

1990 Barolos and Barbarescos

AN OUTSTANDING PIEDMONT VINTAGE POINTS UP THE DIVIDE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STYLES.

MATTHEW CONWAY, ASA



To celebrate the 20th birthday of a great vintage, a group of New York City's top wine professionals gathered for an in-depth evaluation and spirited discussion of 1990 Barolos and Barbarescos. Tim Kopec, beverage director for Veritas, a New York restaurant-wine institution, hosted the tasting. Joining him on the panel were Ned Benedict, consultant for Grand Cru Wine Consulting; Richard Betts, MS, vice president and head of the Fine Wine Division for Castle Brands and co-founder of Sombra Mezcal; Robert Bohr, wine director at Cru; Christy Canterbury, wine acquisitions director for Italian Wine Merchants; Tracé Conway, beverage director at The Red Cat; Michel Couvreur, head sommelier at Per Se; Fred Dexheimer, MS, owner of Juice-man Consulting and a member of the *Sommelier Journal* Editorial Advisory Board; Matthew Krueger, sommelier at Veritas; Steven Olson, co-creator of the Beverage Alcohol Resource and owner of AKA Wine Geek; Juliette Pope, beverage director at Gramercy Tavern; John Ragan, beverage director at Eleven Madison Park; Nathan Rawlinson, sommelier at Eleven Madison Park; Aldo Sohm, 2008 Best Sommelier in the World and wine director at Le Bernardin, winner of the 2009 James Beard Foundation Award for outstanding wine service; Kelli White, head sommelier at Veritas; and Hristo Zisovski, chef sommelier at Jean-Georges.

The tasting originally consisted of 13 bottlings, but one was determined to be corked

and, therefore, was not evaluated. The remaining dozen wines were tasted blind in two flights, arranged in random order. As always, panelists were made aware that their evaluation and commentary were more important than their scores, which were tabulated on a 20-point scale.

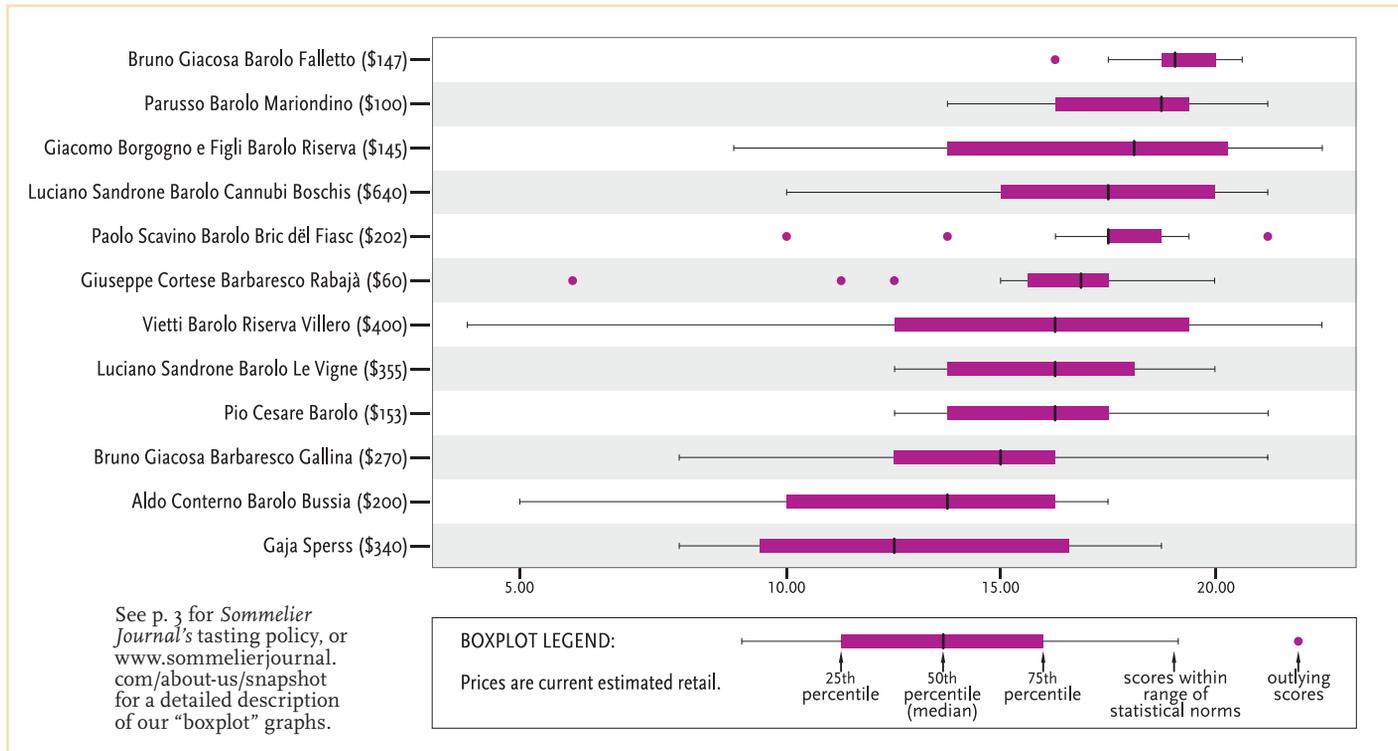
The Piedmont hills of Alba and Asti are banded with a variety of soil types. Vineyards with southern exposures, where the snow melts first, are the most prestigious. Freezing temperatures, rain, drought, and wind all play a role in determining how a vintage plays out for Barolo and Barbaresco, but nothing can be more damaging than the area's annual late-spring and early-summer hailstorms. Fortunately, in 1990, most vineyards were spared from widespread hail destruction, and a long, warm growing season was capped off by a dry harvest, making this vintage impressive from the start.

Although Piedmont is steeped in tradition, a change took place in the early '90s, when old-timers began handing over the reins to a younger generation, some of whom adopted a more international style to keep up with the competitive global market. Cellars were cleaned up, modern viticultural technology was implemented, and winemakers tried new types of oak. On the other hand, many vintners made no changes at all, leading to a debate over which style is better: modern or traditional.

As Kopec summarized the tasting, "With a few exceptions, this was what I was expecting.

TASTING PANEL

SNAPSHOT



Ripeness, power, many of the wines with underlying tannins and those rose-petal characteristics, and you have to like that." Sohm pointed out that the exceptions were the wines where "oak played a major factor." Bohr agreed, "This was a period of experimentation, and you saw that in the wines that aren't classic. There were some traditional wines that spoke to their place, and some just seemed artificial, like someone messed with them just to mess around." Canterbury felt "there were less truly modern wines than I had expected. This was a fruit-driven vintage. Whether they were messing around or knew what they were doing, some did a fine job!" Conway countered, "I expected this level of diversity, but I wanted to like all of them a lot more, and that just wasn't the case for me."

Dexheimer pointed out that the panelists' palates were likely more discriminating than most. "I like some of the more modern wines, and I am OK with that," he said. "Some people want clean wines, and some of the more modern wines had a more clean and approachable aspect to Nebbiolo." Rawlinson added, "I have served some of these modern styles of wines from other vintages, and my guests have raved

about them. Just because they are not our favorites and they are big, bold, and oaky doesn't mean they don't have an audience." Zisovski commented that "as a sommelier, these wines are very diverse, and it shows me that it is our job to know the producers and styles and put the right bottles in front of the right guests." As Olson concluded, "There is no right answer to any of this, which is why I made this my career 30 years ago. What makes this profession so amazing is no matter how much you know, there is always more you don't."

The following are representative comments, in order of the wines' ranking on the accompanying "boxplot."

BRUNO GIACOSA BAROLO FALLETTO

The panelists unanimously agreed that this was a stunning example of the 1990 vintage.

Pope: Definitely the prettiest wine of this flight, intensely floral, dry rose petals, packed with a lot of rich fruit.

Canterbury: Very clean and pure, friendly, juicy, and just plain lovely.

Zisovski: Cleaner and lighter than the rest, with a nice touch of anise and rose petals.



As general manager and sommelier of Marc Forgione, formerly known as Forge, Matthew Conway is responsible for the restaurant's carefully chosen wine list of classic American and European bottles. Conway has worked at a number of New York restaurants including Aquagrill and Pace, most recently as the beverage director for both Café Gray and Grayz.

Conway: Cherries and redcurrants; a nice, feminine, elegant style; and it brings everything you want.

White: This wine was defined by its beautiful acidity; it was uplifting. It was very clean and fun for Nebbiolo.

Kopec: The first thing that struck me was the VA, but it was punctuated with ripe red cherry and finished with plenty of dry tannin, all of which I liked. A very balanced wine.

PARUSSO BAROLO MARIONDINO

There were many positive comments about this wine, which was served in magnum, but most tasters said it needed even more time to age.

Pope: On the palate, everything was there: sweet fruit, dried cherry, tar. It's very complete.

Zisovski: A great example of oxidation beautifully developing in a wine; it just needs more time to develop.

Conway: I would be really happy to be served this wine. It is powerful yet elegant. It has a little bit of fruit, a lot of tannins, and good acidity.

Krueger: It is elegant, but maybe lacking a little complexity to put it among today's top wines.

Benedict: This seems like a 1990 to me—it is exactly what I would expect.

GIACOMO BORGOGNO E FIGLI BAROLO RISERVA

This Barolo might have earned the highest scores of the day if both 750-ml bottles had been in top shape. Still, half the table sung its praises.

Canterbury: Super-dry tannins; lovely, evolved leathery earthiness; and it is drinking well now.

Couvreux: This is feminine and discreet, very sexy and soft, yet very well balanced.

Sohm: Best wine of the flight: very focused, fresh, firm, with a long way to go.

Bohr: Classic, great, traditional, super well made.

Betts: Classic style, tight, detailed, classy, almost perfect.

LUCIANO SANDRONE BAROLO CANNUBI BOSCHIS

The Sandrone displayed a modern style that some of the tasters appreciated, while others did not.

Couvreux: It is packed with black fruit and very ripe. It had some mint characteristics, was very open on the nose, and full-bodied on the palate.

White: Hard to believe this wine is 20 years old. It drinks very youthful.

Kopec: Way too much oak, way too modern!

Benedict: It kind of suffered from the wine it followed [the Borgogno]. It is very well made, just not my style of wine.

Dexheimer: This is sexy, with lots of concentration. It is correct and complete and has all the bells and whistles.

Ragan: 1990 might have been a little too ripe of a year for this producer. If he had to do it all over, he would probably pick earlier.

PAOLO SCAVINO BAROLO BRIC DÈL FIASC

Panelists agreed that this powerful wine, served in magnum, had all the hallmarks of Nebbiolo, although several considered it flawed.

Bohr: This is high-quality '90 Barolo. Great dark fruit, traditional aromatics, tough, tannic, and powerful. What I would expect from a good producer.

Conway: Classic Nebbiolo nose. I would describe this wine as bratty—not enough of everything you want it to be. Hopefully, that will come out in time.

Zisovski: I got Brazil nut, oily and dark, dirty. Its fruit is muted because it is very bitter, made for us real Amaro drinkers.

Sohm: It is not really clean. I think the VA jumps out right away. The acidity is there, but the palate is a little clumsy—a rustic style.

Betts: Classic style—I was into it. Taut and pretty; to me, the VA and little oxidation were part of its charm.

Pope: The nose was a little off-putting: burnt wood, cocoa, celery seed. On the palate, it was very tightly wound. I would love to see it again in a few years.

Ragan: We are definitely on the front side of this wine, as it has a long way to go.

GIUSEPPE CORTESE BARBARESCO RABAJÀ

As the first Barbaresco in the tasting, the Cortese was welcomed by the panelists.

Zisovski: This is a great example of Barbaresco. I think we had a few Barolos that kicked our butt, and now we have something supposed to be a little softer.

Olson: This is the first wine to have that classic Nebbiolo tar, and it's great.

Sohm: Very well made. If you want to start drinking these wines, this is a great start!

Benedict: This wine comes across lean and youthful; it seems to have years ahead of it.

Betts: Really savory, salty, mushroomy; the fruit is red and lifted, but the earthiness keeps coming back.

Pope: Correct on balance, lacking on charm. It is definitely on the more rustic side, a bit clunky, and just not suave.

Rawlinson: Lack of elegance for sure, but it has a ton of really good qualities.

Conway: This reminds me of a dirty Italian cellar, and that is what good Nebbiolo should do.

Bohr: I get sweaty saline—not bretty or anything viral, just dirty, sweaty wine.

VIETTI BAROLO RISERVA VILLERO

An old-school wine, served in magnum, the Vietti split the panel down the middle.

Ragan: This is my favorite Madeira of the flight! This reminds me of the oxidized Barolo that you see in the Midwest.

Pope: This is a really Old World producer, and this wine is likely at the end of its life.

TASTING PANEL

Rawlinson: It has a lot of dried fruit and a really long finish. Definitely not clean winemaking, but still delicious.

Canterbury: I was really put off at first, but this could be great paired with the right food.

Dexheimer: Way too middle-of-the-road and much too oxidized. Just because the finish was long doesn't mean the flavors in the finish were good.

Sohm: This wine was not meant to be clean; it was intended to be this, and it is very well made in a classic style.

Kopec: Best wine of the flight so far. It had notes of iodine, leather, dried licorice—very classic.

LUCIANO SANDRONE BAROLO LE VIGNE

This Barolo was considered by most to be an example of Nebbiolo's softer side.

Dexheimer: It had nice elegance. It had a charming element, pretty and attractive. It wasn't the best of the flight, but it had positives.

Conway: I felt it was the least complex of the flight, but that made it very approachable.

Sohm: Very smooth, very delicate. It showed a real oak presence, but not in a bad way.

White: The oak was very prominent, but it had the least tannins, which made it easy.

Bohr: I wrote short, flat, not super-high quality.

Olson: It had candied juicy fruit, which would have made it good if I didn't have six other great wines to compare it to.

Kopec: It had a strong VA nose. I felt this wine was odd, not offensive by any means; the nose just didn't match the palate.

PIO CESARE BAROLO

An unconventional yet well-crafted wine, served in magnum, the Pio Cesare sparked some debate about whether it was worthy of its price tag as a 1990 Barolo.

Betts: Smells like a great example of '90 Figeac. Heady, pretty, oaky. Objectively, it's good quality, but it doesn't remind me of Piedmont.

Ragan: If we didn't know these were all Nebbiolo, I would think this was Chinon.

Olson: I can't give it a high score because it doesn't taste like '90 Barolo. The weakest wine of the flight.

Dexheimer: I liked this. It had a lot of green spices and cardamom, and the fruit was ripe. This is not for our audience, but it has a large audience.

Canterbury: This wine is great quality and would be very good for beginners. It has a place at this table.

Pope: Lots of nuttiness and vanilla, extra-ripe fruit, licorice, and black tea. Maybe it's pleasing for someone not used to drinking old Nebbiolo.

Couvreux: This is quite vegetal on the nose, with a lot of oak. Not a great example of Barolo.

Krueger: I agree that none of my notes match the descriptors for Nebbiolo, but I still enjoyed the wine.

Bohr: Some people who follow scores will love this wine. They want to drink Nebbiolo because they read about it and how great the '90s are, but they really don't want what Nebbiolo is all about. They want a Cabernet with Barolo written on the label, and this delivers that.

BRUNO GIACOSA BARBARESCO GALLINA

One 750-ml bottle was judged to be a solid Nebbiolo with monster tannins, but the other bottle was believed by the panel to be unsound.

Rawlinson: The nose made me really interested and excited to taste it. Once I got it on my palate, I really felt bad for the wine—it is just way too tannic.

Zisovski: It had a lot of great flavors; it just lacked finesse.

Conway: This is big and bold like a bull in a china shop, but that is how Nebbiolo can be: I'm big and bad, now come drink me.

ALDO CONTERNO BAROLO BUSSIA

Served in magnum, the Bussia was not flawed, but drank well past its age.

Betts: This wine is drinkable, but I am not sure that you would want to. Definitely the oxidation at the outset is bold.

Dexheimer: If this is what Nebbiolo is at the end of the road, you can find some interesting qualities, but you really have to dig deep.

Ragan: This comes across much older than it is. If I were double-blind tasting, I would say it was from the '70s, and I am not sure that is a compliment.

Sohm: The sweetness and wood tannins lead me to believe this was made in a very modern style, and it didn't stand the test of time.

GAJA SPERSS

Gaja's Langhe Nebbiolo, also poured from magnum, was far too international in style for this panel.

Zisovski: This was like cherry pie, cinnamon, vanilla, and spice. I don't know about this wine.

Betts: Tutti-frutti, rotofermented bummer! Way too oaky and dried out on the back from all that oak.

Olson: The last two wines [the Sandrone and Borgogno] were both very modern as well; the difference is they tasted like they came from Piedmont, and this one tasted like it's from Sonoma.

Krueger: I agree that this didn't seem like it came from Piedmont. It may be a 100-point wine, but it tastes more like a super-Tuscan.

Dexheimer: This could have come from anywhere in the world. It is a huge departure from the rest of the tasting; it's all hairspray and makeup. 🍷