

17/01/2025

<https://nelsonpari.substack.com/>

Nelson's Wine Column

2021 Barolo del Comune. Control the hype.

A controversial take on one of the most anticipated vintages ever.



NELSON PARI

JAN 17, 2025



2021 BAROLO del COMUNE



NELSON PARI, FEDERICO MOCCIA & JACOPO DOSIO

After a mild and dry winter, the vintage 2021 started with late budding and frost problems. A warm spring and summer moved the harvest to the start of October. Overall, we classify this vintage as classic.

Control The Hype

You will hear great things and see amazing scores for the vintage 2021 in Barolo. However, we are not entirely convinced.

We are not saying that the vintage lacks quality. Like 2019, most of the wines are indeed good, but only a few truly stand out. What really affected the perception of this vintage wasn't the climate or general winemaking approaches; it was the hype surrounding it. Since the 2019 release, we heard about how this was the vintage to beat, and, unsurprisingly, 2016 still takes the lead, followed by 2020, which was wrongly considered by all of us as "ready-to-drink" while, in reality, today showcases some of the best balance between fruit concentration and structure for longer aging.

If you love classic Barolo - wines with "tension and muscles" - you will adore this vintage, but be aware that, compared to its two siblings - the colder 2016 and the more balanced 2019 - this is a warmer spin-off.

So yes, we will buy 2021, and plenty of them. Nonetheless, we think the safest way to enjoy this vintage is to stick with the producers you like and trust, and, when possible, focus on the higher end of the portfolio (e.g. commune, MGA/cru, single parcel).



2021. A broader overview.

- A mild and dry winter led to late budding at the end of March.
- On April 7, a frost destroyed approximately 15% of the crops in vineyards located below 280 meters in altitude.
- A warm and dry spring, with no significant risk of fungal diseases, was followed by a similarly warm and dry summer with minimal rainfall. There was only a brief heatwave at the start of August.
- The warm conditions persisted into September but were tempered by a high diurnal temperature range, allowing for balanced ripening. Harvesting began in the first two weeks of October.

Slow Fermentations

The mix of lower nitrogen in the must, caused by the lack of rain during spring and summer, combined with high levels of polyphenols, high acidity, and low pH, caused fermentation to slow down.

When producers used wild yeast, a problem arose as fermentations would suddenly stop and then restart, especially toward the end of the process. It is not unusual to see malolactic fermentation starting before the end of alcoholic fermentation. Volatile acidity was higher in the must, and this further increased, introducing strong aromas of nail varnish into the wines. Bottle ageing might slightly reduce these volatile compounds in bottles that are less affected.

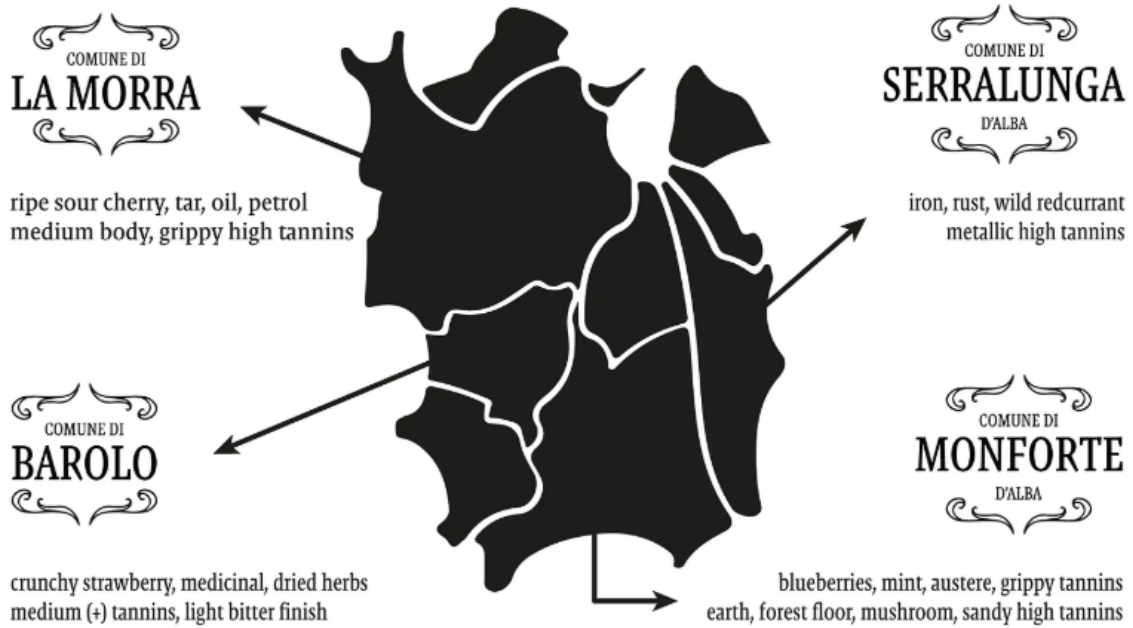
This issue, however, affects only a minority of producers, as many resolved it by controlling fermentation temperatures and using cultured yeasts.

At the time of the tasting, the wines were recently bottled, and a few were still samples from casks. Producers are talking about the wines opening up later in the year, but in certain cases, it's hard to see what might change: some wines are too lean and overly tannic with no supporting high acidity.

The Communes

2021 is a consistent vintage: not many notable climatic differences occurred from one commune to another, so our focus is primarily on the style of the wines. As always, we recommend trying as many as possible: in our yearly database, you will find all the wines we believe are sufficiently terroir-driven to be recommended, along with our tasting notes. Nonetheless, we are human: at the end of every commune recap, we added a short paragraph highlighting the wines that truly stood out in the panel.

P.S. For the communes of Verduno and Castiglione Falletto, only one sample was provided. We considered this insufficient to discuss the communes in detail, and for this reason, they will not be featured here.



Barolo

For the second year in a row, we're not impressed by the performance of the commune of Barolo. There are no crunchy red fruits, no vibrant acidity, fragrance, or complexity. The fruit is darker, dried herbs are muted, and the wines have shorter finishes with less integrated alcohol. Tannins are consistent across the wines - sandy and fitting the dusty character present in most of the wines. When vintages become warmer and hotter, this is the commune that struggles the most.

Even though we enjoyed some of the wines, we found ourselves, for the first time ever, in the position of giving *no high recommendations* for the wines of this commune in 2021.

La Morra

Less fruit, more nuances. Producers who took a more interventionist approach to the vintage often ended up with less complexity and watery palates with unbalanced tannins. Perhaps this is a commune best left alone. Grippy tannins, a strong perfume of incense, and light reductions (suggested by the white peach aromas) seem to define most of the wines. La Morra maintains its identity, but we didn't find the same level of enthusiasm (complexity, concentration, elegance) that we experienced with this commune in 2019 and 2020.

Andrea Oberto, however, got us excited by delivering a high-quality representation of La Morra, with a wine packed with complexity and already perfectly integrated alcohol. Meanwhile, *Gianni Gagliardo* stood out as the rebellious, anarchistic outsider of the year, leaving behind its bold house style to create a Pinot-Noir-esque, artistic, and nuanced wine.

Monforte d'Alba

For the second consecutive year, Monforte takes the crown as the overall best commune. Its classic traits of forest floor and mushroom with an austere palate remain, now enhanced by an ethereal layer - occasionally amplified where volatile acidity is slightly higher. The wines have great aromas, texture, drinkability, and excellent aging potential.

This commune performed so well that we confidently recommend any wine from the tasting. However, if you hold us at gunpoint, we must highlight two producers. *Domenico Clerico* remains a pillar of high-quality Barolo del Comune, with a wine that is both highly concentrated and charming. The structure gives it a youthful, raw feeling, while the complexity of the aromas reveals its precision and refinement. *Castello di Perno* is the neoclassical standout: a truly contemporary wine where elegance and the pure expression of the commune come together. It was captivating enough for us to consider it the best wine of this year's tasting. It will surely captivate you too.

Serralunga d'Alba

Serralunga should be considered a guarantee of quality for Barolo del Comune lovers, as it secures another consistent year with three times the number of wines compared to any other commune. Generally, the less extracted styles, aiming for elegance, didn't shine, showing simplicity and a lack of grace. On the other hand, the more extracted versions displayed more fruit, with a strong note of chocolate replacing the classic herbal character.

When it comes to higher extractions, we have a soft spot for Palladino. The use of large oak casks and expert extractions results in a communal wine with complexity that rivals top Serralunga MGAs. *Schiavenza* remains committed to showcasing the power that has made this commune famous, crafting a long-lived and concentrated communal wine. *Garesio* strikes a masterful balance between elegance and power, combining the best of both to create a wine that is ready to enjoy now, yet holds extraordinary aging potential. Our top pick from this commune is *Ettore Germano*, which captured the purity and complexity of Serralunga with a wine that is a quintessential expression of the terroir, combining trademark precision with vibrancy and depth.

PS. This newsletter is free for all readers. The best way to support us is ***to like and share this report***. We'll see you next year.

Fortemasso

Barolo del Comune di Monforte d'Alba DOCG

Pale ruby. Mint, eucalyptus, charred wood, smoke, and cedar. Orange peel, strawberry, red cherry, and incense. The palate is oak-driven, with high sandy tannins and a long finish of vanilla, cinnamon, and toast, with a hint of tart red cherry. A powerful wine with a lean mid-palate. Fortemasso's debut in the communal category delivers great aromatic intensity and pairs beautifully with anything umami.

2025 - 2027