

Barolo Untapped: Marchesi di Barolo

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Heritage and tradition play a large part in Italian wine culture and not many can trace their history back as long as the one attached to Barolo powerhouse Marchesi di Barolo. The winery itself was actually set up by the then Marquis di Barolo, Carlos Tancredi Faletti after his 1807 marriage to Frenchwoman Juliette Colbert de Maulevrier whom was the instigator in the founding of the winery as it was her who believed in the potential of wines from the Barolo region and that with sufficient wood aging, the local grape Nebbiolo could be fashioned into an age-worthy wine and one that could well express its terroir and natural characteristics.

Now, more than 200 years since its founding, the Marchesi di Barolo winery is run by fifth and sixth generations of the Abbona family with Ernesto and Anna Abbona managing the winery alongside their children and sixth generation, Valentina and Davide Abbona; continuing the heritage and legacy of the first generation Abbona, Pietro whom it was that took over the winery from the Faletti family.



The Abbona family Davide (left), Anna Abbona (middle) and Valentina (right)



Wine Times had the pleasure of meeting Anna, Valentina and Davide whilst in Italy earlier this month and tasted four of their red wines there. The winery is not a new one to us as we have some back vintages in our cellar from the late 60's and early 70's but it does come as a surprise that this historic winery does not command more of the Italian wine market here in the city. Barolo is a popular brand in Hong Kong (although it's not a brand in itself, wines here are often classified and branded by region rather than grape - think Bordeaux not Cabernet / Merlot) with its aging potential a key factor in a country that has become somewhat obsessed with back vintage wines.



Another key point for the popularity of Barolo is the simple fact that it's a red wine. Red has always been dominant in Hong Kong and, as Bordeaux becomes less affordable and more fakes are unearthed, people's love (and arguably trust) for top end Bordeaux is waning and the natural progression would be towards Barolo. For an Italian wine to be successful in the Greater China region, it needs to have some 'brand' behind it. Other big name Italian wines do well in the region because of their association with expense, but the great thing about Marchesi di Barolo wines is that they are not expensive wines and they are extremely approachable.



The ability of Italy in general to offer both quality and value for money is arguably one of the reasons why they, as a country are still lagging behind France as wine producing nation - many people here still believe in the mantra 'if it's expensive it must be good'. Sure, when the British arrived to Hong Kong and China in the 1830's they brought with them Claret and Champagne so French wines are part of the history of Hong Kong, but when the first Italian arrived in Hong Kong in 1842 he brought with him education and religion - not wine and thus the popularity of French wines here has always been dominant.





The range of reds tasted in Italy earlier this month



But surely quality and value for money is what all wine lovers are looking for in a wine right? One thing that struck me most about the wines from Marchesi di Barolo was their approachability – that is, their somewhat easy drinking nature. One fellow journalist told me that the wines were not complex enough and my only rebuttal was that ‘who wants a super complex wine when drinking with friends?’ One of the best wines I had in Italy was the Marchesi di Barolo Madonna del Dono Dolcetto d’Alba 2013 – a young wine for sure but then, I figure one that although may not essentially be designed to be drunk young, but does so very well. A wine to drink casually with friends and one that would work with almost any food as its medium weight and fresh characteristics lend to drinking alone or with food too.

But let’s take a look at the whites from Marchesi di Barolo (one’s that are available in Hong Kong anyway). I recently bought a few bottles from their new supplier here in Hong Kong, Ponti as after tasting and having been impressed with their reds I wanted to get to know the whites too. I picked up a couple of bottles of the Marchesi di Barolo Asti – a proper Asti at 7.5% alcohol and with silky fine bubbles that are more like a sweet cotton candy cloud that melts in your mouth. Not super sweet though, this wine is an excellent choice for the younger drinker and one that works at almost any occasion you can think of.



Marchesi di Barolo Asti by the beach

I also procured some of the Marchesi di Barolo Roero Arneis 2011, a light and minerally wine that we put together with an array of local seafood. There’s some great acidity in the wine that lends well to Asian food and the subtle characteristics of the white work well with local food that is not too heavy on sauces or spices – such as the hot pot we had. Admittedly this wine is definitely one for the summer as it would also work with light salads and could be best paired with a sunny afternoon on a restaurant patio looking out over the beach – now all Hong Kong needs is a few of these and we can get drinking more of the wine!

But obviously many look to Italy, and certainly to the Barolo region for their red wines. Barolo has certainly progressed a long way in recent years – we have the auction market to thank for that as we find very few Italian wines (except the usual suspects) at auction and thus there is little to no speculation on the price of Italian wines enabling them to be priced much more favourably than wines from other popular wine producing regions.



Arneis – a great seafood pairing wine

Ponti import a range of reds from Marchesi di Barolo (unfortunately the Madonna del Dono is not here yet but I am told that it may well be in the next shipment – happy me!) including the Barbaresco Tradizione 2011 which is a wine made from 100% Nebbiolo and lends well to cheese and meat dishes plus the Marchesi di Barolo Cannubi 2009 (another of the wines I tasted in Italy) which is a great, affordable, approachable and un-pretentious Barolo that would make a perfect addition to almost any dinner time. It's not super weighty it's clean and velvety on the palate and does not have the big acidity found in many Italian reds that beg for food making it a wine for conversation as much as dinner. We like wines that are thought provoking and at the same time enjoyable – once we start getting into 'heavy' wine conversation the whole enjoyment of drinking the wine itself goes out the window and it becomes an analytical exercise. For sure, all three of the reds we have tried (especially the Madonna and the Cannubi) will be heading for our cellar towards the end of the summer for our winter drinking enjoyment later this year.

As Hong Kong's wine demographic is set to get younger over the next few years, we see wines such as Marchesi di Barolo as the future of Italian wines in Hong Kong – and we see the younger generation of the Abbona family being key to their success here in the city. Making wine fun and approachable whilst also appealing to those who enjoy the serious side of the product is imperative and I think that within the range of Marchesi di Barolo wines they have managed to do this. Hong Kong's younger generation will be the ones who set the tone for the next decade or so and if they are started on wines that suit both casual drinking and dining then these are the wines that will set the precedent for the market trends of the future.

Marchesi di Barolo wines are available from Ponti and Brix retail shops around the city. For more information go to their website www.pontiwinecellars.com.hk or contact Amanda So at Amanda.so@ponti-tdg.com



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