

Fontanabianca

(Aldo Pola)

By Tom Hyland

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At Fontanabianca winery in Burdin (Neive)

At Fontanabianca in Neive, Aldo Pola has a simple philosophy about making wines. “Above and beyond everything else, great wines are made in the vineyard. Whatever you do in the vineyard regarding the wine, it will never get better afterwards. You can’t perform miracles in the cellar.”

Fortunately, Pola has some excellent vineyards to work with at his estate in this small town, one of three where Barbaresco can be produced. His partner Bruno Ferro and he own 12 hectares (roughly 30 acres), planted to Nebbiolo, Dolcetto and Barbera as well as one local white variety, Arneis. The vineyard at his estate, just next to the cellar is Sorì Burdin, source of the finest Nebbiolo grapes for his cru Barbaresco of the same name.

While this wine has become the signature wine of Fontanabianca, this is not a famous cru. “I am the only producer making Barbaresco from this vineyard,” Pola says. Though not well known by the public, the vineyard and the wine should be. First made in the 1969 vintage, this has become one of the most consistent and complex examples of Barbaresco made by any producer.

Pola recalls that first vintage. “My father had a double barrique of the wine and made 600 bottles. We bottled it all by hand and created hand-written labels. I still have one bottle left from that first vintage.”

Pola took over winemaking from his father in 1983 and today with consulting winemaker Giuseppe Caviola (one of the Langhe’s most in-demand enologists), he produces about 9000 - 10,000 bottles of this cru Barbaresco each vintage. The 2004 was particularly memorable with intense aromas of black cherry, balsamic and cinnamon and is quite rich on the palate with flavors of black plum, black currant and licorice. The finish displays elegant tannins, plenty of spice and excellent fruit persistence. This has at least 10-12 years of life ahead of it, speaking conservatively.

The recently released 2005, is another first-rate wine. Although less ripe and slightly lighter on the palate, this still has impressive depth of fruit. Here the flavors are red cherry and red currant with a touch of fig while prominent balsamic and herbal notes highlight the finish. The acidity is a touch higher with this wine than in the 2004, so the fruit is a bit brighter. Look for this wine to be at optimum enjoyment in another 7-10 years.

The regular bottling of Barbaresco, which surprisingly is of smaller quantity than the Sorì Burdin (only 4000 bottles), also displays Pola’s winemaking talent. Aged solely in large casks (as opposed to the Sorì Burdin, which is aged in barriques), the wine has excellent complexity, with very good fruit concentration and elegant tannins. This will drink a bit sooner than the Sorì Burdin; the 2004 bottling will be at its best in 7-10 years.

Pola also produces a delightful Langhe Arneis with flavors of pineapple and quince; a richly structured Dolcetto d'Alba with light tannins and lively acidity (the 2007 bottling is among his best); two separate bottlings of Barbera d'Alba, a *normale*, made from a selection of three vineyards and single vineyard offering named Brunet as well as a Langhe Nebbiolo.

If the Sorì Burdin Barbaresco is not as famous as others in this district, well, at least the press has noticed. *Gambero Rosso*, Italy's wine Bible, has awarded this wine its highest honor of Tre Bicchieri on three occasions, the latest being for the 2004 vintage. *The Wine Spectator* has scored the wine with at least 90 points for six different bottlings, with the 1997 receiving a score of 96 (that particular wine was listed among the magazine's Top 100 for the year – it was number 19).

So while the Sorì Burdin does get respect from the wine press, the fact that it's not better recognized among the public is hardly a surprise. After all, Barbaresco as a whole is not as famous as it should be, especially as it lives in the literal and figurative shadow of Barolo. Pola has some strong viewpoints on this subject and is never at a loss explaining this situation. Besides the fact that there are eleven towns producing Barolo to only three communes for Barbaresco, Pola points out that there is a longer history for Barolo. He also believes there are more recognized names in Barolo. "You have dozens of Barolo producers that have become very famous, while there is really only one in Barbaresco – Angelo Gaja. Also, the level of winemaking in Barolo is of very high quality, while there are producers at the bottom levels of Barbaresco that do not display that same excellence." Yet things are improving for the image of Barbaresco, if slowly, according to Pola. "Even Angelo Gaja thinks there are today eight or nine producers in Barbaresco that are making outstanding wines. This was not the case ten years ago."

These days, red wines from Piemonte are priced, shall we say, not cheaply. Yet for the most part, Pola defends pricing on his wines as well as those of most other Piemontese producers. "The wines are expensive to produce," he remarks. "In the past five or six years, there has been a steady increase in production costs of Piemontese wines. However, there has been a steady increase in quality as well and there have been a greater number of requests from the market for these wines."

While Pola does think that there have been a few Piemontese vintners who have exaggerated their prices, most have taken increases along similar percentages. "In general, if you look around, you will notice the jump in quality in Piemontese wines which has made this raise in prices justifiable. However if you look at other regions, such as Tuscany, their quality has not increased as much, but their prices have."

Pola remains a farmer and winemaker at heart, a man who is at home at his estate and not on the road. He attends VinItaly, the huge wine fair in Verona each April, but that's it. Although there are countless fairs in which he could participate, he knows he needs to be working among the vines and in the cellar. "It's a personal decision as to whether you attend these wine fairs or not," he says. "There are a lot of wine producers who are merchants. They buy wine and then they have to sell it, so they obviously have to participate in more of these expos. Once they sell everything they've made for the year, that's it. It's not like they can make more wine."

One final secret to his success; he has been blessed with the virtue of patience. "After we plant more vines, we'll see the result in seven years. It takes at least three years to make wine that you

can bottle. Then you have to age it, so you don't see the results until seven years. It's impossible for most people to go to work and think they'll see their results after seven years." Pola has been making classic Piedmontese wines for 25 years, so what's seven years to this forward thinking, gracious and humble man?

WINE NOTES

2007 Langhe Arneis

Deep yellow with golden tints and aromas of quince and pineapple. Medium-bodied, this has good concentration with plump, ripe fruit and distinct white spice. Lively acidity and notes of yellow peach in the finish. Enjoy over the next 2 years.

2007 Dolcetto d'Alba

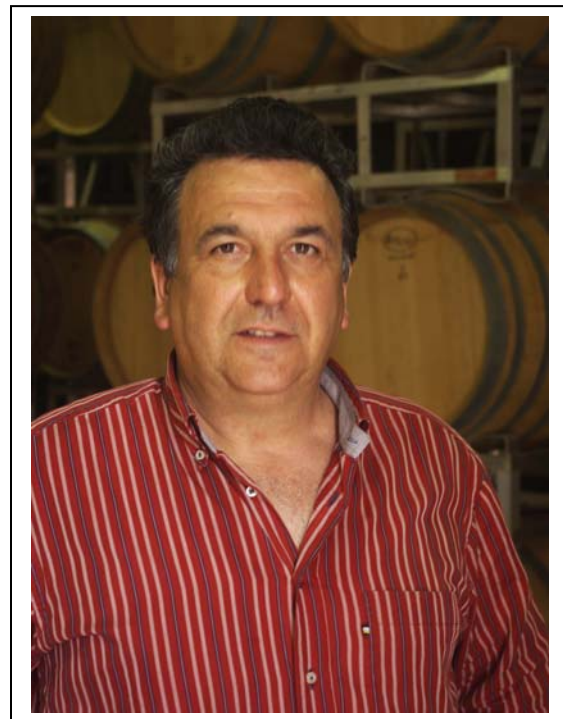
Bright purple with lovely aromas of cranberry and black raspberry. Medium-full with very good concentration. Lively acidity, light tannins and notes of white pepper in the finish. Enjoy over the next 2-3 years.

2006 Barbera d'Alba

Deep ruby red-light purple with aromas of black plum, vanilla and licorice. Medium-full with very good concentration. Good acidity with excellent fruit persistence and a finish with rich fruit flavors of strawberry and notes of black mint. Moderate tannins that are polished and well integrated. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years.

2005 Barbera d'Alba "Brunet"

Bright ruby red with aromas of chocolate, black plum and a bit of toasted oak. Medium-full with very good concentration. A bit more tannic than the regular barbera, this has notable oak and hints of malted chocolate in the finish. Drink over the next 5-7 years.



2004 Barbaresco

Deep garnet with aromas of caraway, balsamic and red currant. Medium-full with very good concentration. Long finish with excellent fruit persistence, perfectly integrated oak and refined tannins. Very nice complexity – enjoy over the next 7-10 years.

2004 Barbaresco "Sorì Burdin"

Deep garnet with aromas of balsamic, black cherry and cinnamon. Full-bodied with excellent concentration. Lengthy finish with excellent fruit persistence, lively acidity and rich, but elegant tannins. Great power and complexity with a nice harmony of components. Wonderful expression of terroir and varietal character, this is outstanding! This will drink beautifully for 10-12 years and probably a bit longer.