



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

What makes for a “great” vintage, or more appropriately, an exemplary growing season that yields great wines? After WWII, most producers pointed to only one metric, heat summation, which is a calculation of how hot a year is during the growing season. The problem is that since the late 1990s, the climate in Europe has changed a lot, with summers now much hotter than they used to be, so using heat alone is no longer an accurate gauge. In fact, most producers now point to a trio of factors: heat, sun, and perhaps the most important, water.

Our features are all from Italy and the 2021 harvest, which producers point to the three factors above and consider an excellent vintage. The growing season had a great start thanks to a wet winter that saw heavy rainfall and substantial snowpack at higher elevations. This was a welcome relief after the drought-like conditions that persisted from 2017 through 2020. Then, unlike the previous four vintages, which all saw below-average rainfall, 2021 was marked by intermittent rain that fell at just the right time, giving vines a much-needed boost. The time was important because each experience was brief and followed by sunny weather. This reduced disease pressure brought on by humidity, particularly mildew and botrytis, ensuring healthy grapes at harvest.

2021 was also a year where the vines started to push green shoots early, in late March, which in the old days was considered great because it was a precursor to an early harvest. However, many European wine regions are now prone to late spring frost, which typically happens the second and third weeks of April. Sure enough, many areas were impacted by frost in 2021, but damage was limited, and many producers feel it helped to thin the crop just enough to allow the vine to concentrate energy on fewer grape clusters. As for heat and sun, 2021 was warm but rarely hot, with plenty of sunshine with a few days of rain each month to revive the wilting vines. The result is a year that rarely happens anymore, the perfect balance of these three conditions creating the perfect scenario for great wines. This quarter, we take a look at two of the most important wine regions in Italy, the Piedmont and Tuscany, to show why 2021 is a vintage for the ages.

## **2021 Fontanabianca Barbaresco Bordini | \$69**

I often hear from customers that they find Barbaresco too “feminine,” when compared to the more “masculine” wines of nearby Barolo. I find this humorous, as to me there is very little difference between top examples from either commune. This selection sets the record straight and shows that good Barbaresco can be just as complex, powerful, and age-worthy as Barolo, which you will see with the third selection.

Barbaresco, like Barolo, is produced using only the Nebbiolo grape, and the regions share similar soil types. The three communes of Barbaresco (Barbaresco, Nieve, and Treiso) all lie along the Tanaro River, while the 11 villages of Barolo create a bowl between the northern and southernmost sites. Most of the vineyards of Barbaresco are around 1,000 feet above sea level, while those of Barolo start about that height and go up to 1,600. There is also a slight difference in exposition, as most of the vineyard sites of Barolo face south, southwest, and southeast. In Barbaresco, the best sites face east or west, allowing the vines to capture more of the sun all day. For these reasons, the vineyards in Barbaresco are typically harvested a couple of weeks earlier than Barolo.

Our feature selection comes from the Fontanabianca, a family-owned winery established in 1969 by Franco Pola. Today, the estate is managed by his son, Aldo, and his wife, Luisella, along with their two boys, Matteo and Francesco. Their goal is to typify not just the character of Barbaresco in their wines but specifically those of the commune of Nieve. They produce a regular Barbaresco as well as two cru bottlings, Seraboella and Bordini, along with Dolcetto, Barbera, and a few other wines. The grapes used to produce this wine are exclusively from the Cru of Bordini.

Located in the commune of Nieve, the Cru of Bordini is one of the most sought-after vineyard holdings among the village growers. With a perfect east face, this vineyard receives early morning sunlight, which jump-starts the vines each morning. As the sun moves across the sky, it shines on this cru until late in the afternoon, enhancing the ripeness of the grapes to

perfection and also producing deep color and concentration. The soils in this cru are almost entirely ancient sea bottom limestone, enhancing the power with the finesse of minerality as well.

After this wine has been decanted for half an hour, it shows a complex nose of fresh cherries, blackberries, licorice, dried orange peel, and pipe tobacco. On the palate, it shows superb concentration, with vivid acidity and tannins that soften a bit into the finish but will need a couple of years to fully resolve. Drink 2027 through 2040.

### **2021 Avignonesi Desiderio | \$69**

Although there is no significant record of the pope's court moving from Avignon to Rome, it is certain that there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of support people who made the three-month-long trek. One family making the journey must have admired the beautiful countryside of Tuscany and ultimately established a farm, with the locals calling them the "Avignonesi," or those of Avignon. No records exist that confirm they planted vineyards, but the name of the property passed through the family for generations. After WWII, the estate was acquired by the Falvo family, who then established a winery under the old family name in 1974. In turn, the Falvo family sold to Virginie Saverys in 2009. Saverys was born in Belgium and became a successful attorney. When she retired to Tuscany, she was introduced to the Falvo family in 2007 and invested in the winery. At the time, the Falvos had purchased another estate in Puglia, Li Veli, and made the decision to divest Avignonesi. Saverys bought them out and became the sole owner, launching them on a new trajectory that makes them one of the elite estates in southern Tuscany.

Virginie is an ardent supporter of organic foods and homeopathic medicine, so her first step was to initiate an organic and biodynamic farming regime for her vineyards. She also acquired more land in Montepulciano, but also expanding the estate holdings in nearby Cortona. In 2012, she acquired a new estate, Lodola, where she built a state-of-the-art winery and barrel-aging facility. All of these changes have added an extra dimension to the wines that I noticed immediately during a recent tasting. While they were always good, to me they now rival my favorite estate in the region, Poliziano. Unlike their *Vino Nobile*, which is typically 100% Sangiovese, this bottling is predominantly Merlot that is grown in their vineyards in Cortona. This area, which is lower in elevation to the east of Montepulciano, is where the soils are more suited to Bordeaux varieties. Because of this wine's impressive size and power, it is named after the legendary bull Desiderio, who belonged to the owners of Avignonesi in the late 19th century. Desiderio, which means "desire", weighed an impressive 3,688 pounds and stood taller than any other bull in the region. For this reason, he sired much of the population of the Chianina herd that lives in the region today. If you ever travel to the region and have the nearly eponymous dish, *bistecca Fiorentina*, that is classically produced from Chianina beef.

The 2021 growing season in Tuscany plays right into the strength of the Merlot grape, which is too often considered the lighter, weaker sibling to Cabernet Sauvignon. On the contrary! In every wine region in the world except California, Merlot is considered the power grape, not Cabernet Sauvignon. This is a simple statement of fact: that it ripens a week or two earlier and produces a wine with more potential alcohol than Cabernet Sauvignon in most growing regions. In Merlot, it is by far the preferred variety to blend with Sangiovese because it enhances color and alcohol, while also filling in the mid-palate of the wines. Here it stands alone in Desiderio, a wine to demonstrate just how powerful Merlot wines can be.

To produce Desiderio, winemaker Matteo Giustiniani crafts this wine from 100% Merlot, grown in their holdings around Cortona. For several vintages, the wine carried the Cortona DOC, but with additional land acquisition, it no longer qualifies. Soils in the area are ancient alluvial beds formed during the ice age. There are significant clay deposits but no limestone. To help the wine develop, it is aged for 18 months in French oak barrels, with a significant portion being new each year.

When you are ready to open this wine, decant it for at least a half-hour before serving. Once you do, the nose is very deep, with rich notes of black currant and blueberry jams, dark chocolate, cigar box, fennel seed, and fenugreek. On the palate, it is quite dense, with moderate tannins that are obvious but well integrated, and medium acidity. You will want to drink this wine from 2026-2045, classically served with a grilled T-bone steak.

## 2021 G.D. Vajra Barolo “Albe” | \$48

I resisted using this wine for the European Reserve Club for one simple reason: in most vintages, this is not an age-worthy example of Barolo. Don't get me wrong, it is delicious and a staple of the TWM Italian section, but I typically describe this as “restaurant” Barolo, meaning it is produced to drink young. The 2021 is a wine that breaks that mold.

The Vajra family has farmed vineyards in the Barolo region village of Serralunga d'Alba since the late 1800s, but they did not begin producing wine under their own label until 1972. This is when Aldo Vajra, who was still in university, took over the family property only to be struck with a terrible growing season in 1972 and no clients to buy their grapes. Undaunted, Aldo decided to make and bottle their own wine, and he named the winery after his father, Giuseppe Domenico (GD) Vajra.

From his early days, Aldo began converting their vineyards over to organic viticulture, one of the first in the Piedmont. It is hard to imagine, but in the 1970s, the vast majority of Barolo was farmed with little intention, made in rustic cellars of the growers, then sold in bulk to the cooperatives and large wineries who bottled under their label. In my research, I could not find any information that grouped Aldo as one of the “Barolo Boys” who revolutionized farming and cellar practices in the region around the same time, but the intention was similar. Almost all Barolo was poorly made and heavily flawed, hardly worthy of the reputation as the “King of Wines and the Wine of Kings.” The work of this group of young winemakers completely changed the international perception of Barolo, and with it, that of all Italian wines.

One of the stats on the winery tech sheet that struck me about this wine was the harvest dates for the grapes, October 5th through 21st. When I visited the region in September of 2021 and 2019, I was surprised in both years that the harvest was complete by the 20th of that month. Part of the lore of how the name of the grape, Nebbiolo, was derived is because it was ready to harvest when the fog, or *nebbia*, settled on the region each fall as temperatures dropped. In the old days, pre-1990s, this was often mid to late October and signified the time to harvest the Nebbiolo grapes. However, over the past two decades, the harvest dates have moved up with most of the grapes picked in mid to late September. The longer hang time allows for the evolution of phenolic ripeness, sometimes called the “flavor curve,” which results in more complex wines.

For the Albe bottling, the family uses grapes from 6 of their sites, all west-facing. Their holdings are around the Serralunga d'Alba, which is the demarcation point for ancient sea bed soils and those of volcanic soils. As a result, this wine shows a bit of both attributes, both structure and aromatics. The 2021 should be decanted for a half hour, and then it shows relatively forward notes of tobacco, dried cherry, tamarind, cinnamon stick, and sumac. Typical of this wine, it is fairly firm to start, with a rich core of fruit oozing forward as it approaches the long finish. The 2021 shows more tannin than is normal in this wine, so it will have a long drinking window, 2026-2040.