Alfredo & Luca Roagna

Interview

This interview with Luca Roagna took place in Los Angeles in March 2011.

Tell us about the Roagna estate.

The Roagna estate consists of 15 hectares. I am the fifth generation to work with these vines, a tradition that began over 130 years ago. My great-great grandfather started the estate with a group of friends, and in the beginning all they made was traditional Barbaresco. Barbaresco used to differ stylistically back then and was a wine with a good amount of residual sugar. A lot has changed since then.

We are a small family from the village of Barbaresco and we make every cru right from our village: the Barbaresco DOC includes 4 villages total but everything we make comes from within our village. The region itself represents a little over 600 hectares; half of our vines are in Barbaresco. The other half are in Barolo, which is roughly twice as large as Barbaresco in surface.

Our style is very traditional, and we only work with historic parcels. For Barbaresco we have the Pajé: it's a little more than 2 hectares, we've worked with this parcel since the beginning and have owned it since the 1950's. This is also were our cellar is located. We select from different parts of the parcel every year depending on the age of the vines and exposure. In the best vintages we'll make three denominations: the base Pajé from 40-45 year old vines, Pajé Riserva with 60+ year old vines and the Crichet Pajé, our most celebrated cuvée; the youngest vines from this half hectare are 65 years old.

We then have the Asili, a cru of 0.2 hectares which we produce 1200 bottles a year from. Finally we have one last cru in the village called Montefico. Of course these are all Nebbiolos and the point of these multiple cuvées is to express our various terroirs. For example Pajé and Asili are two hills that are side by side and the soils are primarily chalky limestone but Montefico is more marl. Exposure is also key: Montefico is South-East so the sun rises onto it and we get a more delicate wine from this, while Pajé and Asili are South-West, resulting in a more rustic style.

Our history in Barolo dates back to the late 1940's but we've only owned land there since 1990. We are located in the village of Castiglione Falletto and the parcel is called La Rocca e la Pira. We are the only ones to work in this area and in the future the denomination will simply be La Pira. This represents a little less than 8 hectares and is of great value to us because of the 11 villages that produce Barolo, Castiglione Falleto is right in the center; we are happy to be the only ones working on this parcel because we have no neighbors and it's complimented by 3 hectares of woods at the bottom and mountains on the top. This makes it so much easier to work naturally and not have to worry about the chemical overlap of neighbors who work conventionally. We are currently building an additional, smaller cellar so we can make our Barolos on site.

We also produce a Barolo from a parcel named Rionda.

How did you personally get involved with the estate?

We always joke that I was born in the vines! I was born in September at the exact time of the harvest so it's not too far off! I studied oenology and started officially working with Roagna in 2001, but my whole life I hung out and played with friends and family in the vines, and they've always been a part of me. And to be honest for me this isn't work. I can't call this work. This is my everyday life, so let's just say that I got involved 30 years ago!

What's the work like in the vines?

Nebbiolo vines are plants that grow very high -up to two meters- and we choose to manually tie them to the lines in the rows. We do our best to work with old vines, a tradition that has mostly come to a stand-still since the 1970's in the region.

In modern winemaking, every new winemaker has to do something different, has to bring something new to the table. Of course I am different than my grandfather and my father, but all I want to do is express our terroir, so I follow our family philosophy. We let grass grow free and never use herbicide or pesticides. We cut the grass manually and as little as possible, maximum once or twice a year, and even then it's only on the sides of the vines. For example last August we degrassed because the risk you take when you have so much grass is an undesirable amount of humidity. I truly despise herbicide because grass is an essential part of nature; I'm not a sommelier so I can't tell you if you can truly taste the 300+ types of grass that grow in our soils, but I guarantee they bring depth, complexity and minerality to our wines.

We also have a lot of free roaming animals in the vines. We only use natural sulfur and copper on the plants; there isn't ever an exact dose as every vintage varies, but it's always less that a kilogram per hectare. I get angry when I see vineyards where the leaves are blue. In those cases the quantity is simply too high.

Are you certified organic?

We've never requested the certification. Some are certified, others aren't. This doesn't apply to everybody, but these days I feel that being certified doesn't always mean that much. A lot of my friends got certified 10 or 20 years ago. I respect their decision because they chose to do this before it became fashionable.

I think you can feel the difference in the wine. If I choose to work chemically, I'm going to kill the wine's identity and I don't want to sell that to anybody.

I understand that for certain people, this is going to cause some confusion. But I refuse to use the term "organic" as a way to sell bottles. Anyone who knows us knows our style and our philosophy.

What about in the cellar?

The cellar is where we transform grapes into wine, and while I know many people feel that good work in the cellar is secondary to good work in the vines, I also think it should never be forgotten just how important this process is.

Our focus is to respect the expression of our terroirs. For our Nebbiolo we try to work as traditionally as possible, and let me tell you that I've opened bottles that are 40, 50, 60 years old that are still expressive and beautiful. We're not trying to change history here; we'd rather contribute to it.

Native yeasts of course. We use a pied de cuve as a starter, and just to play it safe we do a mini harvest of 5 kilograms about a week before the actual harvest. We then do a pre-pigeage, and this starts the fermentation. After a week we'll blend this with the harvested grapes. We made a specific pied de cuve from each cru, because using a starter from another parcel strikes us as un-natural. We then transfer the juice to large wood casks.

We submerge the hat before the fermentation has completed (you can pretty much call it wine at this point), then we'll rack some of the liquid into another cask. This helps us avoid oxidation problems with CO2.

The wines stay on the lies for 60 to 90 days, and are then aged a minimum of 4 to 5 years but we don't have any rules about this. We try to understand each cru based on the vintage: a delicate vintage won't need as much aging but a more rustic one will. The longest we've ever let something age is 15 years. After that, we let the wine age in bottle; the amount of time it's spent in the cask determines how long we age it in bottle before release, between 6 months and 3 years. We basically decide to release the wine when we think it's worth drinking.

How do you place your wines in regards to your DOC's, and specifically to the idea of "typicity" within a a DOC?

We are making wine that is as authentic as it gets. We don't put Nebbiolo on the label, we put the name of the village or the parcel. And if you compare a Barbaresco, a Barolo and a Nebbiolo d'Alba, they are all very different. And if you taste the Pajé, the Asili and the Montefico, you're tasting three very different wines as well. Yes it's all Nebbiolo, but the different expressions are what make these different crus worthwhile. Again, we are trying to express each terroir as much as possible.

How do you feel about the whole "natural wine" debate?

Natural wine is fundamental. Wine is not something you just drink, it's something you ingest, made with ingredients that too often are being chemically tampered with.

We want to bring pleasure with our wines. We want them to taste good but we also don't want to cause problems by forcing people to ingest chemicals. Everyone knows wine is an alcoholic beverage, and everyone knows that if you drink too much alcohol, you're not going to feel great. Not everyone knows that there are other things than fermented grape juice in wine. Herbicides and pesticides are not mentioned on labels, so why would they?

I also feel that making natural wine is the only way to truly express terroir because if your soil is dead, it's not going to have anything to express. It's also an honest product that is not harmful to our bodies, and I place great importance in this.

What do you recommend eating with your wines?

The Dolcettos and Barbera are a lot of fun and can be paired with a lot of foods because they are lighter and fruitier. With our Nebiollos, which tend to be very tannic in their younger years, you're going to want to pair that with fatty meats. But if you're drinking an older vintage, say something 30 or 40 years old, then you need to rethink things a little and use a leaner cut of meat.

For my wines and wine in general, I highly encourage experimenting with food pairings. As long as it's not boring or completely illogical, it's worth trying!

What wines do you like to drink?

I like wines from all over the world: as long as they are interesting and express an identity, I'll drink it.