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Decanter

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Barolo 2009

The Nebbiolo grape, grown in Piedmont, has consistently produced great Barolo vintages, and there is none greater than the 2009, enthuses Ian D'Agata

BAROLO IS ONE of the world's best wines and one of its most beautiful wine tourism destinations. The bucolic countryside located near the charming town of Alba in Piedmont, Italy, is blessed with a truly noble grape, Nebbiolo (which delivers full-bodied wines exuding unforgettable aromas of sour red cherries and red roses and that have noteworthy ageing potential), extreme site-specificity, hundreds of small, family-owned estates, and cuisine that rivals the best of Italy's many regions. It's not surprising that many believe Piedmont bears more than a passing resemblance to Burgundy.

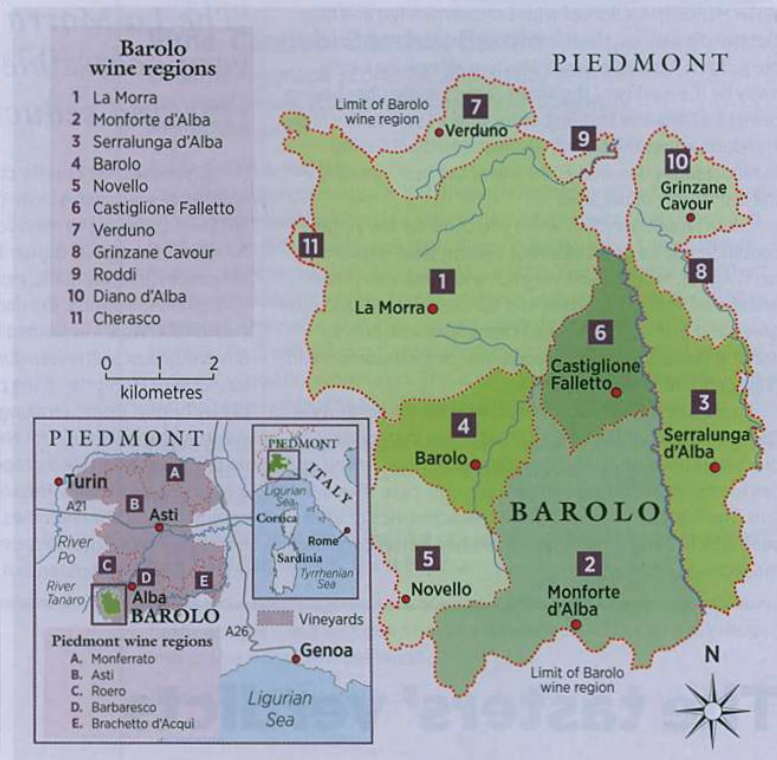
Barolo wines have never been better, with a string of strong vintages in the first decade of the 21st century. The producers are, for the most part, a united bunch, greatly helped by institutions such as the Enoteca Regionale del Barolo and the local consorzio, both of which help promote the wine and the area. Witness the *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* (delimiting the individual vineyards), a rarity in Italy. Though the creation of the *Menzioni* has attracted some criticism (some are simply too large), everyone in Barolo can, largely, be happy with the result. The classification is not a quality scale of the single vineyards, but rather characterises the area in which a specific Barolo wine is made, a good idea given the geological variation of the production zone.

Styles and trends

The wines can be remarkably different: the two extremes are represented by the Barolos of La Morra and Barolo (earlier maturing, perfumed, less tannic), a world apart from those of Serralunga d'Alba and Monforte d'Alba (bigger, tougher, slower developing). The wines of Castiglione Falletto fall somewhere in between in style, and Barolos from Verduno, Roddi and Novello are different still. Current trends include an increasing number of small-production wineries as more enthusiasts try their hand at making Barolo, wines being aged in bigger oak casks or tonneaux (500-litre barrels) rather than barriques (225 litres), and a marked shift towards organic growing. Except for some limited-quantity collector items, prices are reasonable. An unfortunate development would be further enlargement of the Barolo production zone: being very site-sensitive, Nebbiolo can give truly world-class, unique wines only in specific areas. There is already a chasm between wines made from the best sites of Monforte or Barolo and those made in Cherasco or Roddi.

The outstanding 2009 vintage (released this year) offers Barolos with plenty of early appeal, fun to taste even when young, though the best will age 30 years or more. The vintage qualifies as a warm-weather one, similar to 2007 – the wines have greater flesh than 2005 (but less perfume) and are less tannic than 2006. A minority are marred by vegetal notes and rough, unripe tannins, either because of the brief but extreme summer heat causing metabolic blockage in younger vines and those in sandier soil, or over-extraction. However, there are great wines to be had from virtually every Barolo sub-zone.

Ian D'Agata is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Piedmont.



Barolo: know your vintages

2012 Good potential, but July hailstorms were a problem in some areas. Strong vineyard work a must.

2011 Very hot and dry summer spell marks many wines. The best are powerful, but alcoholic.

2010 Classic, balanced wines from a relatively cool growing season and late harvests. Probably the best long-term potential of wines from 2009–2012.

2009 Fleshy, rich wines offer early accessibility. The best will easily age 20 years or more.

2008 Classic vintage. Relatively cool growing season with less-massive wines than 2007 or 2004, but more balanced.

2007 Warmer growing season and early harvest led to big, fleshy, faster-maturing wines. Less typical than 2008.

2006 Warm year without extremes. Powerful but classic wines. Tannins can be tough and need plenty of time.

2005 The most underrated Barolos of the 21st century. The best wines are pure and amazingly perfumed, surprisingly ageworthy and very great.

Barolo: the facts

DOC granted 1966

DOCG granted 1980

Grape variety 100% Nebbiolo

Area under vine 1,880 hectares in 2010

Annual production figures 11,985,497 bottles in 2010 (11,277,673 bottles in 2006).

Minimum ageing requirement Released three years after the vintage (two years in oak, one in bottle). Riserva wines require a minimum of five years' aging (three in oak). >

The results

It was a warm year, but Barolo producers came up trumps in 2009, crafting wines that bowled our judges over with their drinkability, refinement and sheer deliciousness. Christelle Guibert reports

WITH MORE THAN 95% of wines recommended and nine Outstanding wines, the Barolo 2009s definitely impressed our judges. After two days of tasting, they were blown away by the quality of the wines. 'I can't remember having been to a *Decanter* tasting before where I saw such a high standard across the board,' enthused Michael Garner. Indeed, judges deemed 2009 one of the best vintages in the last couple of decades.

Quite an achievement when you consider the vintage conditions. 'It's a great year, but a warm year,' explained Ian D'Agata. 'August was very hot and some vineyards underwent metabolic stress and blockage which can cause green and astringent tannins.' Thankfully, with only a handful of these wines not recommended, consumers can feel confident in their purchase.

Paolo Basso noticed an evolution in winemaking style: '2009 was hot but the wines tasted prove that today, producers have a better understanding of their terroir and can master hot vintages, which wasn't the case 10 years ago. The 2009s don't display the characteristics of a hot year, which means Barolo producers had better control of the picking window.'

'The La Morra wines were very accessible, aromatic, ripe and seductive' Michael Garner

Communes were pretty consistent. Garner commented: 'I've never seen such a clear-cut demonstration of the different styles of the main communes.' The best were Barolo and La Morra. Garner felt the La Morra wines 'were very accessible, aromatic, ripe, seductive and lovely'.

Serralunga d'Alba, the darling of Barolo, was the most criticised. D'Agata explained 'there is no kind way to say it, but producers' skill level in Serralunga is not as high as in La Morra or Monforte. In the past, every producer wanted to buy grapes from Serralunga because they all knew it was the best commune for Nebbiolo. And as growers had no problem selling their grapes, they had no reason to make their own wines.' Basso echoed this view: 'Terroir is essential but it always comes back to the producers. Even a great terroir will not express itself in the glass without a producer who understands it.'

The scores

140 wines tasted
9
Outstanding
56
Highly recommended
69
Recommended
6
Fair
0
Poor
0
Faulty

The tasters' verdicts

Paolo Basso



Basso runs his own wine consultancy, *Ceresio Vini*, and is a familiar name on the sommelier competition circuit. He has won many awards, including Best Sommelier of Switzerland 1997 and Best Sommelier of Europe 2010. In addition, he has been the runner-up in the Best Sommelier of the World competition three times - in 2000, 2007 and 2010. In March this year, he finally won the title.

Basso's verdict

'After this amazing tasting of Barolo 2009, we can highlight two important facts: the high quality of the vintage and the increasing sensibility of the winemakers to the use of wood.'

'2009 is an outstanding vintage that has allowed producers to bring grapes to a high level of maturity. The balance between alcohol and acidity has given well-concentrated and harmonious wines with great personality. There is a lot of high-end wine from all villages, with an outstanding performance from the Cannubi vineyard in Barolo. One key fact of this vintage is the high maturity of the tannins, which allow wines to be drinkable in the short term, as well as having good ageing potential.'

'The other good news is the increasing sensibility of the winemakers to better calibrate the use of wood. The trend to use bigger barrels seems to be a good way for maturing Nebbiolo, which traditionally was aged in large *botte* in the past.'

'Definitely, Barolo producers are generally moving together toward a high level of quality, improving their knowledge and integrating modern winemaking techniques with traditional methods.'

Ian D'Agata



Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Piedmont, D'Agata was named Italy's Best Wine Journalist 2012 by the *Comitato Grandi Cru d'Italia*. He writes on Italy, Bordeaux and Canada for *Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar*, and is author of *The Ecco Guide to the Best Wines of Italy* and an annual, bilingual *Guide to Excellence in Italian Wines*. Co-director of the *Rome International Wine School*, he also lectures on Italian food and wine history for New York University.

D'Agata's verdict

'I do not recall ever taking part in a better panel tasting at *Decanter*. The quality of the wines was absurdly high overall, with bottle after bottle that was, at worse, very good, but with most superb and many downright outstanding, as shown by our very high scores. The 2009 vintage is a great one, and the wines are in the hot weather style of 2001 and 2007 - but due to good day-night temperature differentials, the vintage avoids the excessive traits of an unsuccessful year such as 2003.'

'It follows that the 2009s are fleshy, soft and offer plenty of early appeal: ideal for those who wish to know Barolo better or those turned off by the wine's "monster tannins" reputation. The only wines that disappoint are those made with very young vines or in very sandy soils, as the strong heat of the summer caused some wines to have less than perfectly ripe tannins. Less successful wines (happily, a minority) are marred by a green streak and rough tannins. There were excellent wines made in all the various crus and townships - another plus.'

Highly Recommended 17-18.25pts (90-94pts)



Giovanni Rosso, Serralunga d'Alba
17.25 (90+) PB 16 ID 18 MG 18

£28.50 Berry Bros & Rudd
Rich, smoky and chocolatey. Full, round and juicy palate with good development of rich fruit flavours. Balanced structure and long, lingering finish. Impressive. **Drink** 2014-2028 **Alc** 14%



Mauro Molino, Vigna Conca, La Morra 17.25 (90+) PB 19 ID 17 MG 15.5

£48.75 Champagnes & Châteaux
Elegant and expressive nose of white pepper, cinnamon and ripe cherries. Very floral plus a hint of nutty new oak. Brown spices and red fruit, with an intense, tasty finish. **Drink** 2013-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Monchiero, Rocche di Castiglione Falletto, Castiglione Falletto
17.25 (90+) PB 17.5 ID 17.5 MG 17

N/A UK www.monchierovini.it
Balsamic, sweet spices, black pepper and red cherries. Full and fleshy with good, rich fruit flavours. Clean, fresh, very pure with a long floral lift and mineral energy. Lovely. **Drink** 2014-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Palladino, Ornato, Serralunga d'Alba 17.25 (90+) PB 18.5 ID 17 MG 16.5

£42.99 The Winery
Intense and typical nose of cloves, cinnamon, violet and red cherries. Quite plush in the mouth with well-balanced oak and fair structure. Long, well-modulated finish with good potential for development. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Paolo Conterno, Ginestra, Monforte d'Alba
17.25 (90+) PB 17 ID 17.5 MG 17

£44 (2007) Decorum Vintners
Rich, ripe, long, mineral and pure. Full and tannic, powerful in body, with impressive concentration but little development as yet. Well-structured so should develop. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



~~£21.69 (2008) Adnams~~
Paolo Manzone, Meriame, Serralunga d'Alba
17.25 (90+) PB 17.5 ID 16 MG 18.5

~~£21.69 (2008) Adnams~~
Pungently floral - lavender, iris, violet - and spicy - cloves, pine needles - plus black pepper. Impressive concentration of ripe black fruit flavours within a firm structure. Good length and persistence with an aromatic finish. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Poderi Colla, Dardi Le Rose, Bussia, Monforte d'Alba
17.25 (90+) PB 17 ID 17 MG 17.5

£30 Boutinot
Perfumed nose of plums with cedar and spice tones, plus a hint of chocolate. Full, ripe and luscious with well-developed fruit flavours. Gamey and rich, balanced and long. **Drink** 2014-2025 **Alc** 14%



Prunotto, Bussia, Monforte d'Alba
17.25 (90+) PB 16 ID 17.5 MG 18.5

£42.20-£58.99 widely available via UK agent Berkmann
Aromatic herbs, spices, green pepper, cloves. Sweet, easy-going, clean delivery of red berry and orange peel aromas and flavours. Long and precise finish with exceptional balance. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Rocche Costamagna, Rocche dell'Annunziata, La Morra
17.25 (90+) PB 17.5 ID 17.5 MG 16.5

£24-£29 Majestic, Private Cellar
Intense and open nose, with a structured and rich, quite supple palate. Intense and balanced finish. An exuberantly fruity Barolo, with red fruit-cocktail qualities. **Drink** 2013-2022 **Alc** 14%



San Silvestro, Patres, Barolo
17.25 (90+) PB 17 ID 17 MG 18

£22 Cozzi & Boffa Wines
Smoky and toasted aromas of coffee, cassis, cloves, black chocolate and green pepper. Ripe, full and fleshy. A long, savoury finish with peppery aromas. **Drink** 2014-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Schiavenza, Cerretta, Serralunga d'Alba 17.25 (90+) PB 17 ID 17 MG 17.5

POA Dudley-Jones Fine Wine, HS Fine Wines
Seducing and noble aromas of ripe plums, sweet spices and dahlia. Rich, well-extracted, showing a lovely structure with balanced but firm tannins and a lingering, aromatic finish. **Drink** 2015-2026 **Alc** 15%



Andrea Oberto, Vigneto Brunate, La Morra 17 (90) PB 17 ID 18 MG 16

£44.30-£63.75 Fine & Rare, Lea & Sandeman
Toasty and oaky with a charred, smoky quality. Coffee and cocoa complement red cherry and tobacco. Rich, dense and ripe, this has brown spice nuances typical of a Brunate and a balsamic, tobacco tone. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5% >

My top three

Paolo Basso

Virna, Cannubi Boschis, Barolo

The seductive nose of wild strawberries is mixed with aromas of balsamic, eucalyptus and anise. The wood is well-integrated and gives notes of vanilla and sweet spices. A rich, complex mouthfeel, complemented by round, ripe tannins and a long, savoury aftertaste. **19 (96)** Drink 2015–2025

Rocche dei Manzoni, Vigna Cappella di Santo Stefano, Monforte d'Alba

A refined wine from one of the lesser-known crus of Monforte d'Alba. Violet, roses, sweet spices and blackcurrant introduce a wine of great personality, deep taste, velvety tannins and very long finish. You can enjoy it young, but it will age well. **18.5 (95)** Drink 2015–2035

Paolo Manzone, Meriame, Serralunga d'Alba

This lovely wine displays aromas of ripe plums, cloves, dried violets and black pepper. The gentle winemaking technique gives a round, soft and well-extracted, full-bodied wine. This is a very pleasant Barolo with a great price-to-quality ratio. **17.5 (91)** Drink 2015–2025

My top three

Ian D'Agata

Luigi Pira, Marenca, Barolo

A Serralunga d'Alba Barolo that is slightly more approachable than most, given the tough-as-nails tannins this area is known for. This result is a fitting tribute to a family that has been making outstanding wines for decades. **18.25 (94)** Drink 2015–2024

Oddero, Rocche di Castiglione, Castiglione Falletto

There might be better traditional Barolos than Oddero's, but not many. Mariacristina Oddero runs the estate with passion, grace and charm, and this wine, though less famous than her Vigna Rionda or Brunate, is an excellent introduction to the house style and to Barolo. **17.5 (91)** Drink 2014–2025

Francesco Rinaldi & Figli, Cannubio, Barolo

You'd never guess this sat for 36 months in oak: it's an absolutely splendid rendition of the Cannubi vineyard. Like at Oddero, women run the show here, and run it well. **17.25 (90+)** Drink 2014–2022

My top three

Michael Garner

Fratelli Savigliano, La Morra This is from a Dolcetto specialist at Diano d'Alba. I loved the unrestrained exuberance of the wine – its fleshy, ripe and scented character is so typical of La Morra. **19 (96)** Drink 2013–2022

Virna, Cannubi Boschis, Barolo Barolo's most famous vineyard doesn't always deliver, but this example was seductively aromatic and expressive, yet with decent structure too, highlighting the tendency for the wines from this commune to show a little more substance than those from La Morra. **19 (96)** Drink 2015–2025

Sobrero, Ciabot Tanasio, Castiglione Falletto Another winery I had not come across before: tasting this traditionally styled wine was a little like stepping back in time. Lovely aromas with good texture and a tight structure, which promises the ability to age well. Classic Nebbiolo. **19 (96)** Drink 2014–2022

NB: the tasters' top wines are not necessarily their top scoring, rather those which, on learning the wines' identity, they feel are the most notable given their provenance, price or other factors

Expert summary: Ian D'Agata

This was a tasting that confirmed Barolo's general greatness. Encouragingly, we saw top performances from a mix of more established and younger producers



Ian D'Agata is a writer with specialist interest in Italian wine, and is a regular contributor to *Decanter*

AN ADMIRABLE PERFORMANCE, everyone agreed. I was surprised by just how luscious and downright enjoyable almost all the wines were – and, though they might not be the most ageworthy Barolos of the past few decades, the better wines will improve over the next 10 years and have enough acid and tannic spine to age for another 20.

A number of very interesting observations arise. First, that great Barolos were made across sub-zones in 2009, with splendid wines from both famous and less famous crus, such as the Monvigliero cru in Verduno (Fratelli Alessandria) and the Ravera and Bergera Pezzolle crus of Novello (respectively by Cogno and Le Strette). The Scuola Enologica d'Alba also turned in a very good effort from Grinzane Cavour.

However, there is no clear-cut winner among the communes: Barolo and Monforte each placed six wines in the top 20, La Morra four; and, at two each, Castiglione Falletto and Serralunga are perhaps somewhat less represented than current wisdom might have led one to imagine. The big five communes of Barolo, La Morra, Castiglione Falletto, Monforte and Serralunga remain the source of the vast majority of great Barolo, an observation further strengthened by the fact that those producers who own vineyards and make wines in other communes still chose to send in a wine from one of the big five (producers were allowed to send in only one wine each).

A very encouraging finding is the many up-and-coming producers confirming the many good things being said about them: Bric Cenciurio, Diego Conterno, Bruna Grimaldi, Ciabot Berton, Giacomo Grimaldi, Ferdinando Principiano, Rivetto, Serradenari, Sobrero and Virna are just some of the many rising stars of the region. Another plus is that some estates appear to have made one of their best wines in decade: I don't believe I have ever tasted a better wine from Stefano Farina or from Serio and Battista Borgogno. Last but not least, all the usual suspects have confirmed their star status, with outstanding wines made by the likes of Brezza, Ceretto, Conterno Fantino, Renato Corino, Mario Marengo, Paolo Scavino and many more.

There were some usually very great wines that performed poorly (Sandrone, Chiara Boschis, Castello di Verduno and Cavallotto); though on other recent occasions I had personally found them to be better – a slight tannic grittiness may have held less appeal on the day of this particular tasting. Time will tell. **D**

'I don't believe I have ever tasted a better wine from Stefano Farina or Borgogno'