

BRANDINI | 2021 BAROLO CRUS
QUIET COURAGE: LESS IS MORE



WRITTEN BY TED VANCE

This month, Giovanna Bagnasco (who goes by Gio) from Agricola Brandini will be showcasing their 2021 Barolo single crus in the US. As mentioned in this year’s February newsletter, we’ve waited for this vintage since we started our collaboration at the beginning of 2022. The sisters already nailed the 2019 and 2020 versions, but 2021 should top them when one considers Nebbiolo classicism, and the greater realization Gio and Serena intend to quietly sidestep the full embrace of Barolo classicism.

While their resolve traverses many levels and is nothing new to the world of wine, it’s a little more avant-garde in Piemonte’s Langhe. In the last two decades, the wine world’s age of extraction slowly evolved toward an age of greater elegance. In the Brandini wines themselves, their changes lie more in cellar techniques than vineyard augmentation. Their goal remains to preserve Barolo’s structural integrity while having the courage to craft the finest and its most elegant versions at the same time.

Elegance and finesse are not revolutionary in themselves. But in the critic’s world of tasting, it’s often the louder or more well-known voices in the room that receive the attention—at least initially. It’s easy to miss subtle depth unless demonstrated in a more intimate setting. It’s a risk every new grower takes when framing their wines from the start around elegance rather than power; it can take time before reviewers notice, and sometimes they eventually do when encouraged by other people of influence—perhaps drinkers, more than tasters.

Globally active and open-minded, without waving their flag, the sisters quickly made a strong move toward spontaneous fermentations, infusion extractions rather than forced, submerged cap, stem inclusion, varied maceration times depending on the season and site, softer pressing, and then, like many classicists, years of aging in large *botte* but with fewer rackings in between.

One constant and refreshing practice is the belief that sulfur should be delayed as long as possible, often all the way up to bottling, to work around Nebbiolo's potentially stern and drying tannins and to allow microbial life more say in each wine's expression.



Even if the Bagnascos talk about trying to find a “sort of recipe” for the future in the face of climate change, there is no recipe except attention to detail and the soft touch of these young women and their keen interest in wine culture outside of their region. The “less is more” agenda in a region celebrated for its structural muscle and stamina sets them apart from many second and third generation growers whose parents and grandparents lived through some of the hardest times during and after World War II.

In the decades following the war, the Langhe was a poor landscape for subsistence agricultural. Thousands left for factory work in Turin or left Italy altogether, and those who remained learned to value caution and stability over experimentation. Authority in vineyard families traditionally passed to the son, even though women worked every bit as hard.

In Piemonte, and particularly in the Langhe, to charge two young women in their mid-to-late twenties with full autonomy is already an act of courage—not only by the sisters themselves, but also by their parents, who've offered them agency and stand by them as they make decisions based

on strong beliefs. We have to keep in mind that the first Italian woman who ever received an enology degree was the trailblazing Virna Borgogno in 1988.



THE 2021 SEASON

Across much of the European wine country where we work, 2021 was cool and difficult, with endless barrages of mildew from Northern France all the way to Galicia. However, for most vigilant growers, it was a triumphant test of their resolve, and so many architecturally refined wines came to fruition despite the odds. But with Piemonte's confluence of the Alps on two sides, the Mediterranean on another—separated only by a mountain range roughly half their height—and the continental influence of the Po Valley, it writes a different script.

“If one wants to place 2021 somewhere in the modern context of Barolo, 2019 and 2016 are its closest relatives.”—Gio

The story of the vintage begins with the winter between 2020 and 2021. The snowfall was extraordinary—more than she remembers seeing in the vineyards since she was a child. After roughly a year and a half of drought and extreme heat, the snow restored water and energy to the soils and allowed the vines to begin the season in far better condition.

Spring was mild and rainy, but with moments of extreme cold, and frost arrived in April. “Fortunately,” Gio said, “our La Morra Barolo vineyards are more exposed and sit at a higher

altitude, and thanks to ventilation and temperature shifts, they avoided serious damage. Yields were naturally lower, but the vines handled the conditions well.”

Summer followed with warmth but balance. Without any extreme heatwaves, the fruit matured steadily on the floral spectrum and with elegant tannins. The vines were never shocked by extreme temperatures; this allowed the grapes to reach full ripeness without losing composure.

“The 2021 Barolos are contemporary in style. They will be open and approachable in terms of tannin and structure, yet still rich and complex because of the equilibrium of the season.”—Gio

In the cellar, the approach was familiar for a year when the fruit arrived in excellent health. For R56 and Cerretta, Giovanna used the usual equal split of whole-cluster and destemmed fruit. The Annunziata and La Morra were fully destemmed. Fermentations were handled gently on extraction, and the wines aged for twenty months in *botte*.

VINEYARD ADAPTATION

Now with ten seasons under her belt, when asked about what changes they’ve introduced in the vineyards over the past decade, Gio explained that one of the most important shifts concerns cover crops. During years of hydric stress, cover crops may compete with the vines for water in some sites. Today, they are used far more selectively, mostly during rainy seasons when the soil benefits from additional absorption from other flora. Instead of mowing the grass, they now roll it down with a heavy tool introduced in 2019. The flattened grass forms a natural carpet across the vineyard floor, providing shade and reducing the heat reflected from the sandy marl soils while helping retain moisture when summer storms arrive.

Canopy management has also evolved. In the past, the vineyards were trimmed neatly, “almost like a garden at Versailles.” Gio said. Today, the canopies are allowed to grow longer and a little wilder. The additional foliage shades the fruit and prevents the vine from spending unnecessary energy producing new leaves.

During hot seasons like 2022 and 2023, they also experimented with a treatment derived from microorganisms found in seaweed. Applied before heatwaves, it acts almost like a natural sunscreen, with the leaves retaining more water and the vines suffering less hydric stress during photosynthesis. A generation or two ago, growers might have laughed at such ideas, but today they are becoming standard practice across thoughtful vineyards. And, with the incoming laws regarding the ban of copper in European vineyards, all will be looking toward the neo-pioneers—you know, those kooky natural wine people—of regenerative and natural vineyard remedies to teach them how to survive in the face of this new hurdle.

Pruning has also shifted to later in the winter, toward the end of January or early February. Late pruning was once considered mostly theoretical, but research now shows it can reliably delay budbreak and the vegetative cycle by about 5–10 days, sometimes slightly more. This simple shift in timing offers growers a chance to thread the needle during spring frost, a much more common issue today in places where this hadn’t occurred before.

Warmer winters have brought another challenge: greater pressure from bacteria and insects that once would've been diminished by stronger winters. To address this, Brandini relies on natural treatments built around beneficial microorganisms that regulate the threats.

In the end, Giovanna summarized the philosophy with disarming simplicity: “Embrace a little more wilderness in the vineyard and intervene as little as possible, allowing nature to regulate itself.” Indeed, some things seem obvious in hindsight and from behind a desk. Yet it has taken the greater wine world several generations to return to the simple idea of working with nature, not against it, a concept that was often lost when the cheat codes of modern chemicals were introduced.

2021 BAROLO TERROIRS

Brandini's rarest wine is also its beacon. Formerly known as Resa 56 (a name change forced by the Italian government), the **BAROLO R56** is the family's brightest and purest light—their north star; the wine that sets the tone for all others.

Only a straight shot of two and a half kilometers from neighboring Verduno's town center to the north and five kilometers from its most celebrated cru, Monvigliero, it's right to think that R56 has an structural and aromatic kinship with this neighbor known for bottling seriously made but joyful and playful Barolos. Because it's exposed to the southwest with an uninhibited path of the cooling Alpine winds at altitudes of 410-435 meters (which makes it one of the highest altitude crus in Barolo), it tends to have more tension, even if it's exuberant when young. While it has the same geology as the parcels that go into the La Morra Barolo, Gio says the uniqueness of this site lies in altitude and strong exposure to the Alps' influence, which adds a more introverted, complex aspect to the elegance of La Morra.

Brandini
La Morra





Giovanna and Serena’s stylistic objective with the celebrated **BAROLO “ANNUNZIATA”** vineyard is to “represent a perfect picture of La Morra with its pure elegance, fruit, flowers and soft tannins.” Located at a lower altitude on the cru, it gets a lot of sunshine that ripens the fruit first and always allows for great approachability even when young, characterized by expressive aromatics and soft tannins. The first thing worth noting is Annunziata’s obvious upfront appeal. Annunziata often shows generosity early, but Brandini’s interpretation keeps that openness in check with a more refined posture. There is both substance and precision, the kind of balance that allows the wine to

feel complete without ever seeming heavy. In the end, Brandini's rendition quietly affirms the long-held idea that Annunziata expresses one of the most graceful sides of La Morra, distinct from the broader power often associated with Brunate and Cerequio.

The relevance of **BAROLO "CERRETTA"** among the great crus was greatly influenced by the 2008 purchase of a parcel owned by Roberto Conterno. Now Cerretta is one of the most talked about crus in the region, known for its stature and power. With the Bagnasco touch, it exhibits elegance rarely seen from this cru when young. Because of the tendency toward firmness and structure, the Cerretta harvest is partially made with destemmed grapes and, in another vat, whole bunches. It's often more rustic compared to the others in Brandini's Barolo range and even slightly more orange in hue and modestly floral—veering toward orange flower and dried rose—it surprises with immediate appeal in its youth without any indication that it won't stand the test of time, which is to be expected from this formidable cru. In 2021, they switched their grower partner from a south-facing, steep plot to one a touch higher up and facing west on a slightly softer slope.

TASTING NOTES APRIL 1, 2026

The wines settled in my cellar for more than a month. It was cold, extremely windy, but sunny. I thought the tumultuous weather might affect the wines or me, but if it did, it couldn't be noticed. Perhaps because it had been wildly windy for the previous two weeks, we were already adjusted to the chaos. It was also a full moon.

The 2021 **R56** showed a beautiful color. A striking nose of roses popped straight away and simmered down within a minute with a few green notes that Giovanna attributes to the stem inclusion—this also shows in the whole-cluster Cerretta, but not in the fully destemmed Annunziata. The tannins were a bit austere on first taste, but this is Barolo, and to me, a good sign. In my experience, when Nebbiolo tannins are firm but finely pointed at the onset, they often smooth out relatively quickly. The aromas were cross-current chaotic in the first 10 minutes, swirling from fruits to herbs and back around the full moon, but 35 minutes in, the unswirled nose began to shoot with purple fruit I often associate with more exposed and higher-altitude Nebbiolo sites, or those that sit inside areas that create more austerity in ripeness and a lifted fruit profile. After three hours, R56 was full of fine licorice, orange and red fruit—citrus and raspberry, strawberry, cherry—with a soft minty-fresh finish. Gorgeous.

ANNUNZIATA showed a slightly darker hue, and deeper cherry and rose kicked off the nose. A sappier concentration in the aromas—classic Italian red wine nose that combines aromas of former Italian wine glories from the occasional warm vintages of a cooler past with balsamic, cherry preserves, and bitter but sweet orange—and a much softer palate than R56. A touch of lifted volatile acidity compared to R56 and Cerretta also lifted the wine. Lightly elevated volatile acidity (if not by numbers but at least in balance) in Italian red wines seems cultural—perhaps built through time from highly acidic and tannic varieties and their need to ripen further, but with less protection during processing. For this reason, slightly higher volatile presence in Italian wines doesn't disturb me as it often does from wines from other countries—it's what often makes some of Italy's most iconic wines really sing. The palate shows much sweeter fruit than both R56 and Cerretta. Perhaps because it's the only one among the three crus that's fully destemmed, it's much readier from the get-go. While this makes it tough company at the start with the other two Barolos, this was just the beginning of their collective ascent.

Citrus started to pop after thirty minutes, and then came the beautiful anise. This is the immediate crowd pleaser. 45 minutes in, still oozing pleasure, and the fruits began to rise above the veil. After three hours, it continued to swell with fuller flavors in the same vein from the start. The structure remained tight, but its naturally curvy nature renders a wine in full fuego.

Even if the parcel used in 2021 is different from the years before, the **CERRETTA** opened with the familiar dusty Serralunga nose. The aromas were not immediately giving, but this is typical of Brandini's interpretation of Cerretta: the taming of a potentially powerful beast. Five minutes in after a new pour, it was far more revealing: chestnut, raspberry, sappier fruit and flower components—it built and refined as it slowly unfolded. 40 minutes in, the nose remained a little closed at first, but after a few minutes, the subtle nuances began to pop: much more floral and secondary complexities over fruit than the other crus. I love the palate textures.

Across the 2019 and 2020 crus, and again with these 2021s, I keep circling back to Cerretta throughout the day, while the others seem to reveal their full character earlier over day-long tastings. I like its subtlety and restrained power, and three hours in, the palate really softened. While the other two remained with more tension and more extroversion at this point, Cerretta was Marcus Aurelius in front of the fire—refined, pondering, ruling.

Eight hours open and tasted again just before the cassoulet came out of the oven after its seven hours of alchemizing, it was almost too much all at once. The three Barolos were in full form, neither posturing for position nor outpacing one another but singing as one. It's an impressive trio, and while I couldn't say for sure that it's "by far their best" for each wine, they appear to be a nose in front of their already impressively generous 2020s and their classic 2019s.