

Good parenting makes fine wine

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It's often said that wine is art. Winemakers like to say this because it makes them feel better about themselves (who doesn't want to be an artist?). However, they can certainly fiddle in the cellar and profoundly modify a wine.

The key word here is modify rather than create. This is why wine is not art. By definition, art is expression. It comes from a blank canvas and a richly embroidered mind. Wine comes to the winemaker more as a pinata, something to be cracked open to get at all the goodies within. Like babies, grapes are pretty much an already complete package.

But doesn't nurture count? Of course. Ask any parent. But parents will also tell you that the personalities and characters of their children already were installed. It's the same with winemaking. You get your grape package from the vineyard and, like parents, you try to bring out what's best.

It's tempting for winemakers to see themselves as artists because there's so much they can do to make a wine taste different: more or less oak; various fermentation techniques; employing particular yeast strains; filtering; blending and more.

But if a vineyard site -- and the grape variety that teases a particular quality from it -- aren't intrinsically great, all the winemaking "art" in the world won't help. You can't make chicken salad out of, well . . . you know the rest.

Langhe Nebbiolo "Martinenga Vyd." 2005, Marchesi di Gresy: If you ever need proof of the profound importance of site in crafting great wine, this exceptional wine will do nicely. To grasp why this wine is so good requires, as they say in college literature classes, textual deconstruction. That may seem a chore, but it's worth the effort.

The story here is that Tenute Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Gresy -- to use the estate's elaborately aristocratic full name -- is in the Barbaresco district in Italy's Piedmont region. Barbaresco is one of Italy's greatest red wines, made entirely from the nebbiolo grape variety.

The di Gresy family owns what the locals concede is arguably the single best vineyard site in the entire zone: the 29.5-acre vineyard called Martinenga. It's planted exclusively to nebbiolo.

Although everything from Martinenga can legally (and very

profitably) be sold as Barbaresco -- the law requires such a wine to be 100 percent nebbiolo grown within the boundaries of the Barbaresco district -- the di Gresy family chose to declassify a portion of their production from Martinenga. They do this to improve the quality of the flagship Barbaresco bottling.

In declassifying wine, producers such as di Gresy forgo the lucrative Barbaresco name, substituting the more humble Langhe designation. Langhe is the collective name that embraces both the Barbaresco and Barolo districts.

And what about the wine itself? In a word, it's stunning. This is lovely, medium-weight nebbiolo that demonstrates the distinctive beauty of the idiosyncratic nebbiolo grape variety and a powerful scent of roses -- something often invoked with nebbiolo but not easily found.

The 2005 Langhe Nebbiolo from Marchesi di Gresy is a perfect example of the greatness of site -- and how wine makers can never do more than exalt what they are given. Here, the winemaking is almost Zen-like in its absence of a winemaker's "signature" -- it's pure-tasting, devoid of oak, allowing the great Martinenga vineyard to shine.

Although already supple and smooth-drinking, experience reveals that this wine will improve for at least another five years, maturing into an even more dimensional wine. Serve this in your most generously sized wine glass, as its wafting scent needs all the air space it can get. This is an ideal red for lamb, pasta with cream or butter sauces or just a slice of good pate.

The price is a steal for the stellar quality: \$21.95

