

BAROLO 2005 DRINK NOW WITH PLEASURE

While not quite at the level of 2001 or 2004, 2005 still boasts classic, fruit-forward wines that are already approachable. But choose carefully, advises **TOM MARESCA**

Leave your generalisations at the door when talking about the new Barolo releases. This year's Alba Wine Event focused on the Barolo 2005s – 183 of them, from about 150 producers. Conspicuously absent was any consensus about the vintage, on the part of either the producers or the 60 international media members assembled to taste and – in theory – make a definitive judgment about it. Where enthusiasm for the 2004 vintage had been unanimous, opinions and evaluations of 2005 seemed to range from a few critics who thought the vintage superb to a few who thought it completely skippable. For my palate, while 2005 showed only a handful of really top-flight wines, it also produced a lot of very good ones, and only a few to which I wouldn't give some shelf- or cellar-space. But 2005 still doesn't yield to generalising: it is very much a producer-by-producer, wine-by-wine call.

PHOTOGRAPH: THOMAS SKOVSENDE

The reason for all the variability is easier to sum up: rain. According to the Alba Consorzio, unsettled weather during the summer pushed some areas 'to the brink of a drought', while 'violent storms elsewhere led to above-average quantities of water'. Then it rained for 10 days straight during the harvest, creating a sharp line between those growers who got all their grapes picked before the rain and those who waited too long. The fuzzy middle ground – harvesting some grapes early and some late – seems to include most of the larger estates. So here's one tentative generalisation about Barolo 2005: smaller growers were able to pick their whole crop before the rain, so had pretty fine material to work with; larger growers had to confront a mixed lot. Valter Fissore, winemaker at Cogno, confirmed this: 'For me and other small growers, 2005 was a good year: we were able to harvest before the rains. The larger properties had trouble. Up until 3 October, the >



Above: the new-release 2005 Barolos may not equal the 2001s in pose and balance, but they offer more immediate drinking pleasure

weather was fantastic. Then rain halted the harvest completely for 10 days.'

The best examples of 2005 Barolo have no need to apologise for anything. While not equal to the balance and poise of 2001 and 2004, they are well above 2002 and 2003 in every respect. More fresh and fruit-forward and with perceptibly more acid than is usual for Barolos – and consequently not nearly as finely balanced as 2001 and 2004 – they still offer a very accessible and totally characteristic Nebbiolo flavour profile. They lead with earth and dried roses and leather on the nose, and follow with lots of fresh, black-cherry fruit on the palate, with a little underlying leather and tar, both of which show most prominently in the finish now (they should evolve more prominently on the palate later).

A key element in the flavour profile of many of these wines is the absence of prominent vanilla or coffee flavours – the telltale marks of heavy use of new or toasted small oak barrels. In Barolo at least, the barrique wars seem to be largely over, and the true taste of Nebbiolo is triumphing throughout the zone. Carlo Revello, speaking of his own practice and that of other producers, said: 'We're using less new barriques than we used to five or six years ago. It's very easy to smother Nebbiolo with barrique, so you have to

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be careful.' That's a point many consumers and critics have been trying to make for at least a decade, and it is gratifying to see that it's finally being taken seriously by growers and producers.

All in all, 2005 adds up to reasonably classic Barolo on a scale less generous and less fine-tuned than '04 and '01 – not a brilliantly poised or complex vintage (at least not at this young age) but one tasting of a truly noble grape. For the consumer, 2005's greatest advantage is that it shows every sign of being drinkable right from the start, so should be a useful vintage both for restaurateurs and private collectors: a really characteristic Barolo to enjoy while waiting for other, grander and more slowly evolving vintages to mature.

How well it will age is hard to predict: its extra jolt of acidity, beyond the Barolo norm, should help preserve it, and some makers told me they thought 2005 would be very long-lived. Most, however, felt

that a life of between 10 to 15 years from harvest was a more realistic expectation.

Looking forward a year, it seems the same evaluation holds true for 2006. I tasted 75 bottled 2006 Barbarescos and about 12 barrel samples, and even though '06 shows a different character than '05 – more fruit-led, less terroir-driven – the quality (and relative unevenness of the two vintages) seems the same: few outstanding wines, but many sound ones that will give great pleasure right from the start.

Maresca's top 2005s

FIVE STARS

Aldo Conterno, Colonnello, Bussia

★★★★★ (19/20)

Fresh fruit with lovely acidity, soft tannins, and a long, sour-cherry-and-tar finish – very fine. 2010-2025. **£83.95; Ben, But**

Cogno, Ravera ★★★★★ (19)

Roses, tar and cherries on the nose, lovely black cherry fruit with underlying leather and earth in the mouth. 2010-2025.

£23.255 (2004); Adv, GIW

Fratelli Giacosa, Bussia ★★★★★ (19)

Very lively, with fine balance, elegant structure, classic flavours, plus a little tar and tobacco in the finish. 2010-2025.

£23.95; Coe