



Wine News Barolo Rolls Out an Uneven Vintage

Barolo Rolls Out an Uneven Vintage | By Tom Hyland | Posted Saturday, 01-May-2021



The new releases of Barolo from the 2017 vintage are just now entering the market, and as far as judging these wines, a sound bite won't do this year justice.

Of course, a few select words should never be used to rate any **Barolo** vintage, but given the consistently excellent performances by the area's producers this decade, descriptions of these wines as exceptional, outstanding and superb have become almost commonplace.

But for 2017, it's a bit of a mixed bag. In a decade of warm temperatures, clearly warmer than during the 1980s and 1990s (a direct result of climate change), 2017 stood out as hot, very hot. So it would be natural to assume that the wines might be low in acidity, with very ripe fruit that makes them appealing for the short term, and indeed many of the 2017 Barolos are in that manner. Other wines didn't fare quite as well, displaying slightly cooked fruit, as well as rough tannins, not a formula for long cellar potential.

Yet there are some lovely offerings of 2017 Barolo with good acidity, impressive complexity and notable overall harmony. So while 2017 will never be considered a classic Barolo vintage, it is better than the below average reports that were circulating early on, even before the grapes were picked that year.

Pietro Ratti, proprietor of the **Renato Ratti** estate in La Morra recalled the devastating spring frosts – this after a mild winter with only a few snowfalls – in 2017. "These frosts arrived at the end of April when fragile shoots were just long enough to feel it. It was an unusual situation that occurred in lower vineyards as well as higher elevation ones." Ratti notes that the result was about 10-20 percent lower quantity than usual.

Valentina Abbona of **Marchesi di Barolo** in the town of Barolo comments that while temperatures were above average for May, conditions were fine, as "our soils stored a good amount of water for the summer". This turned out to be very important, as there were drought conditions in the Barolo zone from June until early September. Regarding the warmer than normal temperatures, Abbona notes "the nights were cooler than in other hot years". This is clearly a reference to the torrid 2003 growing season, one that resulted in far too many overripe, unbalanced wines.

In his book *Barolo MGA Volume II*, Italian journalist and cartographer Alessandro Masnaghetti notes the sweltering conditions of 2017 compared with 2003. "The temperatures [in 2017] were not as extreme, just as the period of intense heat did not last as long a period of time." Masnaghetti is quick to point out that the lack of rain was a determining factor in 2017. "Much more significant was the length of the drought which lasted from early August until early November, with the exception of the first two days of September." The author notes how limited that rain was, and writes that it "allowed the fate of the harvest to change; otherwise it would have been doomed".

In total, less than 14 inches of rain fell in the Barolo zone between January and October, according to statistics in Masnaghetti's book; contrast this with 26 inches in 2016, considered an outstanding vintage for Barolo by most producers. As heat summation in 2017 was 10 percent higher than in 2016 and higher still than any other year in the decade of the 2010s (with the exception of 2011), conditions in 2017 pointed to an early harvest, with some growers picking Nebbiolo for production of Barolo as early as September 22-23, anywhere from two to four weeks before other years this decade, and more than a month before harvests in the 1980s and prior years.

As most Barolo producers had experienced previous hot growing seasons, they had learned their lessons and knew how to deal with the higher temperatures. At **Rocche Costamagna** in the town of La Morra, winemaker/proprietor Alessandro Locatelli recalled that he delayed the green harvest until the end of August (between the 15th and 20th specifically in the Rocche dell'Annunziata vineyard), "so that the sugar ripening was slowed down, and we left some more leaves around the bunches, to protect them from direct sunlight".

Locatelli adds that he could anticipate an early vintage – the 28th and 29th of September for him – "and in this way we preserved the acidity, while the sugars and phenological ripening were already achieved". Regarding winemaking, Locatelli notes that the maceration was a bit shorter than usual, around 15 days, instead of the usual 20-30 days.

Generally, how do producers view the 2017 vintage for Barolo? At **Vietti** in Castiglione Falletto, Luca Currado remarks "2017 is not too dissimilar to 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2015, all vintages that expressed themselves wonderfully after aging in the bottle. In our opinion the most closely comparable is 2009." Ratti comments: "Our Barolo shows a good structure mixed with a very surprising elegance, already delivering the approachable classic character of the La Morra area, but also capable of good aging."

For Abbona, the Barolo zone can deliver notable quality ever year, even in warmer than normal conditions. "The 2017 vintage gave us very promising wines considering the fears of the beginning of summer, confirming once again how well-suited and well-equipped the hills of Langhe are for viticulture."

The wines

Ten noteworthy 2017 Barolos:

[Rocche Costamagna Rocche dell'Annunziata](#) | [Podere Oddero Villero](#) | [Palladino Ornato](#) | [Paolo Manzone Meriame](#) | [Ratti Marcenasco](#) | [Vietti Rocche di Castiglione](#)
[Gianni Gagliardo Monvigliero](#) | [Silvio Grasso Bricco Manzoni](#) | [Bruna Grimaldi Bricco Ambrogio](#) | [Marchesi di Barolo Sarmassa](#)

Barbaresco update

While Barolo producers were forced to adapt in 2017, their counterparts in the **Barbaresco** zone enjoyed a lovely year in 2018; these wines are now in release. "2018 has been a classic year for Nebbiolo," says Alessandro Ceretto, winemaker at his **family winery** in Alba. "Temperatures were high in the summer, but the last week of September we had changes in temperature that helped the final phenolic maturation. The picking date was usual, around the first week of October. The crop size is good."

Daniela Rocca at Albino Rocca in Barbaresco was also enthused with the vintage. "I really like the 2018s. The wines are very elegant and represent the true expression of Nebbiolo with their vibrancy. We didn't get the same complexity as in 2016, but Nebbiolo enthusiasts will love the wines."

Five noteworthy 2018 Barbarescos:

[Ceretto Bernadot](#) | [Albino Rocca Ovello Vigna Loreto](#) | [Paitin Serraboella](#) | [Rizzi Nervo](#) | [Rizzi Pajoré](#)