

RAVERA

The Cool Corner of Barolo

by STEPHANIE JOHNSON Photographs by ELISA CARUCCI

LOOKING SOUTH FROM
THE TOP OF THE RAV-
ERA CRU, TOWARD
THE MOUNTAINS THAT
SEND CHILLY BREEZES
TO COOL THE VINES



Novello's Ravera.) According to Valter, a series of devastating hail storms hit Novello's vineyards in the 1950s, driving many of the winegrowers to leave. Much of the land was owned by wealthy families who lived elsewhere and left management of the vineyards to tenant farmers under the *mezzadria* system. Valter says most of the grapes from the Ravera cru were sold to producers in other communes, who used the fruit as a backbone for their blended Barolos. Few, if any, were bottling Barolo made exclusively from Novello, and no one was putting the Ravera name on their labels. "In the mind of many people," says Valter, "Ravera was marginal for Barolo production. But not for Elvio."

Valter had met Elvio's daughter, Nadia, on a schoolbus when they were teenagers. They married in 1988, and Valter worked briefly at Cagno-Marcarini before moving on to army service and then to an engineering firm. Elvio asked his son-in-law to join him in the new venture, and Valter left his nascent scientific career for a life in the vineyards. "Elvio knew the potential of this cru. And what is really important is to have the farmhouse and vineyard together. That is a great power for us," says Valter, explaining that living in the center of the vineyard allowed them to follow the vines' growth more closely, and react immediately to disease threats or weather changes. Elvio and Valter, along with Nadia, restored the farmhouse and tended to the vines. In 1991, they produced the first Barolo to carry the name Ravera on the label. They acquired a few more parcels over the years and, by 2005, they owned 22 acres of nebbiolo vines in Ravera, from which they bottled four different Barolos.

THE FIRST TIME I WALKED THROUGH THE ROWS OF RAVERA'S vines, I found myself turned around. Valter Fissore had led me to the top of a slope in Barolo's southwestern commune of Novello, where he pointed southward to the Alps in the distance. "Alps to the south?" I thought. In every other wine region of northern Italy, I'd used views of the Alps to orient myself northwards. Tracing the mountain range on a map afterwards, I followed the Alps across Italy's northern border from Friuli in the east to Valle d'Aosta in the west, where they make a sharp left turn, curving southward past Turin before curling back to the east at Cuneo—in effect, bounding the Barolo zone on three sides. As Valter explained, the Maritime Alps, close to the Mediterranean Sea, direct cold air northward toward Ravera.

Thirty years ago, those cold mountain currents were considered something of a drawback. For Barolo producers at the time, the best vineyard plots were the warmest, those where the snow melted earliest, since ripening was a struggle in the area's continental climate. When Renato Ratti created his famous map of Barolo's greatest crus in the 1970s, Ravera was not among them. Despite its unheralded status, Elvio Cagno, Valter's father-in-law, decided to bet big on Ravera. Elvio had grown up in Novello, and in 1990, after 30 years of making wines at Cagno-Marcarini in La Morra, he leapt at the opportunity to buy the Cascina Nuova farm in the heart of Novello's Ravera cru.

Novello is both a village and a commune, like the other ten villages/communes that make up the Barolo zone, and Ravera is its largest cru. (Confusingly, there is also a separate Ravera cru in the neighboring Monforte commune called Ravera di Monforte d'Alba, to distinguish it from

EVEN BEFORE 2005, RAVERA HAD BEGUN ATTRACTING the attention of other important producers, the first of which was Vietti, based in the commune of Castiglione Falletto. Alfredo Currado, the third generation to make wine at Vietti, became one of the first producers to bottle a single-cru Barolo in 1961. When Alfredo's son, Luca Currado Vietti, joined the business in 1992, the family already owned parcels in renowned crus like Brunate in La Morra, Lazzarito in Serralunga d'Alba, and Rocche di Castiglione and Villero in Castiglione Falletto. Luca married Elena Penna in 1994, and their first vineyard purchase, two years later, was a plot in Ravera.

"Ravera is really about climate," Luca says. "It is a cru facing the mountains, outside the horseshoe of Barolo [the inner, warmer part of the zone]." The hills of Ravera absorb the brunt of the cold mountain air flowing up from the southwest, protecting those inner "horseshoe" crus. "Ripening in Ravera is slower compared to other vineyards," he continues. "In warm vintages, the average temperature is lower. It is one of the last vineyards we harvest." After buying the Ravera plot, Elena Penna Currado Vietti says, she and Luca encountered legendary producer Beppe Rinaldi and were excited to tell him about the purchase. But Rinaldi was unimpressed, saying, "From Ravera, I do some dolcetto."

Luca bottled a Barolo Ravera from the 1999 and 2000 vintages, taking advantage of a new cru to diverge from the family's traditional winemaking practices and try out techniques he had learned while working in California and Bordeaux. The wines, aged in barriques, were widely acclaimed in the press—but the couple was not satisfied. "For us, it was a wine that was very good but a little uncomfortable, like beautiful shoes that don't make your feet feel good," he says.

Elvio Cagno

THIS PAGE: ELVIO CAGNO WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PRODUCERS TO REALIZE THE POTENTIAL OF THE RAVERA CRU WHEN HE FOUNDED HIS WINERY IN 1990. HE PASSED AWAY IN 2016.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CASCINA NUOVA FARMHOUSE ATOP A HILL IN THE RAVERA CRU; THE CAGNO TEAM HARVESTING IN RAVERA OCTOBER 11, 2021; VALTER FISSORE AND NADIA CAGNO





Vietti

ELENA PENNA CURRADO VIETTI AND LUCA CURRADO VIETTI (TOP LEFT) AND THE VIETTI CREW HARVESTING IN RAVERA OCTOBER 11, 2021

It may have been a wine in the style that the market liked, but it was not to their taste. The couple took a big gamble and decided not to bottle a Barolo Ravera from 2001, a great vintage. “It was dramatic for our family. Everyone wanted to kill us,” Luca recalls. No one could understand why they would stop making such a highly rated wine, but the couple stuck to their guns. “We are revising to make it in a way we like,” they insisted. It would be ten years before the next release of Vietti’s Barolo Ravera.

For the rest of the 2000s, Luca tried different approaches, working with longer macerations, aging in large casks and not racking for three years; “the oldest school possible,” he says. In the meantime, Ravera continued to be a key component of Castiglione, Vietti’s blended Barolo. “Ravera is the backbone of Castiglione,” Elena says, noting that it constitutes two-thirds of the blend. “It is a very classic expression, with big shoulders. It gives the structure and intensity.” After a decade of experimentation, the couple felt the wine was showing so beautifully that they released a 2010 Barolo Ravera, and have done so every year since, with impressive results (we recommended the 2016 with 98 points).

Luca muses on why it took him ten years to come to terms with Ravera. “With crus like Rocche [di Castiglione], we have experience going back to my great grandfather, but Ravera was a new cru. For me, even the 2018 vintage is still an experiment.” Eventually, he found his way by going back to traditional practices of his grandfather, and of producers like Mauro Mascarello, whose 1970 Monprivato inspired Luca when he tasted it during his period of experimentation. “Mascarello forgot to rack the wine for two years, and it was fantastic. So, we learned that it is possible to do less racking, to work more in reduction,” Luca says. It was also a matter of understanding Ravera’s cooler microclimate and how that has evolved since he first bought the vineyard. “In the last ten to fifteen years, with the warming trend, Ravera got all the benefits of its exposure to the mountains. It can be twelve or even fifteen days later than Brunate in terms of harvest, and it’s not very far, some twenty to thirty minutes by walking,” Luca says. He owns two plots in Brunate, a cru in that protected, inner horseshoe of Barolo. One parcel is higher, the other lower, and in warmer vintages, he can’t use fruit from the lower parcel in his single-cru Brunate. “In those celebrated crus of the past that were protected by the horseshoe of Barolo, today it is probably two to three degrees [Celsius] warmer than it should be. Now Ravera’s climate is like [that of] the most celebrated crus of the 1950s and ’60s.”

IN HIS *Barolo MGA Vol. II*, ALESSANDRO MASNAGHETTI builds upon the painstaking mapping of Barolo’s 170 MGAs (*Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive*), the official name for the commonly used term, “cru.” He classifies each MGA according to harvest dates, with five categories ranging from very early to very late. Ravera is one of 22 crus that fall into the very late category, a characteristic that has become increasingly desirable with the warming trend of recent years. Giuseppe Vaira, who makes the wine at G.D. Vajra along with his father, Aldo, explained the benefits of late-ripening vineyards. “If you pick later, you’re reaching phenolic ripening when the temperatures are lower. The accumulation of sugar and the breakdown of acidity is slower, so you achieve a balance of the

complexity of aromas and fruit. It is like the difference between a microwave and a professional oven. In a microwave, things get hot really fast and might lack the finesse of something cooked more slowly. We want to pick when nighttime temperatures are cool. Nebbiolo pulls out its best game in these conditions.”

Aldo Vaira had established the G.D. Vajra winery in 1972 on the high, western edge of the Barolo commune, another late-ripening area swept by winds from the Alps—in this case, to the west. All of the family’s Barolo vineyards were located within that commune until 2000, when an acquaintance of Aldo’s offered to sell him a parcel of Ravera vines in a section of the cru called Pratorotondo, which is below Cagno’s Cascina Nuova plots. Aldo and his wife, Mirena, had lived in Novello briefly as newlyweds, and their apartment overlooked the Ravera cru. According to Giuseppe Vaira, that emotional attachment to Ravera drove the decision to buy, but they also knew the vineyard and the microclimate were something special.

Echoing Vietti’s experience with Ravera, the Vaira family waited a decade before releasing a single-cru Barolo Ravera. They replanted with a mix of clones and rootstocks to avoid homogeneity, and used the fruit for their Langhe Nebbiolo while waiting for the vines to mature. “We were confident that replanting would create a better vineyard, but we still believe that young vines don’t have the depth for Barolo,” Giuseppe notes. They released their first Barolo Ravera from the 2010 vintage, the same year that Luca Currado Vietti re-introduced his own.

At 36 years of age, Giuseppe Vaira represents the second generation of vignerons to produce single-cru Barolo from Ravera. Reflecting on the evolution that has occurred in Barolo in his lifetime, he echoes Vietti’s observations about those vineyards in the interior of the Barolo zone, where lower elevations and protection from hailstorms brought more reliable ripening in a time before the climate began to warm. “There are vineyards that are more commercial than Ravera, that produce wines that are more juicy in the midpalate, but this is the greatness of Ravera. It’s not a cru that pleases everyone. It takes some time to crack it. Ravera has plenty of soul, but there is a wildness to it.” He recalls a line from “Anthem,” a Leonard Cohen song that he likes to sing in the car on the way home from the vineyards: “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Ravera Barolos, he says, are for people who have the sensibility to see something beyond the surface. They’re not the easiest Barolos to understand, particularly in their youth, partly because the structure built up in that cooler microclimate takes time to reveal its full personality. “Ravera is a wine for people who don’t mind jumping on the wild horse and leaving their comfort zone, people who like to feel the vertigo of taking a risk instead of staying in a round, juicy comfort zone. And there’s life in that energy.”

YET ANOTHER FAMOUS PRODUCER JOINED THE RAVERA club in 2015, when Enrico Scavino bought a plot of Ravera vines. Based in Castiglione Falletto, the Paolo Scavino estate owns parcels in 20 different crus; Ravera is the highest in elevation and the last to be harvested. According to Enrico’s daughter, Elisa, the family is still refining its approach in harvesting and vinifying fruit from Ravera. That sounds familiar...and the results of the first



two vintages are promising (we awarded the 2016 vintage 95 points in December 2020).

At 322 acres, Ravera is the fourth-largest MGA in the Barolo zone, with plenty of changes in elevation, exposure, and soil composition. This diversity allows Valter and Nadia to produce four different Elvio Cogno Barolos from a single cru—not unparalleled (Aldo Conterno produces four Barolos from Bussia, a cru more than twice the size of Ravera), but very unusual. Their Barolo Cascina Nuova doesn’t carry the Ravera name on its label, but the fruit all comes from the estate’s younger vines just below the farmhouse. Barolo Ravera is the flagship wine, the most structured of the four, requiring more time to unfurl. Fruit for Barolo Riserva Ravera Vigna Elena comes from a single, sandy plot in Ravera planted exclusively to nebbiolo rosé, once thought to be a clone of nebbiolo but now understood to be a separate, if closely related variety. Vigna Elena has a totally different personality from Elvio Cogno’s other three Barolos, its exuberant floral scents and high-toned red-cherry flavors reflecting the influence of nebbiolo rosé and those sandier soils. Barolo Ravera Bricco Pernice comes from another single plot that represents, according to Valter, the historic heart of the cru. Bricco Pernice’s microclimate is slightly warmer than other parts of Ravera, and it contains the estate’s oldest vines, some more than 50 years of age; that combination proved magical in the 2016 vintage, garnering a recommendation of 100 points.

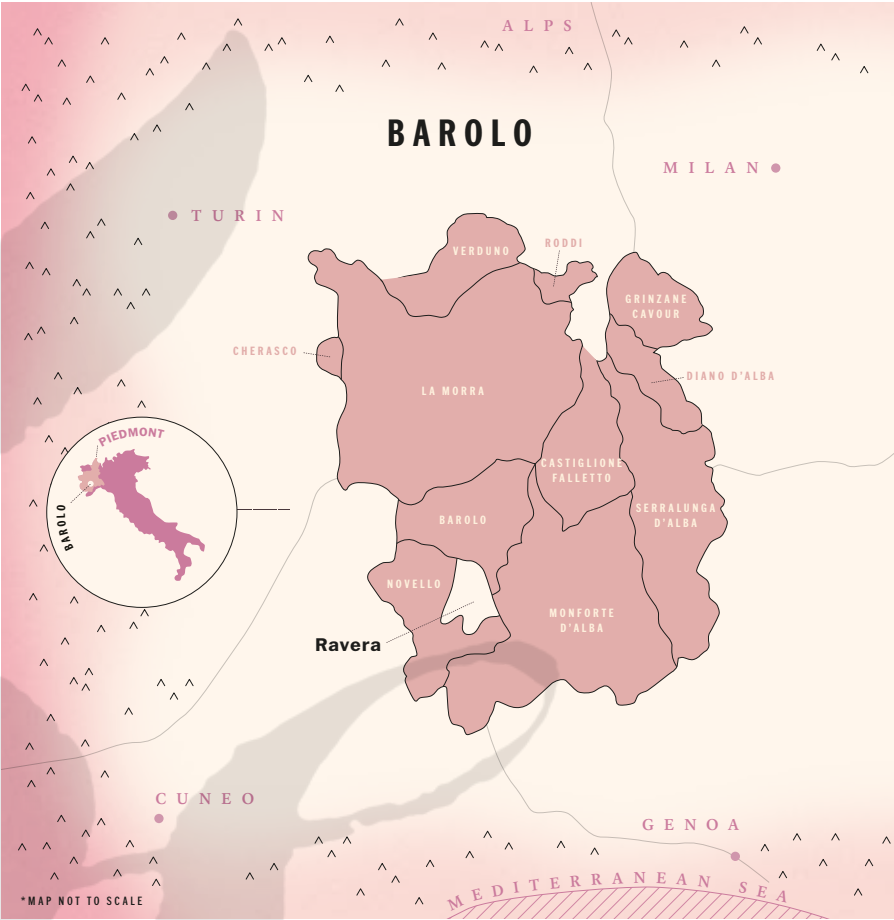
When discussing those diverse and articulate expressions of a single cru, Valter often goes back to the fact that he lives among his vines and can respond immediately to changing

G.D. Vajra

ISIDORO VAIRA MANAGES THE FAMILY’S VINEYARDS (TOP LEFT); SCENES FROM THE CRUSH AT THE VAJRA CANTINA IN BAROLO OCTOBER 11, 2021

conditions. Our most recent conversation was on the eve of the 2021 harvest, and he was reflecting on the fact that, when Elvio Cogno moved to Cascina Nuova in 1990, it was his 30th harvest. Elvio passed away in 2016, and Valter, now 56 years old, has the same number of harvests under his belt. Having worked almost his entire professional life in the Ravera cru, he agrees with Vietti and Vaira that it takes time to get the measure of the vineyard. The 2014 vintage was a turning point for Valter, when he realized that Ravera is not just a hedge against hot vintages—that he could find balance in the vines in a cool and rainy growing season. And despite enjoying Elvio Cogno’s reputation as “the king of Ravera” (in the words of Penna Currado Vietti), Valter and Nadia welcome the company in their home cru. “We were pioneers, but then to have other producers who see the potential was important,” says Valter.

Even after 30 harvests, Valter is still experimenting, now with the use of stems, a practice that may be common in Burgundy but not in Barolo. I ask him why, after all his success, he would risk taking such a different direction. “I taste wine from around the world, and my palate becomes more demanding,” he replies. “I want wines with more complexity and emotion, because I have become more complicated as I get older.” Nadia, who has been working side by side with Valter during those 30 harvests, can’t suppress a chuckle. But perhaps that willingness to take a risk, to work on the edge of ripeness, to jump on the wild horse, is what it takes to make Barolo in Ravera. ●



Barolo Ravera recommended by our tasters:

*Elvio Cogno 2016
Barolo Ravera
Bricco Pernice*

*Elvio Cogno 2016
Barolo Ravera
Vietti 2016
Barolo Ravera*

*Elvio Cogno 2015
Barolo Ravera
Bricco Pernice
Elvio Cogno 2013
Barolo Riserva Ravera
Vigna Elena
Elvio Cogno 2013
Barolo Ravera
Bricco Pernice*

*Elvio Cogno 2017
Barolo Ravera
Elvio Cogno 2015
Barolo Ravera
Vigna Elena
Elvio Cogno 2015
Barolo Ravera
G.D. Vajra 2016
Barolo Ravera
Vietti 2017
Barolo Ravera
Vietti 2015
Barolo Ravera*

*Elvio Cogno 2014
Barolo Riserva Ravera
Vigna Elena
Elvio Cogno 2012
Barolo Riserva Ravera
Vigna Elena
Elvio Cogno 2012
Barolo Ravera
Bricco Pernice
G.D. Vajra 2017
Barolo Ravera
Paolo Scavino 2016
Barolo Ravera*

*Elvio Cogno 2016
Barolo Cascina Nuova
Elvio Cogno 2014
Barolo Ravera
Bricco Pernice
Elvio Cogno 2013
Barolo Ravera
Elvio Cogno 2012
Barolo Ravera
Paolo Scavino 2017
Barolo Ravera
Vietti 2014
Barolo Ravera*

*Elvio Cogno 2017
Barolo Cascina Nuova
Elvio Cogno 2015
Barolo Cascina Nuova
Elvio Cogno 2011
Barolo Riserva Ravera
Vigna Elena
Elvio Cogno 2011
Barolo Ravera
G.D. Vajra 2015 Barolo
Ravera
G.D. Vajra 2014 Barolo
Ravera*