

assess both the consistency and the changes in Piedmontese winemaking over the past eight decades.

With Anna Abbona, who speaks English as fast as she does Italian, I tasted several of her wines. The 2004 Barolo (\$55) had a wonderful warmth on the palate. It was tight in the nose, as expected from a young vintage, and had a charming, rose-like bouquet.

An older vintage, 1999 (\$90), had achieved marvelous maturity. It's elegant, full bodied and expresses nebbiolo's underlying spiciness. Not surprisingly, a 1990 (\$125) showed off a classic, older style of brawniness, though it's a highly satisfying wine with plenty of vitality left.

Top of the Line

The winery's **Estate Vineyard series** comes from its finest vineyards, including Cannubi, Coste di Rose and Sarmassa; the 2003 vintage (\$63) was dark and intense, with a truffle-like nose and a developing balance of elements still coming into complex focus.

We then tasted a wine from grapes grown entirely in the Cannubi vineyard, considered the finest in the region. The Abbonas own about two-thirds of it, and their Cannubi Barolo is one of the highest achievements of Piedmontese winemaking.

The grapes are hand-picked and fermented in stainless steel. Then part of the wine is aged in oak for two years, with another portion in moderately toasted French oak for one year; after blending they spend a year in bottle. I tasted the 2004 (\$100), with a high 14.5 percent alcohol level, yet it didn't blast my palate with either alcoholic heat or overripe fruit flavors. It was certainly full bodied, and the oak is still present, so I'll look forward to a rematch in about five years.

Till then, I'll content myself with getting hold of one of those library wines to give me an idea how the Marchesi di Barolo releases of this century will develop in the decades to come.

(**John Mariani** writes on wine for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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## Marchesi di Barolo Challenges Barbaresco With Classic Red Wines

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Review by John Mariani



Dec. 15 (Bloomberg) -- Whenever a wine snob voices the cliché that in Italy's Piedmont district Barolo is the masculine "king" of wines and Barbaresco the feminine "queen," Anna Abbona smiles and shakes her head.

"Perhaps it is only that women prefer Barbaresco because it sounds lighter," she says. She ought to know. Abbona and her husband, Ernesto, own the historic **Marchesi di Barolo** estate and make both kinds of wines.

In fact, both are made from the same grape, nebbiolo, which has never produced a wine of distinction outside of Piedmont,

where the chalky soil and humidity -- nebbia means "fog" -- are ideal and the locations of the vineyards give Barolo and Barbaresco their different styles. Both wines are aromatic and silky, often with high alcohol levels, yet never jammy.

Barolo is aged longer than Barbaresco (two years in barrel versus one for Barbaresco, with both spending at least another year in bottle). Reservas are aged for four or five years. If Barbarescos seem lighter in body, with looser tannins, they nonetheless have their own complexity of terroir.

Still, Barbaresco has achieved a higher status, largely due to the fame of **Angelo Gaja's** versions, which often sell for \$120 a bottle and more. Barolo, kingly or not, has become the stepbrother to Barbaresco.

### Changing Image

The Abbonas are trying to balance perceptions about the two nebbiolo wines, not least because they own an estate that dates to the 12th century through the aristocratic Falletti family that claimed to have given Barolo wine its name. The Abbonas acquired Marchesi di Barolo in 1929; Anna married into the family and now, at 50, is known for her tireless efforts in restoring the estate and promoting wineries as travel destinations.

"We are not just a company," she insisted over lunch at an Italian restaurant in New York. "We are a family winery, and we know what we have to do with our wines by controlling every aspect from the vine to the bottle. We are not just looking to get rich.

"In Italy, big wineries are buying small ones and changing their wines for a global taste. In the last 15 years, people just want to be impressed by simply tasting a wine. You have to drink a wine, not just taste it, and we make our wines with elegance so they can give pleasure throughout a meal."

To this end, Marchesi di Barolo, while investing in the most modern technology, makes its wines in the reserved, highly refined style they have for decades. They still use some of the big oak barrels that date back 200 years, when many Piedmont wineries use smaller barriques made from new wood.

### Wine Library

The estate is famous for its library of 35,000 wines, with vintages dating back to 1859. It still offers limited quantities to U.S. clients of vintages from 1938, 1947, 1948, 1961 and 1964 (the U.S. is the estate's most important market, taking 20 percent of its production). This allows a wine lover to