



CAVALLOTTO

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Kerin O’Keefe visits the close and passionate Barolo family that has for generations been producing naturally grown, traditionally vinified wines from a great and historic but barely recognized cru

The Fratelli Cavallotto estate in Castiglione Falletto has been turning out some of the purest expressions of Nebbiolo ever since brothers Olivio and Gildo Cavallotto began bottling their own Barolos from their spectacular Bricco Boschis vineyards back in 1948. And when Olivio’s children Giuseppe, Laura, and Alfio (*left to right above*) began working at the estate toward the close of the past century, the family decided to continue making classic Barolos rather than the dense, highly extracted, oak-driven wines so in vogue at the time. Now that most consumers have tired of this once-popular but anonymous and overblown style, the Cavallottos’ choice of the road less traveled has indeed made all the difference.

Scaling the crest of the Castiglione Falletto village in the heart of Barolo country, one cannot help but notice the Cavallottos’ Bricco Boschis estate with its impeccable hillside vineyards of thick, old vines surrounding the family’s quiet country house and cellars. It is an unusual sight in the Langhe, where, as in Burgundy, the famed vineyard areas are rarely adjacent to producers’ homes and cellars. It was the spectacular setting of these vineyards that initially drew me to the estate while I was touring the Langhe in 2000. Eager to try the wines from these sun-drenched and perfectly maintained vines, on a whim I made my way unannounced up the tree-lined drive all the more beckoning for its lack of the usual imposing gate. I was warmly welcomed by this close and joyous family, who treated me to complex and well-structured wines that were worlds apart from the many fruit-forward, bombastic Barolos that were pouring out of the area at the time.

This was, after all, at the height of the now infamous “Barolo Wars” that had dominated the Langhe’s winemaking scene for years. The conflict had deeply divided the area’s

winemakers as nowhere else in Italy, and back then the word *tradizionalista* was practically an insult hissed at traditional winemakers. Hoping for critical acclaim, the majority of the Langhe’s producers of the day were fully immersed in imitating a select group of Barolo-makers, those self-proclaimed “Modernists” (a term that has now thankfully become passé) who had been elevated to superstar status by a cadre of national and international journalists.

In this tumultuous period, the Cavallottos, part of a brave minority, bucked all those tempting trends to make “easy” and more commercial Barolo, even if it meant effectively falling off the narrow radar of many wine publications. “We want to make Barolo that tastes and ages like Barolo, a great but unique wine that can’t be made anywhere else,” Giuseppe said at the time, adding that the firm tannins and vibrant acidity of their Barolos were crucial for lengthy cellaring. Nearly ten years later, the Cavallottos remain adamant about making Barolos of almost invincible structure that express the power and purity of Nebbiolo in all its rose-petal, tar, and wild-cherry glory—and doing so in the most natural manner possible in both the vineyards and the cellars. And while they have always elected to travel the road less traveled, there is decidedly more traffic these days as other winemakers turn toward many of the methods the Cavallottos have embraced for years.

Naturally revealed *tipicità*

The hyped concept of all-natural viticulture may have become the wine world’s latest marketing tool, but the Cavallottos are true pioneers in organic vineyard management. Gildo, now 78, remains in charge of the family’s 24ha (60 acres) of vineyards, and in 1975 he and Olivio, with the collaboration of

Professor Lorenzo Corino, director of Asti's Experimental Institute of Agriculture, were the first in the growing zone to plant grass between rows in their vineyards. The grass competes with the vines and "naturally reduces the vine's grape production, generating fewer but better grapes," according to Gildo. Cuttings are then left on the ground to help stop erosion and, because the resulting humus retains water, to keep the soil cool and moist during drought. One year later, the estate introduced predatory insects that allowed them to cease using insecticides altogether. These organic alternatives to the chemical herbicides and insecticides that growers the world over were happily spraying in their vineyards did more than raise eyebrows in Barolo three decades ago. "In 1975 and 1976, my uncle and father were viewed as eccentrics if not downright crazy. But they quickly reached their goal of improving our vines and grapes, and hence the quality of our wines, by eliminating these harmful chemical substances. Since then, organic agricultural methods have been a way of life for us," explains Alfio.

In the cellar, brothers Giuseppe and Alfio, both trained enologists, are decidedly non-interventionist. Besides aging their wines in large Slavonian oak casks (the riservas for five years and vintage bottlings for three), they use only indigenous yeasts for the fermentation. "We are quite convinced that because we carefully cultivate our vines with full respect for nature, the indigenous yeasts on our grapes are the best. Obviously, these wild yeasts are only an option for grower-producers who scrupulously follow every phase of the cultivation process and who never buy grapes on the market," says Giuseppe. Today, Cavallotto's powerful yet graceful Barolos are no longer castaways afloat in a sea of internationally styled wines; instead, they are among the Langhe's most distinct bottlings and have become a benchmark for impeccable Barolos that demonstrate *tipicità*, Barolos that respect both Nebbiolo and their terroir.

Going it alone

The family's long experience has been key to their success. Cavallotto is in fact one of the most historic houses in the Barolo growing zone, currently boasting the fifth generation of grower-winemakers. They were also the first private winery in their area, and undoubtedly one of the first in the entire Barolo growing zone, to vinify and bottle their wines commercially. "For generations, local farmers used to sell their grapes to the cooperatives or the few large Barolo houses that existed. Our family always sold grapes to Bonardi, which was a famous Barolo firm in Alba and one of the first to export to the USA," explains Olivio, who, at 79 still oversees the running of the estate. "But in 1944 and 1945, the roads and bridges were destroyed because of the war, and we couldn't get the grapes to Alba. Rather than lose all the grapes, we decided to make the

wine ourselves and aged it in our cellars. After the war, our cellars were full of wine, but the brokers and buyers didn't want it because there was no demand. So we sold it all directly in *damigiane* [demijohns] to local restaurants and *trattorie*," says Olivio. Fortified by this experience, in 1948, after their father's premature death, 18-year-old Olivio and 17-year-old Gildo began producing, bottling, and labeling their wines and selling them to what had already become a loyal clientele, decades before other local growers became producers.

Bricco Boschis

Then as now, the Cavallottos vinified only their own grapes from their magnificent Bricco Boschis hill that crowns the entrance to Castiglione Falletto. Many Barolo fans ask why their vineyard area or cru does not appear on Renato Ratti's legendary map of Barolo's best subzones, where he identifies most of the best vineyards. But while many consider the work a landmark guide to the area's best Barolos, there is a little-known fact regarding the selected vineyards. "Ratti's map is undeniably important," says Alfio, "but even he acknowledged

that the map was based on the then-prevalent tradition in Barolo of grape buying. There were very few private wineries who made and sold wine, and Ratti's map was based on interviews with a multitude of grape growers who sold their fruit. When Ratti collected information for the map, all

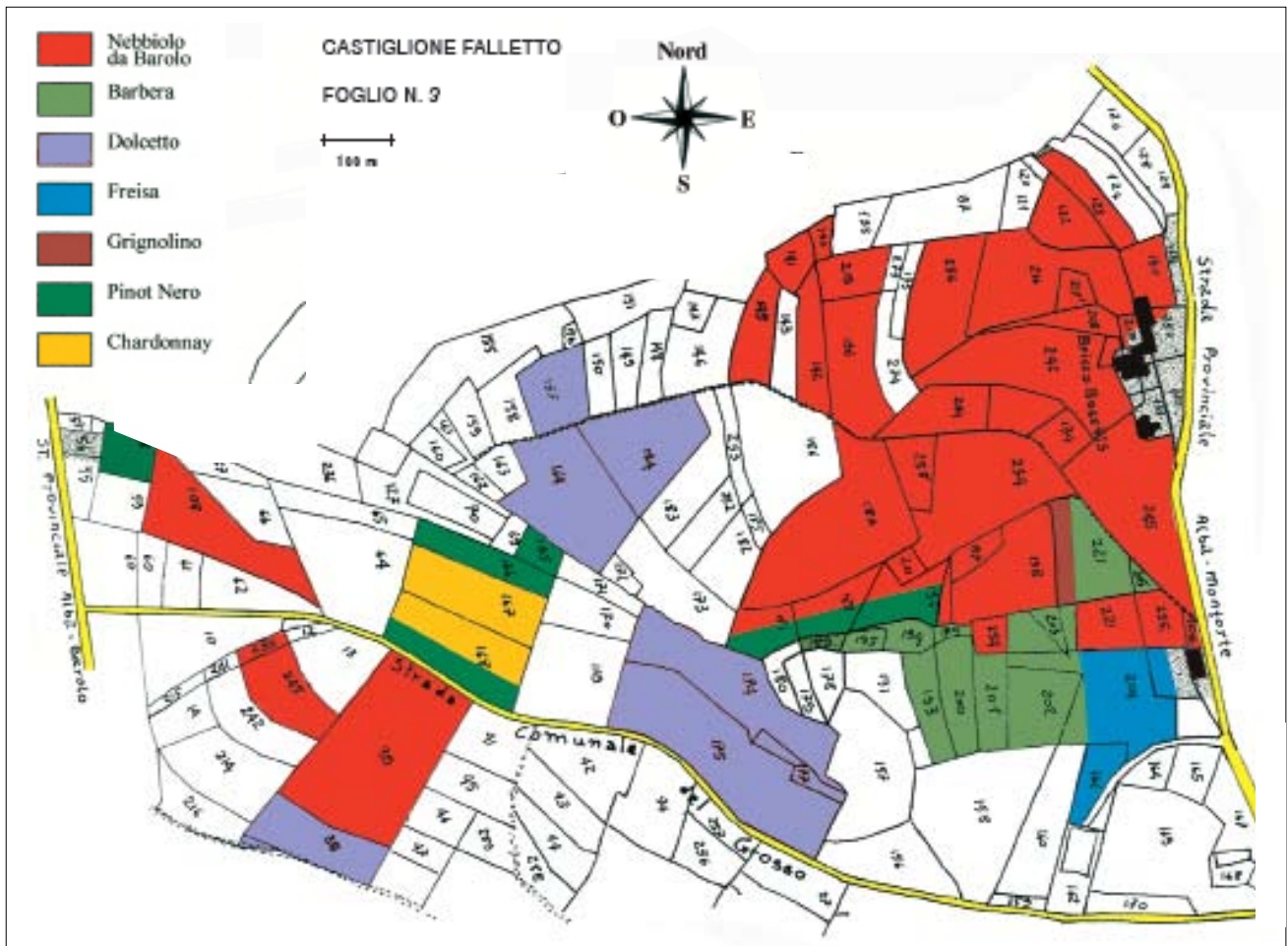
Cavallotto is one of the most historic houses in the Barolo zone, boasting the fifth generation of grower-winemakers

the subzones and crus he included had more than one owner at the time. As a result, many of Barolo's top vineyards are missing from the map—not because they weren't worthy, but because they were owned by a single family, and Ratti wanted a general consensus from numerous growers who had parcels of select vineyards. Besides our Bricco Boschis cru, Falletto, now owned by Bruno Giacosa, and Giacomo Conterno's Francia, are also absent from Ratti's map."

The Cavallottos are the sole owners of the Bricco Boschis hill, and in the 1960s they had already identified the most important parcels there: Vigna San Giuseppe, Vigne Colle Sudovest, and Punta Marcello. "This estate originally belonged to Marchesa Giulia Falletti, as did most of the vineyards and farms," explains Laura Cavallotto, who is in charge of the administrative side of the firm as well as public relations. "When she died childless, the *marchesa* left this property, and several others, to Giuseppe Boschis, who used to manage her numerous farms. Of all the land he inherited, Boschis chose to live here," explains Laura, adding that the vineyard area was already marked on a military map dating from 1879. "In 1928, our great-grandfather and grandfather, who were grape farmers here in Castiglione Falletto, made the Boschis family an offer and bought the property.

"Although I think that the name and reputation of a producer offer consumers the best guarantee, it's no coincidence that behind the area's best producers are Barolo's

(on the vine)



Top: Cavallotto's parcels on the magnificent Bricco Boschis, the Vigna San Giuseppe lying in front of the house; bottom: map showing the plantings by variety

Map and photography courtesy of Fratelli Cavallotto

greatest crus,” says Laura. Bricco Boschis, with its varied southern exposures and complex combination of clay and calcareous soil, is unquestionably one of the area’s top crus. Many of the Cavallotto’s vines are also very old, with an average age of 50 years. “Our old vines give greater concentration and better balance between acidity, sugar, and tannins. Because they produce fewer grapes, the wines tend to be powerfully structured and long-lived. Their long roots also allow them to reach underground minerals, all of which lend better aromas and more complexity to the wines,” explains Alfio, adding that the deep roots also enable the older vines to survive severe drought much better than the younger vines, as in 2003. The Cavallotto also produce a fantastic Nebbiolo Langhe, a rich and concentrated Barbera, and a spicy and vibrant Grignolino from their Bricco Boschis vineyards, as well as another outstanding Barolo Riserva from their nearby cru Vignolo.

The proof in the glass

The Cavallotto graciously opened a number of their older Barolos to demonstrate, in their words, how their wines held up. After the bottles were opened, the tasting and interview lasted several hours, allowing ample time for the wines to evolve in the glass. The tasting proved beyond a doubt that Cavallotto’s wines have extraordinary aging potential, evolving splendidly for 50 or more years in the greatest vintages, such as 1961, 1978, 1999, or 2001.

Aging remains a controversial subject in Barolo, with many producers aiming for a more ready-to-drink style that they nevertheless claim will age well. For the Cavallotto, on the other hand, cellar-worthiness is a crucial quality in their Barolos, and although they have very few bottles left, they had the foresight to hold back a few from their earliest vintages, when they began their journey down the road less traveled. ■

THE TASTING

1958 Barolo

A great year for Barolo. Deep brick color, with a hint of orange at the rim. Dried rose-petal, toffee, and prune aromas. On the palate, hints of maple syrup and nice length with a tea and tobacco finish. Very much alive, though delicate and past its prime, with surprisingly firm acidity holding it together. At the end of the tasting it had opened and held up well. **16.5**

1961 Barolo

Another excellent vintage. Solid garnet hue with brick rim. Rich and complex, with a smoky nose of leather, earth, and mineral. Rich palate of stewed plum and tea, with an almost Port-like sweetness. Firm acidity and velvet-smooth tannins, still with good grip. Has aged majestically and is still going strong. **19**

1967 Barolo Bricco Boschis

A very good year. Smoky aromas punctuated with meat-juice extract, herbs, and spice. Spicy flavors and good acidity, but the tannins have disappeared, leaving a somewhat abrupt finish. **14**

1971 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

An exceptional year. Deep, compact garnet color. Wonderfully youthful, with classic aromas of rose petal and a hint of tar and leather. Complex, with lovely, creamy, cherry-strawberry flavors balanced with vibrant acidity and still-firm tannins. Great length that closes on a note of tea and dried fig. An impressive Barolo that still has staying power. **19**

1974 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

A very good harvest. Garnet with some orange on the edge. Somewhat closed on the nose, but a much better palate of spice and cherries marinated in spirits. Lacks the vibrancy of its predecessors, though still a very valid effort. **15.5**

1978 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna Colle Sudovest

A great vintage, as this wine amply demonstrates. Deep, scintillating garnet. Intense fragrance of cherry and rose with a hint of leather. Plenty of succulent wild cherry and licorice on the palate, with fantastic length. Impeccably balanced, this is a complex wine of great depth, which will continue to age well for decades. The best wine of the tasting and a hallmark Barolo. **20**

1985 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

Exceptional year. Dark, deep color. Smoky nose lifted by fresh strawberry aromas with the same character carrying on to the palate. Lovely mineral character, very Burgundy-like. It continued to open up and revealed ever-greater depth. Gorgeous. **18.5**

1990 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

Yet another exceptional year. Deep color, with some brick on the rim. A bit more rustic in nature, with lots of earth, leather, and underbrush on the nose. Delicate berry and fruit on the palate, with a hint of licorice, but cut short by a slightly bitter close. **15.5**

1997 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

An excellent year. Deep color and, at first, a somewhat inexpressive nose that opened up to reveal classic floral aromas and tar. The ripe-fruit palate is very fresh for this notoriously forward vintage and it has teeth-coating tannins typical of classic Barolos. **18**

1999 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

An exceptional year. Deep and dark, a great, fresh bouquet with heady floral aromas and a hint of leather and earth. Delicious, succulent, cherry-berry flavors punctuated with mineral and Vigna San Giuseppe’s hallmark licorice notes. Delicious and, at ten years old, still a mere baby, just developing its complexity. Will evolve into a stunner. **19**

2001 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

Another superb vintage. Deep, solid color. An intense nose of ripe cherry, rose, and spice, with mouth-watering wild-cherry flavors. Powerfully structured, with vibrant acidity and a tannic backbone, this will age for decades. A magnificent wine. **19.5**

2003 Barolo Riserva Bricco Boschis Vigna San Giuseppe

One of the hottest and driest vintages on record. Although many Barolos were jammy, with extremely evident alcohol, the Cavallotto have again proved that they can excel even in difficult vintages, thanks to old vines and careful vineyard management. Dark color, with intense berry aromas and a hint of eucalyptus. Ripe wild-cherry flavors and intense licorice, with surprising freshness for the vintage and compact tannins. Very forward and an amazing effort for the vintage. **17.5**