

COMUNIST



Evolution

Barolo del Comune wines spotlight Barolo's 11 villages

by STEPHANIE JOHNSON



THE COMUNE DI SERRALUNGA D'ALBA
COMPRISES THE TOWN OF SERRALUNGA
D'ALBA AND THE SURROUNDING VINEYARDS.

In the spirit of all those standardized tests that have been cancelled due to COVID-19, let's start with a quiz:

What is Barolo?

- A. A wine made from *nebbiolo* grapes in the Langhe hills of Piedmont
- B. A wine region
- C. A village
- D. A *comune* (comune in Italian)
- E. All of the above

The answer, of course, is E, that most annoying choice. Barolo is a wine that comes from *nebbiolo* grapes grown within the limits of the Barolo DOCG zone. Within that Barolo zone is the town of Barolo, one of 11 villages that are authorized to produce Barolo. Each village sits within an extended area called a *comune*, or municipality, that carries the same name as the main village, and often the words village and *comune* are used interchangeably.

Confusing? To most casual wine lovers, absolutely, even to those who share an impression of Barolo as a powerful, tannic and often expensive wine. For many years, that was all you really needed to know about Barolo, though having the names of some top producers in your back pocket helped.

That uniform façade began to crack in the 1961 vintage when Beppe Colla of Prunotto bottled a Barolo Bussia, and Alfredo Currado of Vietti made a Barolo Rocche di Castiglione—each appending the name of a famous single site. Although considered radical, and actually prohibited by Italian wine law at the time, this kicked off a profusion of Barolos carrying single-site names, as well as Barolos with invented or “fantasy” names with no relation at all to any site. According to Giovanni Minetti, president of the Barolo and Barbaresco Consorzio from 2001 to 2007 and vice president until 2010, “Anything was going on the labels. It was completely out of control.”

THE MGAS

Alarmed by the confusion and lack of regulation, Minetti and other local officials began scrutinizing Italy's wine laws for a way around the single-site prohibition; they also worked with producers to map out and delimit Barolo's most important historical sites. Those efforts dragged on for some 20 years, culminating in 2010 with an official map of Barolo that included 170 single vineyard sites, known collectively as *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* (additional geographic mentions), or MGAs—roughly the equivalent of a *cru* or *climat* in Burgundy, and ranging in size from 3.6 to 938 acres.

While this brought some clarity and order, it also required Barolo consumers to make a giant leap from the macro to the micro. Now, instead of knowing the name Barolo and those of a few producers, consumers are confronted with Barolo labels that can also include the name of one of the 170 MGA vineyards.

Fortunately, in addition to the 170 single-site MGAs, the regulations also defined 11 “super-MGAs” corresponding

to each of the Barolo zone's 11 communes (Barolo, Castiglione Falletto, Cherasco, Diano d'Alba, Grinzane Cavour, La Morra, Monforte d'Alba, Novello, Roddi, Serralunga d'Alba and Verduno). The *comune* MGAs allowed a producer making Barolo with 85 percent of the grapes coming from a single commune to label that wine with the commune name—for example, Barolo del Comune di Serralunga d'Alba. The possibility of including a commune name on Barolo labels actually existed prior to 2010 but was only used by a few producers. The MGA rules codified the *comune* category and standardized the language so that all such wines would be called Barolo del Comune di (insert *comune* name here).

To put it another way, *comune* wines are an intermediate category between “regular” Barolo (Barolo *classico* or Barolo *normale*; there is no official term for this) and single-MGA Barolo from those 170 sites. Returning to the Burgundy analogy, Barolo *comune* wines can be compared to *villages* wines in Burgundy. Burgundy aficionados may be able to elucidate the differences among the dozens of grand-cru and the hundreds of premier-cru wines; a larger circle of Burgundy fans might know that they prefer elegant, red-fruited Chambolle-Musigny villages wines over darker, more structured villages Burgundy from Gevrey-Chambertin.

In a similar way, Barolo's 11 communes have different personalities that derive from their predominant soil types, altitudes and positions. Back in the days before MGAs, Barolo was almost always a blend of *nebbiolo*

The 11 Communes of Barolo



MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOEL KIMMEL

from assorted vineyard sites and often from different communes. These wines might have combined, for instance, the perfumed fruit of La Morra with the tannic power common to Serralunga d'Alba and finesse from Castiglione Falletto. The *comune* category presents an opportunity for producers to make wines that are representative of their entire home town, in a sense. It's a concept that has existed for hundreds of years, far pre-dating the founding of the modern Italian state in 1861, and it holds special significance for Italians. Pietro Ratti, whose father Renato was an early cartographer of Barolo's important sites, describes this as a "*senso di appartenenza*, a sense of belonging to a place or a community. It is an essential part of our history as Italians, and it is beautiful to see the differences among communes in the wines."

Only a handful of Barolo del Comune wines existed when the MGAs were first approved, and according to the Barolo and Barbaresco Consorzio, that number slowly increased to 23 by 2014. Today, there are at least 70 Barolo del Comune labels, with more slated for release next year. A number of other producers have said they are thinking of bottling a *comune* wine in the near future. For an area as traditional as Piedmont, this is fast-paced change.

FOCUS IN SERRALUNGA

Nearly half of the Barolo del Comune labels on the market now are from Serralunga d'Alba and, in fact, Serralunga's growers were early proponents of Barolo *comune* wines. Giovanni Minetti, the consorzio president who helped launch the MGA project, was also the general manager at Fontanafredda for 17 years. Minetti and others point out that Serralunga's history is somewhat different from other villages. Serralunga fruit was always considered the backbone of a blended Barolo, and its grapes were in high demand. "When all Barolo was blended," Minetti says, "every serious producer wanted to buy grapes from Serralunga, and so, until about twenty years ago, there were very few producers [making wine] in Serralunga, because everyone else was selling their grapes."

Roberto Bruno, now the commercial director for Fontanafredda, has worked at this historic Serralunga estate since 1991. He notes that in the early 1990s, much of the Barolo wine market was focused on the commune of La Morra, where the Barolo Boys (producers like Elio Altare and Roberto Voerzio) were breaking traditions by reducing maceration times and aging in French oak barriques to give rounder, more approachable Barolos. "Wines from Serralunga were considered austere and not enjoyable," Bruno recalls. "We thought Serralunga was underestimated and had great potential, so we decided to express this through a single-village Barolo. At this time there were no MGAs, so we called it Barolo di Serralunga d'Alba." Fontanafredda released the inaugural 1988 vintage of this wine in 1992. Davide Rosso, winemaker at his family's Giovanni Rosso winery, recalls Fontanafredda's dynamic young winemaker, Livio Testa, encouraging other Serralunga producers to follow their example. Rosso was one of the first to respond, producing his first Barolo di Serralunga from the 1996 vintage. Since 2010, both have changed their labels to Barolo del



▲ THE HISTORIC FONTANAFREDDA WINERY SITS AT THE NORTHERN TIP OF THE COMUNE DI SERRALUNGA D'ALBA

Comune di Serralunga d'Alba.

Those early *Comune di Serralunga* wines set the stage when the Consorzio was considering the new MGA regulations. Minetti notes that the Barbaresco MGA system, released three years before Barolo's, did not include any provision for *comune* wines as Barbaresco had no such tradition. In Barolo, on the other hand, the *comune* tradition had existed at least since 1988. In fact, Minetti points out that before the MGA mapping project started, Barolo's 11 communes were the only areas with officially delimited borders, so they were really the first areas that could be defined as MGAs.

Serralunga has become such a strong brand that some producers have decided to label wines as Barolo del Comune di Serralunga d'Alba when they could use a single MGA name instead. Davide Rosso (owner of Giovanni Rosso) is also the winemaker for the new Luigi Vico project in Serralunga. One of their wines comes exclusively from a half-acre plot of vines in Serralunga's Meriame MGA, yet they chose to release it as a Barolo del Comune di Serralunga d'Alba. "It is easier, in terms of the market, to have a Barolo Serralunga," Rosso says.

Other wineries have decided to invest in vineyards to take advantage of the Serralunga name. The Krause family (owners of Vietti since 2016) purchased the Roero-based Enrico Serafino winery in 2015; around the same time, they acquired 4.9 acres of vineyard in the Carpena and Meriame MGAs, both on Serralunga's western slopes, and released their first Barolo del Comune di Serralunga d'Alba from the 2015 vintage. According to Nico Conta, president and vinegrower at Serafino, "Barolo is the dream of any Piemonte winemaker, and Serralunga is the dream of the dreamers." He points to Serralunga's soils, which are predominantly the older Helvetian (also called Serravallian) soils, which tend to impart more power and longevity to the wines. "This is why we are focused on this *comune* wine," he says.





BEYOND SERRALUNGA

Piedmont has seen a tremendous increase in wine tourism in the last 20 years, and as more wine lovers make the trek to Barolo and visit its villages, they are starting to think about Barolo not as a monolithic zone but as 11 separate ones. For Stefano Conterno, who now works with his father at the Diego Conterno winery, this was a motivating factor when the family decided to make a Barolo del Comune di Monforte d'Alba, first released in the 2016 vintage. "People know the Barolo area better now, and it is important to work on the brand of the *comuni*. The opportunity of *comune* wines is to help the final customer to understand Barolo better."

Vittore Alessandria, winemaker at Fratelli Alessandria, has decided to shift his Barolo *classico* to a *comune* wine, and next year will release the 2017 as a Barolo del Comune di Verduno, the first one from this *comune*. His Barolo *classico* typically included ten to 15 percent of fruit from Gramolere, an MGA in Monforte d'Alba, and while this would technically be legal in a *comune* wine (up to 15 percent of the fruit can come from other communes), he decided to use fruit exclusively from Verduno to make it a purer representation of his home village.

Alessandria compares his Barolo Monvigliero, from Verduno's most renowned MGA vineyard, to a soloist who sings with great personality and also, perhaps, some idiosyncrasies. The *comune* wine, Alessandria says, is more like a choir: "The voices are a bit different, but similar to each other and in harmony. Our idea of quality and beauty is the fact that you can recognize this similarity. If a wine lover can recognize that this wine is from Verduno, that is the important thing."

Comune labels may be more confusing for consumers when they come from the village of Barolo, but there are now at least nine such wines on the market, including one from Marchesi di Barolo that existed since 1987, although under a variety of different labels prior to 2010. Virna



"Serralunga fruit was always considered the backbone of a blended Barolo."

— GIOVANNI MINETTI,
WHO HELPED DEVELOP
BAROLO'S MGAs AS THE
CONSORZIO PRESIDENT.

Borgogno, another producer in the commune of Barolo, had been making a Barolo with fruit from Preda and Sarmassa, two of her most important MGAs, both located within the comune of Barolo, and she labeled the wine Barolo Preda Sarmassa. When the new MGA rules went into effect in 2010, it became illegal to use the name of more than one cru on a label. She changed the blend from 50/50 to 85 to 90 percent Preda, preserving more of her Sarmassa fruit for her single-cru wine, and renamed the blend Barolo del Comune di Barolo in the 2010 vintage.

Alessandro Masnaghetti, an Italian wine journalist whose two-volume tome is considered the last word on Barolo's MGAs, believes that *comune* wines represent a significant trend. "At the beginning, only a few producers were really convinced of the potential of this kind of Barolo," he says, "but along the years, they started to realize this wine has bigger potential compared to the regular Barolo, because it is a way to give the idea that 'this is from my village.'" Masnaghetti thinks that, in terms of quality, *comune* wines lie between regular Barolos and those from single MGAs, but are closer to the cru level. He sees *comune* wines as a reference point for consumers: "If you want to approach Barolo and have a first idea of the villages, this is the place to start. But then you have to move to the single-vineyard Barolo, to understand that the villages have more than one single character."

With the rise of Barolos carrying the name of a *comune* or an MGA, where does this leave Barolo *classico* wines, those labeled simply Barolo? Some have begun to see wines from Barolo as a pyramid, with MGA wines at the top, *comune* wines in the middle and Barolo *classico* wines at the base. Yet a pyramid may not be the best model for Barolo. Unlike Burgundy, with its premier- and grand-cru designations, the MGAs are officially neutral on the question of quality. They indicate differences among the sites without rating any as better than the others.

Many *comune* wines are made with fruit from single or multiple highly-regarded MGA vineyards. The same can be true of Barolo *classico*: A prime example is made at Bartolo Mascarello, one of the most renowned houses in the region, now run by Bartolo's daughter, Maria Teresa Mascarello. Harkening back to Barolo's earlier tradition, Mascarello makes just one Barolo, and it has always been a blend of fruit coming from her vineyards in the Barolo and La Morra communes.

The day may come when Barolo assigns quality classifications to its MGAs, though this seems a distant prospect. Until then, perhaps it is more useful to think of Barolo's wines as a set of concentric circles, with Barolo *classico* as the outermost ring, *comune* wines inside of that, and single-MGA wines as the center. You can find high-quality wines in any of the circles, and some producers make excellent wines in all three, but as you move closer to the center, the wines should reflect a more specific expression of place. There is value in following this path and in spending some time in that intermediate ring, becoming familiar with the personalities of Barolo's 11 communes and building a context for approaching the array of single-site MGA wines at the center. ■