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Barolo is a wine of mystery.*

Savoring sensuality of old, austere Barolos

By Eric Asimov

CHAPPAQUA, New York

It was a cold, crisp Sunday afternoon, and the gray sky cast a somber hue over the stone walls and clapboard houses of this pastoral Westchester County, New York, suburb. It was a day for huddling in the family nest, with maybe a little playoff football for company.

But this was no ordinary Sunday. An astounding group of old Barolos was calling, along with a lovely dinner and congenial company. It was a call I could not ignore.

The occasion was a Festa di Barolo at the home of Douglas Polaner and Tina Fischer, husband-and-wife proprietors of Polaner Selections, an importer and distributor. Among the dozen people assembled around their long dining table were collectors, members of the trade, the wine directors of two fine Manhattan restaurants, John Ragan of Eleven Madison Park and Morgan Rich of Del Posto, and even a couple of wine writers. What brought us together was a passion for Barolo.

Barolo is often called a wine for intellectuals, and I suppose I can understand why. Something in the tannic austerity of a young Barolo suggests a wine that holds you at a distance, that must be pondered to be understood. But no Barolo lover would ever suggest such a thing.

Indeed, among great red wines only Burgundy offers the sort of hauntingly seductive, sensuous, nuanced aromas that make Barolo so profoundly soulful. Call it intellectual if you want, but to me few wines go for the gut like Barolo.

Even more so than Burgundy, though, Barolo is a wine of mystery. It is made entirely from the nebbiolo grape, which flourishes almost exclusively in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy. Unlike with pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon and syrah, nobody has come close to achieving a great nebbiolo wine anywhere else in the world.

The pleasures of Barolo can remain locked away for years. Some producers have tried to make Barolo accessible at an earlier age, but even so the wines usually require at least a decade of aging before they can really be en-

joyed. Nowadays, when few people have the time, space, money or inclination to store wine for years, Barolo and its Piedmont sibling, Barbaresco, can seem almost anachronistic.

Personally, I have a few cases of Barolo and Barbaresco stored away from 1996, '98 and 2001. It may be another five years or so before I taste a bottle or two. I've recently enjoyed '93s and '95s, and every now and then I come across a reasonably priced older bottle in a wine shop or restaurant (reasonable compared with Burgundy, Bordeaux or California cult cabernets, that is; \$100 to \$200 a bottle is expensive by any other standards).

It was this rare opportunity to drink older Barolo that brought us together, and the list of vintages and the producers, mostly masters of traditional Barolo, was the finest I'd ever seen in one place. The youngest wines were from 1990, a flamboyant vintage, and the oldest stretched back to, well, I'll get to them.

The first wines — a '90 Cascina Francia from Giacomo Conterno and a '90 Falletto Riserva from Bruno Giacosa — came with the antipasti. As we passed the decanters, the Falletto seemed a bit off, unexpectedly advanced in age, but the Cascina Francia had the fireworks typical of a Giacomo Conterno Barolo — bright colors going off like skyrockets in the mouth.

Next came a pair of '89s. A Giuseppe Rinaldi Brunate was muscular and rich, with mushroom and tar aromas, a deliciously complete wine, but a Giuseppe Mascarello Monprivato was what Barolo lovers live for, lovely in its purity, focused, fresh and detailed with lingering aromas of mushrooms and flowers.

A 1988 Sperss from Angelo Gaja, who brought glamour and a sense of superstardom to Piedmont, made a surprise appearance. With its density and almost sweet fruit it offered a contrast to the elegance of the Monprivato.

"Definitely a different animal," Ragan said.

Two pasta courses followed, as did two 1982s. A firm Aldo Conterno Colonnello showed flavors of licorice and tar, with the mushroom aroma turning truffle. Then came another highlight, a Giacosa Collina Rionda Riserva, that was sensuous and ethereal, with aromas of truffles and leather.

"Another of the grand cru vineyards



Robert Presutti for The New York Times

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of Barolo," Polaner said.

While the vineyard hierarchy of Burgundy is a matter of record, only a geeky few comprehend the myriad, complex vineyards of Barolo, which have never been officially codified. Nonetheless, the next flight offered a clear illustration.

A 1978 Monprivato from Giuseppe Mascarello was firm and structured, typical of wines from the village of Castiglione Falletto, with pure, complex flavors. By contrast, a 1978 Bartolo Mascarello, which includes a sizable percentage of grapes from the village of La Morra in its blend, was more graceful and harmonious, and gorgeously aromatic.

As the main course of goat braised in Barolo, naturally, was placed before us, we forged ahead. Another Bartolo Mascarello, a '71, was full and lovely, with a hint of mint. Then came a surprise, a '71 labeled Giulio Mascarello — the father of Bartolo — Cavalieri del Tartufo, which paradoxically seemed younger and fresher, also with that mint.

If it was possible for me to have a fa-

vorite among all these wonderful wines, it was the next bottle, a '71 Monfortino Riserva from Giacomo Conterno, a vibrant wine of power and grace, with aromas of earth, tar and roses. It was enough simply to inhale it.

"What can you say about this wine?" asked David Leibowitz, who had collected some of the bottles that we drank. Sighs and shrugs around the room seemed to say enough.

Several more wines came, including a vivacious 1964 Marcarini and an impossibly fresh 1945 Francesco Rinaldi. Suffice it to say that almost each of the bottles we opened could have been the centerpiece of a meal for the ages.

In an effort to put the evening in perspective, one person asked, "What have we learned?"

"If we drink a lot of Barolo," the answer came from across the room, "the Giants play really well." Intellectuals!

I remembered what Bartolo Mascarello told me in an interview a couple of years before he died in 2005.

"When I open a bottle of Barolo, first I caress it," he said. I think I know how he felt.

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