

Between The Wines

Wine. Food. Travel. More wine

BY RUMA SINGH



THE MARCHESI DI BAROLO TABLE: THE KING, THE
QUEEN, THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS



There's something about an evening done Italian-style. For one, there's always great food and excellent wine to go with it and finally there's the warmth of the hosts. For Italians, much of the best of life happens with friends and family around a table laden with food and wine.



The Abbona family: Ernesto and Anna with Davide and Valentina

And so it was with the Abbona ladies. Anna Abbona, wife of Ernesto Abbona of Marchesi di Barolo, and her daughter Valentina see themselves as ambassadors of their brand. But it's more than a brand to them. Their wines are living, breathing products and they are the proud family members, descendants of Pietro Abbona of Marchesi di Barolo of Piedmont, who spread the word – through good food, wine and conversation around the dinner table. Anna says as much, “An evening is made by good food, good wine and good company.” The wine, I would add, is the protagonist.

And so it was at the Marchesi di Barolo wine dinner at Le Cirque Signature restaurant at the Leela Palace, Bangalore that evening. The Abbona ladies were warm, friendly hosts, introducing and discussing their wines and their region (Langhe, in Piedmont, is a UNESCO Heritage site) with genuine love and affection, and the conversation moved along easily, touching on both the personal and the professional.

Far from being an occasional India visitor, Valentina is familiar with India, having had a month-long stint studying business at the Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad in 2009. Why India? “I was curious about India,” she said, “I wanted to go to Brazil to study but my parents wouldn't agree.” It was a decision that worked well: she loved it so much, she wept when she left, she confessed. The India experience was an eye opener to the director of sales for the company, who now flies all over the world promoting her wines.

We start the dinner with the **Gavi, Marchesi di Barolo 2013** paired with a rich white asparagus soup with wild mushroom, black truffle pesto, basil oil. White wines aren't really given their due in Italy, coming in second after their magnificent reds, but this one from Piedmont shows off the character it draws from its soil – sandy marl and clay which gives the Cortese grape its minerality. Anna laughingly tells us the most common question she faces during her travels: “which wine is closest to Pinot Grigio?” (The correct answer is none.) But **Pinot Grigio** has become the ubiquitous white Italian wine, sweeping the west with its light, easy drinkability. As a result it has typecast all Italian white wines. Gavi, is in fact the name of a village just two hours from Barolo, the small Piedmontese village with a big name and a big wine. Barolo itself has a mere 600 inhabitants. (“As you can imagine, everyone knows everything about you when you live in a small village like this,” she laughs.)

Then it's on to the **Dolce o d'Alba DOC Madonna del Dono 2014**, a wine bursting with ripe red fruit, paired with black olive and orange crusted scallops, red beetroot carpaccio, crispy fennel salad, ginger. “Dolcetto means little sweet one,” says Valentina, “It's our everyday wine, the one which every Piedmontese opens at his table everyday – fresh, easy and elegant, and tastes delicious with a little chilling.” It is. But while the grape is very different from its very big brother, the Nebbiolo, it is far from sweet or little, drawing from similar soil. The lack of oak ageing gives it an easy accessibility and makes for a joyous sip.

With the Barbaresco coming for the next course, we are now getting into the major leagues. **Barbaresco DOCG della Tradizione 2012** has persistent red fruit on the nose and a mouth-filling finish. “The Barbaresco is made from Nebbiolo grown on younger hills, where there has been less erosion, more sand, less wind, rain, so the grapes are more protected. The wine is matured in Slavonian (very popular in Piedmonte) and French oak barrels. You can't make Barbaresco outside Barbaresco, or Barolo outside the **DOCG (Denominazione di Origine**



The king and queen: Barolo and Barbaresco, Marchesi di Barolo DOCG

Controllata e Garantita) area of Barolo, but ours is the only winery to make Barbaresco in Barolo,” says Anna, adding, “If Barolo is the king of wines, Barbaresco should be queen.” Barolo, though not far from Barbaresco, comes from a higher, cooler region, more exposed to the elements. At this time Anna gets a message on her phone from her husband. There’s news: they are now the proud owners of a vineyard they have waited patiently to acquire for several years. She is ecstatic, hugging her daughter, and we raise a toast to the moment. “I believe in magic moments in my life,” she laughs, thrilled. “You know, Piedmont is small and no one sells his property. You can buy grapes, but rarely ever the land. We have wanted to grow bigger in Barbaresco, and now we have this, from a friend who wanted to sell his vineyards to someone who would look after them. My husband is a believer that wines are made in the vineyard not the winery, so this is wonderful for us. The wines we drink this evening are very happy.” Indeed, they taste very happy, unfurling their entire bouquet in our glasses to show their full glory.



The Gavi is poured



Black olive and orange crusted scallops, red beetroot carpaccio, crispy fennel salad, ginger, by Le Cirque's Chef Giuseppe Mandaradoni, served with the Dolcetto d'Alba 2014

For Valenyina, an economics major, the change to handling the family wine business was not simple. Occasionally there are difficult mes, but that's a part of life. "If it's too easy it's not good enough," shrugs Anna philosophically. "Wine was in my life, and meant to be," agrees Valentina.

The evening's king, the majes c garnet-red **Barolo DOCG alla Tradizione 2009** comes on with my *fillet mignon* done perfectly *à point*. The Barolo has been decanted for three and a half hours and is drinking beau fully. Fruit, spice, tobacco in subtle layers open up to a wine of complexity, structure and balance with a mile-long finish. This wine packs a punch in every way, yet it has easily another 10 years on it. It makes one long to taste their star Barolo wine, the famed single-vineyard Cannubi, often referenced as the world's best Barolo.



Le botti in the Marchesi di Barolo cellars

The evening meanders to a close, finishing in leisurely fashion with dessert and more mellow chatter. The ladies are off on an early flight, onward on their travels. It can be exhaus ng, but this is how they like to do things – mee ng people, si ng around a table, drinking their wines. This is Anna's eighth visit to India, and she loves it every me, she says. "Some mes, you have been to a place, but you want to see for yourself how people take to your wine, you want to discuss new aspects about your wines," says Valentina.

And as for the wines – the Barolo and Barbaresco, the kings and queens of Italian viticulture – well, they can speak beautifully for themselves. Just throw them an Italian-style party.



The Abbona family



Valentina and Anna Abbona