

Vietti Barolo Rocche: A Historical Retrospective 1961-2011

Sometimes everything just works. That isn't always the case with older, artisan wines that can at times be moody, but on this night I had a feeling the late Alfredo Currado was looking down on us as we embarked on a search to understand the essence of his family's iconic Barolo Rocche through seventeen vintages going all the way back to the inaugural 1961. Proprietors Luca and Elena Currado were on hand to add their invaluable insights as we travelled through the history of one of Italy's most iconic wines.

Historical Background

Vietti is one of Italy's most historic wineries. Husband and wife Alfredo Currado and Luciana Vietti (Luca Currado's parents) were pioneers in so many ways. They were among the first producers to bottle single-vineyard Barolo and to promote Piedmont and its wines abroad, especially in the United States. Alfredo Currado is also widely credited for rescuing Arneis from total obscurity in the 1960s.

In 1961, Alfredo and Luciana Currado made their first single vineyard Barolo Rocche from the family's prized hillside site in Castiglione Falletto. The same year, Beppe Colla also made a Barolo Bussia at Prunotto. Bruno Giacosa followed in 1964 with the first single-vineyard Barbaresco, his epic Santo Stefano Riserva. These three seminal wines changed the history of Piedmont forever.



Alfredo Currado and Luciana Vietti, photographed the day Currado came home from the hospital after losing part of a finger to a destemmer

Now in its fourth generation, Vietti remains very much a family affair. Winemaker Luca Currado, his brother-in-law Mario Cordero, along with their families and tightly knit staff, have taken the early groundbreaking work of Alfredo and Luciana Currado and built upon those successes, reaching an unprecedented level of consistency and quality across their entire range. Vietti is the only estate in Piedmont that owns vineyards in all eleven of the Barolo-producing villages. Many of the parcels are located in the region's most historic and pedigreed sites.

Rocche di Castiglione

The village of Castiglione Falletto lies in the middle of the Barolo zone, where the soils from the two main periods – Serravallian and Tortonian – come together, often resulting in rich tapestries of soils that yield distinctive wines. One of the signatures of the best Castiglione Falletto Barolos is their ability to drink well relatively early and also age for decades. Castiglione Barolos are often intensely perfumed and have a silkiness to their tannins that is distinctive. All of those qualities find their highest expression in Rocche di Castiglione and nearby Monprivato. With the 2010 vintage, Rocche di Castiglione is known by its full name, but before then it was also often seen on labels as simply Rocche, which, among other things, caused confusion with other similarly named vineyards such as Rocche dell'Annunziata in La Morra.

The Currado family owns two parcels totaling just under one hectare in Rocche di Castiglione, a steep, vertigo-inducing site outside the center of town. The original vineyard is the larger piece that lies in the direction of Monforte. According to Luca Currado, this parcel has been in the family for as long as he has records. Colloquially, the vineyard is still known as 'Rocche di Natale' after the farmer who previously owned the land.

Now shared between Vietti and Roccheviberti, this vineyard was formerly one large parcel. Currado observes that the clonal makeup in both holdings is exactly the same across the two large horizontal sections that run across the properties, which leads him to think the land was originally divided into upper and lower sections, but was later reconfigured to give both owners access to the main road above. The lower part of the vineyard is planted with an old variant of Michet, while the upper section is planted with a combination of Michet, Rosé and Lampia Nebbiolo clones.

In the mid 1980s, Vietti bought a second piece in Rocche that lies closer to Castiglione Falletto, near the bend in the road and nestled between Brovia's holdings. It, too, is locally known by the name of its previous owner, in this case, Margherita. This parcel is also planted with an old variant of Michet, identified as such because the bunches have no wings. According to Currado, the soils are not markedly different between the two parcels; both are rich in the blue tufa/sand mixture that is typical of Rocche, with perhaps just a bit more sand in the vineyard on the Castiglione side.

Although Vietti's Barolo Rocche has been an estate wine for some time, there was a period during which Alfredo Currado purchased grapes from his neighbors. Records are inexact at best (Piedmont is still Italy), but purchased fruit is almost certainly present in vintages through the mid 1990s with a production in excess of 5,000 or so bottles. For example, in 1986 Vietti made 5,300 bottles of the Rocche and that is after hail wiped out more than half of their crop. Similarly, production of the 1988 surpassed 7,000 bottles, while the 1995 came in around 6,500 bottles. Of course, none of the techniques that are used today such as green harvesting, bleeding and sustainable farming (which tends to naturally reduce yields) were common up until the 1990s, so information on labels alone can only tell part of the story. Today, Vietti makes closer to 4,000 bottles of Rocche, which is the norm for what is considered quality-driven farming and yields by present day standards.

The Four Periods of Vietti

In my view there are four distinct periods at Vietti going back to 1955, the oldest Barolo I have tasted from the Currado family. Up until the mid 1980s, the wines were made with the rudimentary tools that were available in Piedmont at the time. Alcoholic and malolactic fermentation were done entirely in cask and with no temperature control, an approach that led to distinctive, but at times also variable, wines.

Stainless steel tanks arrived in 1984. The ensuing wines were immediately more polished because of temperature-controlled fermentations in tank and the greater hygiene that steel allows. The shift can very easily be seen in this tasting by looking at the 1982 and then comparing it stylistically to the 1985, as well as the wines that follow.

The third period takes place in the mid 1990s as Luca Currado gradually introduced more modern techniques, including malolactic fermentation in French oak barrique, bleeding of the musts to obtain greater concentration, and a generally more extracted, oaky style.

In 1992, Currado introduced French oak barriques for Barbera d'Alba Scarrone. A few years later, around 1996, Currado began using barrique for Barolo as well. "At the time, the 1990 vintage was all the rage. It was the beginning of the first Barolo craze. But it was the modern wines that were getting all of the attention. Like any young winemaker, I wanted to experiment. In 1994, we bought a large parcel measuring 2.7 hectares in Ravera. My father told me if I wanted to make a more modern Barolo, I could do it with the Ravera. Quite rightly, my father did not want me playing around with any of our signature Barolos. The relatively large size of Ravera made it more naturally suited to trying different things out."

"I started to use the barrique for stabilization of color and also to give the wines more creaminess through stirring of the suspended lees," Currado explains. "An added benefit is that CO₂ acts as a natural preservative, so we need to add less SO₂ during aging," he adds. Most winemakers who do malo in barrique work with 100% new oak, which is considered more desirable for control and cleanliness, but at Vietti, Currado prefers to work with only a small amount of new oak. Over the years, the new oak and total amount of time the Barolos spend in French oak have both come down significantly.

In my view, 2001 is the next inflection point in a style that became more crystallized by 2004 and that continues today, naturally with further refinements along the way. Today, the Barolos see several weeks on the skins, with a classic submerged cap fermentation. Bleeding is used in vintages that are lacking natural concentration. Malolactic fermentations are still done in French oak, but with mostly neutral oak. The Barolos spend 2-3 months in barrique as opposed to the 8-9 that was common a 10-15 years ago. Curiously, the Ravera remains Currado's most experimental canvas. In the late 1990s, it was the most modern Barolo at Vietti, today it is the most traditional because it does not see any French oak at all. Instead, all of the aging takes place in cask. This vertical provided a great opportunity to see all of those transitions firsthand and explore the full stylistic evolution that has taken place at Vietti over the last fifty years.