

Decanter PANEL TASTING

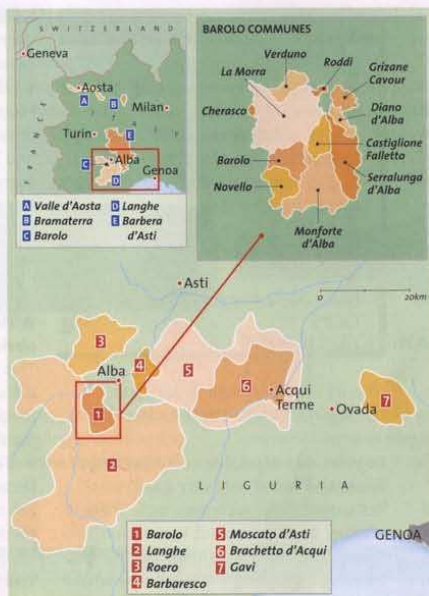
Barolo 2004

Nebbiolo may be a fickle grape, but producers had the perfect chance to master it in 2004. **KERIN O'KEEFE** looks at the intricacies behind Italy's 'tar and roses' wine

After the difficult 2002 and 2003 vintages, the 2004 Barolos are being trumpeted as a return to excellence for the wine known as the 'king of wine, wine of kings'. Many of the full-bodied, elegant 2004s are already approachable, but all have the structure for lengthy cellaring. Bruno Giacosa, one of the great 'Barolisti' with more than 60 years in winemaking, set the bar high when he said: '2004 was one of the best vintages ever, and can be compared to the 1964,' one of the most legendary years for Barolo.

The long, near-perfect growing season in 2004 should generate classic Barolos of depth and complexity that allow Nebbiolo's aromas of rose, tar and leather, and its typical wild cherry and tobacco flavours to shine through. Another factor in the vintage's favour is the ceasefire in the infamous Barolo Wars between traditionalists and modernists that have raged in the Langhe hills for the past 20 years. The lack of evident new oak in many '04s suggests some producers are shunning barriques and going back to Slavonian casks for Barolo's mandatory two-year barrel ageing. Nebbiolo, the only grape allowed in Barolo production, has, in the past, proven very susceptible to the aggression of new wood, with its dominant coffee and vanilla sensations masking Barolo's earthy and floral characteristics.

Notoriously temperamental, Nebbiolo is often compared to Pinot Noir, not only



for its light colour and intense perfume, but because it is extremely site sensitive – its performance can vary between villages and vineyard areas. The Barolo DOCG spreads across 11 communes, and soil composition – predominately limestone – is crucial to the wine, as is the period the soils developed in – Helvetian or Tortonian. Among the most famed communes, Serralunga and Monforte to the west have mainly Helvetian soils, and produce the most structured Barolos – deeply coloured, full-bodied and tannic. These wines require

patience to tame their bracing tannins but are the most ageworthy. Over to the east, the village of La Morra has mainly Tortonian soils which yields elegant, enticingly perfumed Barolos that are approachable in youth but usually lack the structure for lengthy cellaring. The communes of Barolo and Castiglione Falletto have both Helvetian and Tortonian soils, and their well-balanced Barolos combine structure with elegance.

Because site is crucial in defining Barolo, the consorzio has recently mapped out the DOCG and delimited the boundaries of every vineyard. Pending government approval, these cru names will soon be allowed on Barolo labels. 'These are strictly geographic mentions and not a classification, but it's the first step in promoting the area's crus,' says Claudio Salaris, director of the Barolo and Barbaresco Consorzio. 'Because many of these crus are

unknown to consumers, producers will also have the option of adding the village name to their Barolo,' he adds. If passed, he estimates the new labelling regulations will start with the 2010 vintage. **D**

'They have a finesse and heady perfume that you just can't find anywhere else'

Sebastian Payne MW

Turn the page to see the results

BAROLO: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

2004 Superb, well structured and classically balanced. Drink 2010–2035
2003 Hot year. High alcohol, cooked fruit and low acidity. Drink now
2002 Cold, heavy rains and hail at harvest time. Dilute. Drink now
2001 Excellent with great structure and impeccable balance. Drink now–2029
2000 Overrated. Hot weather led to fat wines with rich fruit. Drink now

1999 Classic Barolos with great body and balance. Drink now–2019
1998 Mid-weight, attractive. Drink now
1997 Lush and forward. Delicious fruit but no structure for cellaring. Drink now
1996 Magnificent and austere, needed time to develop. Drink now–2026
1995 Variable ripening. Drink now
1994 Cold and wet September led to poor ripening. Drink now

THE TASTERS

Sarah Abbott MW, wine consultant; Beverley Blanning MW, wine writer; Stephen Brook, Decanter contributing editor; Giles Burke-Gaffney, buyer, Justerini & Brooks; Julia Harding MW, wine writer; Sergio de Luca, buying director, Enotria Wine Cellars; Kerin O'Keefe, wine writer; Sebastian Payne MW, buyer, The Wine Society; Michael Palij MW, director, Winetraders UK

Barolo 2004: the results

Rigid structure and big tannins may overshadow the fruit of these young Barolos now, but a few years cellaring will reveal their charms, our tasters told **ADAM LECHMERE**

What was your overall impression?

Perhaps the best way of summing it up is to say the tasters were suitably, rather than wildly impressed. They all arrived with high expectations: as many of them emphasised during the discussion, 2004 is a great vintage – 'probably the best since 2001, and along with 1996, the best vintage in 20 years,' said Sergio de Luca.

'An excellent vintage,' agreed Giles Burke-Gaffney. So the panel set to work expecting wonders. But they also approached the wines with huge respect: they were determined to do right by them, however much their perfumed charms were disguised by powerful tannins and rigid structure at this stage.

And did you find many charms?

Stephen Brook spoke for the mood of the panel. He started by saying he was 'slightly disappointed overall' and ended – having in a sense convinced himself – that 'it was pretty impressive.' Julia Harding MW felt 'she had slightly higher expectations' of 2004. 'It was very good, but not as outstanding as I would have thought across the board.' There were some wonderful wines, with what Sebastian Payne MW described as 'a finesse and heady perfume of roses and violets that you just can't find anywhere else'. But he also noted that there were 'a few dogs'.

De Luca favoured the wines that displayed a clear Nebbiolo character, frowning on those that showed aromas which one doesn't identify with that grape. 'Blackberry is not a Barolo smell,' he said, 'and so I marked such wines down.'

But surely the good wines outweighed the bad?

Undeniably. But, going back to Harding's comment, the wines weren't as consistently good as the judges would have expected. Burke-Gaffney was the most positive, in a roundabout way: 'There were very few shockers.' De Luca said, 'they were all good, but few were really outstanding.' Beverley Blanning MW said that while her marks were 'up and down' it was 'one of the most interesting tastings' she recalls doing.

THE SCORES:

202 WINES TASTED	
★★★★★ Decanter Award	4
Outstanding (18.5–20pts)	
★★★★★ Highly recommended	27
Very good to excellent (16.5–18.49pts)	
★★★ Recommended	139
Good (14.5–16.49pts)	
★★ Fair (12.5–14.49pts)	28
★ Poor (10.5–12.49pts)	2
Faulty	2

'There's certainly nothing boring or homogenous about these Barolos.'

So you came expecting a fabulous set of wines and found only very good ones?

Yes, expectations were very high. There is another important point to mention, that Payne, Brook and others highlighted: this was a gruelling tasting. It was what made Brook 'unsure about whether the tannins would resolve themselves in time; I found that very hard to assess'. He compared the 2004s to the 1996s for their tannin levels.

Payne said that tasting 50 of these wines a day over two days 'must affect the way we taste' as the powerful tannins build up in the mouth. That was an important question for the judges: was the perceived lack of fruit in these

Barolos simply the fact that they were overwhelmed by the tannins in the wine, or was there actually a lack of fruit?

For some tasters this wasn't a problem. Harding found her 'jaded palate' was revived by wonderful wafts of perfume and fruit – which 'lifts the wine above everything else'. But Sarah Abbott MW was another doubter: 'Barolo is something you need to get to the bottom of; for that you need quiet, philosophical moments and some maturity in the wine.'

With such structure, Barolos are obviously good food wines...

This was another thing the panel discussed. De Luca said, 'it's hard to drink Barolo on its own, even if some of them are very clean and fruity'. Abbott agreed. 'I've erred on the side of generosity because the growers would be having absolute kittens that we are not tasting them with food.'

Will the wines age?

Naturally. As Harding said, most of her drinking dates start at 2012 and go on up to 2025. 'It is very important to tell consumers they must have somewhere to store the wine.' Brook agreed: 'You must lay these wines down because you aren't going to get the true complexity for another two to five years at least.' Payne pointed out that these are *vini da meditazione* – wines you drink very slowly, after a lot of time.'

Most importantly, does the panel recommend we buy them?

De Luca was enthusiastic: 'I would!' Payne was more reticent, adamant that for the sort of money one spends on Barolo he would want more perfume. Burke-Gaffney said 'buy them by all means, but if you've spent that extra bit of money, make sure you know how to best cellar and serve the wine – and when'. Brook said: 'If you're going to spend £50 a bottle, then these are the wines you're going to cellar.' He added that, for people with the desire but not the means for a Barolo-style wine, Nebbiolo d'Alba and Nebbiolo Roero were far cheaper and more readily approachable alternatives.

