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The cru-isation of Barolo

- [Michaela Morris](#)

The trend towards 'cru' bottlings in Barolo is a thorny issue. Michaela Morris explores the background to the designation of these areas and picks out 18 shining examples...



It's easy to get lost in the hills of Barolo, especially when the fog rolls in. Spellbinding as it is disorienting, Barolo's convoluted landscape is best demonstrated by dizzying hand gestures only Italians have perfected.

This region, totalling about 2,000ha of vineyards, is a jumble of ever-changing slopes with diverse aspects, altitudes, gradients, microclimates and soil composition. A wine from one corner will express itself very differently from another, even though both are made from the same grape, [Nebbiolo](#).

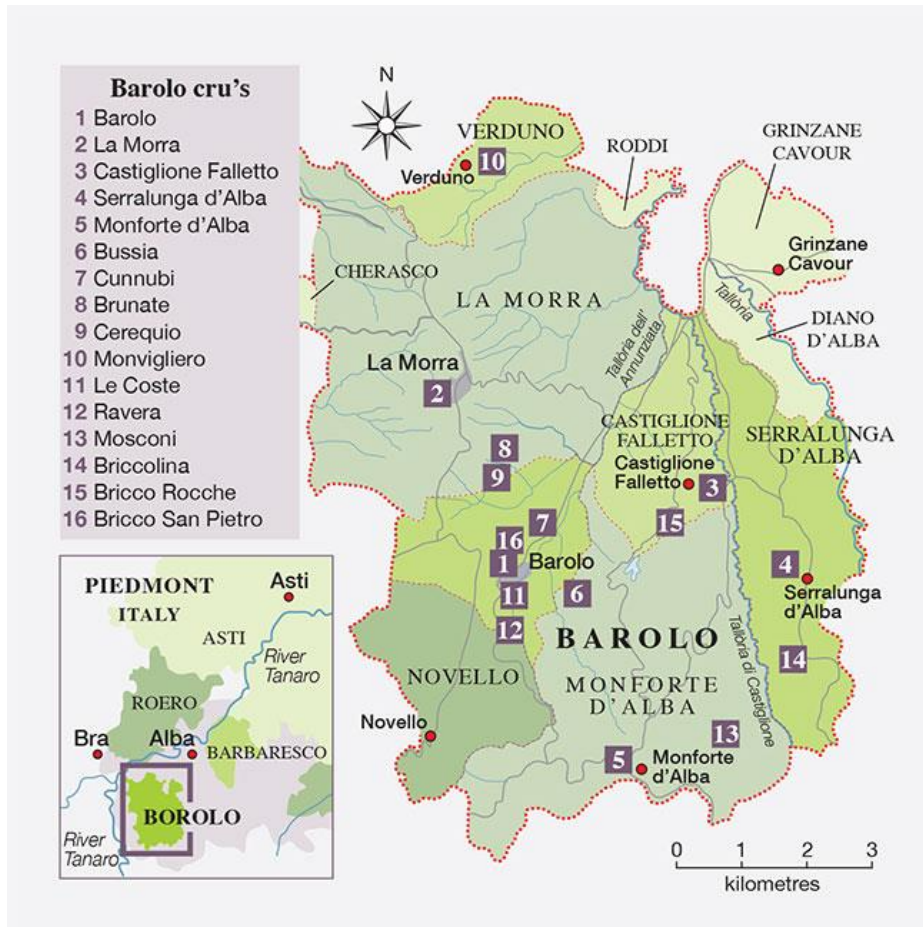
Wine-growers in Barolo have long recognised the differences within their territory and which vineyards are superlative. yet the tradition here was to make a wine that combined an estate's various parcels, rather than keeping each separate.

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It has often been explained that a vineyard within the area of **Serralunga** would contribute powerful structure, while another in **La Morra** might lend softness and elegance. The historical reasons for blending, however, were likely more practical.

Among these was the difficulty of fully ripening Nebbiolo in all plots for much of the last century. Combining them allowed winemakers to achieve a balanced whole consistently every vintage.

image: <https://keyassets.timeincuk.net/inspirewp/live/wp-content/uploads/sites/34/2018/01/Barolo-map.jpg>



The first crus

As such, 'cru' bottlings were rare in the past. Cantina Mascarello's Canubbi [sic] of the 1950s and '60s was in fact a mix of sites. Owner Giulio Mascarello simply labelled his wine with the name of his most prized holding.

Among the first true cru wines were Prunotto's Bussia and Vietti's Rocche di Castiglione in 1961. 'My father did this because he was in love with Burgundy, and believed that there were some zones in Barolo that were better than others,' explains Luca Currado of Vietti.

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Influential journalist Luigi Veronelli encouraged others to vinify and bottle their parcels separately. By the 1980s, there was a proliferation of cru names appearing on Barolo labels.

Yet until 2010, these sites were not legally delimited, exposing them to exploitation. In the 1990s, producers and authorities alike recognised the need for regulations. The consorzio worked together with the local municipalities to clearly define the boundaries of each, a process which took 20 years.

The result is Barolo's official Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive (**MGA**). Wine writer and cartographer Alessandro Masnaghetti's comprehensive tome **Barolo MGA: The Barolo Great Vineyards Encyclopedia** details all 181 MGA.

He describes the motivation for formalising the MGA as both a legal and cultural safeguard. 'If these crus weren't officially recognised in the production *disciplinare* there was a concrete risk they would no longer be allowed on labels at all,' says Masnaghetti.

Pros and cons

The work to define Barolo's MGA cannot be downplayed, and the rigour with which it was carried out is widely acknowledged. The region's producers are largely in favour. 'It has given value to our hills and elevated the territory of Barolo,' asserts Marta Rinaldi of Giuseppe Rinaldi.

Pietro Ratti of Renato Ratti is justifiably gratified. His father, and namesake of the property, produced the first Barolo vineyard map in the 1970s, which provided the foundation for the MGA map.

Yet it's not without its shortcomings. Each of Barolo's 11 municipalities was responsible for identifying its MGA. Some, specifically the townships of Monforte d'Alba and Barolo, registered every piece of land. Others, namely Serralunga d'Alba and Castiglione Falletto, registered only the best or historical sites.

Castiglione Falletto's 20 MGA are all less than 25ha in size. Monforte d'Alba, meanwhile, has 11 MGA almost all larger than this. Bussia alone covers almost 300ha and its area under vine is equal to all Castiglione Falletto's MGA vineyards combined.

The large MGA within Monforte d'Alba are essentially confederations of crus and rely on *vigna* (single-vineyard) bottlings to indicate more precise origins.

The greatest sore spot is the EU regulation which permits only one MGA to be listed on a label – front or back. While the law is based on traceability and transparency issues, producers argue that it doesn't value the tradition of the region. 'It's a paradox that after such important work on the MGA, the labelling regulations do not allow producers who blend crus to write on the labels the MGA that are present in the bottle,' laments Rinaldi.

Maria Teresa Mascarello echoes Rinaldi's sentiments. She has carried on the philosophy of her father, Bartolo Mascarello, and the heritage of Barolo by making one wine from her four sites. She is most outspoken about the introduction of the MGA into the Barolo

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disciplinare. 'I am not against the zonation, which has given order to the names of the vineyards,' she states. 'I am against the way they are used.'

She is referring to the increase in separate cru bottlings and describes it as imposing French customs on Italian territory. 'It's a practice which belongs to Burgundy, but doesn't belong to our history or past.'

Of further contention is the loss of some original historic boundaries. Both Mascarello and Rinaldi point to Cannubi specifically, which has been enlarged to include the adjoining sub-zones of Cannubi Valletta, Cannubi San Lorenzo, Cannubi Muscatel and Cannubi Boschis, all of which can now simply claim the name Cannubi.

Michaela's top Barolo cru bottlings:



Oddero, Vigna Rionda, Barolo Riserva, Piedmont, Italy, 2007

Serralunga d'Alba's Vigna Rionda MGA is a rounded hill with a south to southwest exposure, the soils made up of compact grey marl and layers of sandstone. It is truly among Barolo's greatest crus, but as it can be austere and unrelenting in its youth, Oddero ages theirs for 10...

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In favour

Nevertheless, support for the MGA is fervent. Currently, more than 80% of the 181 MGA are used on labels. In 2011, 39% of the DOCG's production was cru Barolo. By 2016, this had increased to 57%. 'More than one in every two bottles of Barolo bears an MGA, and 90% of producers bottle an MGA,' reports Andrea Ferrero, director of the Consorzio di Tutela Barolo, Barbaresco, Alba, Langhe and Dogliani.

On average, estates produce two crus in addition to a 'classic' Barolo crafted from a blend of MGAs. In this case, the cru wines tend to be a winery's more prestigious bottlings.

The increased production of cru wines isn't concerning to Masnaghetti. 'It's part of maturing', he says. 'We can't expect a wine like Barolo would remain fossilised in the 1950s or 1960s.' For him, quality is what counts and in Barolo it has never been higher.

On the other hand, Luca Sandrone of Luciano Sandrone does acknowledge a possible detriment. 'There is a risk that a classic Barolo becomes a basic Barolo,' he says, 'though it will never be the case with ours.'

The quality of an estate's classic Barolo is dependent on how a winemaker approaches his or her blend. If all the best fruit is reserved for crus, then the classic Barolo may indeed be markedly inferior. However, many producers regard this as their calling card, crafting a wine they are proud to put their name on.

Massolino, for example, has a prime vineyard in the Briccolina cru of Serralunga. 'We decided to use these precious grapes to help elevate the quality of our classic Barolo, essentially sacrificing an MGA for this objective,' emphasises Franco Massolino.

Anyone who has the misconception that a Barolo made from a blend of crus must be sub-standard runs the risk of missing out on some of the region's best value wines. And, in some cases, these are among Barolo's greatest wines, sitting alongside the finest of crus.

Grand cru?

As for the crus, not all are equal; which leads one to ask whether a hierarchy should be established. While producers are divided on the merits of creating an official ranking, they agree that it would be a colossal and complex undertaking. 'It would be logical, but it's a utopia,' says Alex Sánchez of Brovia. 'There are too many people with vested interests.'

And what criteria should be considered? In terms of a scientific classification based on soil composition and elevation, for example, Masnaghetti comments: 'Even though I'm an engineer, this scares me.' Historical reputation is another option. Yet the great sites of yesterday might not be the best today, given the changes in climate. While a direct south exposition used to be considered optimal, studies by both Richard Ballantyne MW and the University of Turin concluded that southwest is now most desirable.

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The other complicating factor is human impact. In the 1960s and 1970s everyone worked the land similarly, which means the best crus – namely Brunate, Cannubi and Cerequio – always excelled. As viticulture and vinification have improved, the quality differences between crus has diminished.

Today less famous crus are giving great results. 'Twenty years ago, crus like Le Coste, Monvigliero, Mosconi and Ravera weren't even considered,' says Currado. Now they are seen as gems. 'The illusion of the consumer is that the "best" vineyard always makes the best wine,' adds Mascarello.

'It's best to go very slowly' advises Masnaghetti. First producers must get used to using MGAs and explaining what they are; while consumers need time to recognise them and understand what they mean.

Cru Barolo is like a zoom lens providing an intimate close-up of the intricacies of the region's terroir, while a classic Barolo is akin to an aerial shot which can offer a greater general understanding or completeness.

The two different approaches present wine lovers with myriad wines to enjoy, while getting to know Barolo from every angle.