2010 BAROLO
HOW GREAT AND WHY?

It was clear from the early barrel samples that this would be an important vintage for both the quality of the wines and the reputation of Barolo as a whole. But to what extent would a blind tasting of bottled 2010s, led by **Nicolas Belfrage MW** and shared by **Bruno Besa** and **Andrew Jefford**, endorse the prior praise?

In various ways, this was an easy vintage to assess. First, the wines were unmistakably superior—that much was evident from the tasting. Second, we had been told they were superior by the pundits who had gone before us, unanimously and unhesitatingly declaring 2010 as a five-star year, the greatest since 2006, since 2001, since ever, for goodness' sake. It was all they could do to refrain from awarding a sixth star, in the manner of the illustrious guru who occasionally in his excitement would award 21 out of 20. 2010, we were told repeatedly, was the culmination of Barolo's journey from barter reject (as recently as the early 1980s, would you believe?) to stellar substance. It was left to us to rubber stamp the accepted verdict or risk ridicule (which we risk regularly with our genuinely "blind" approach to organoleptics). But as I say, agreement was a simple task based on the only criterion that matters in wine (cf "the only poll that matters" in politics): the taste.

Third, the 2010 vintage arguably marks the graduation of Barolo into the lofty realms of "fine wine," which might alternatively be expressed as "investment wine," in the manner of Burgundy and Bordeaux. But Burgundy—the truly "fine" stuff—suffers from a chronic disparity between availability and demand, which pumps up prices and, compounded by the fact that some very expensive Burgundy isn't actually all that good, causes investors, especially those who actually intend to drink the stuff (or some of it), to seek elsewhere.

And when the 2013 harvest in Bordeaux proved a failure (at least in investment terms), Barolo was there, a year before 2010 Brunello, with a quality vintage behind it, to fill the gap. Ladies and gentlemen, once the pundits started pushing points up into the high 90s, those 2010 Barolos fairly flew. New customers were ignored, opportunist orders—from those who had passed on the 2009s, for example—were slashed, and prices started taking a hike in a distinctly northward direction.

The '82 Bordeaux factor

So, what was so special about the 2010 vintage? Like many of the best years, there was nothing particularly remarkable about it for those who lived through it. Temperatures from budburst to final harvest were lower than average, there were no dramas, there were periods of warmth (especially July) and scattered rains. Day/night swings of temperature were a feature, allowing for development of complex aromas and all-round ripening of the fruit: ripe tannins and refreshing acidity. In the end, the name of the game, as ever, was balance. Vintage time, for most, was mid-October, and a very few mishandled things in October rain. But those with good drainage generally didn't suffer.

Nobody thought of '82 Bordeaux when the wines were racked in late October—'82 Bordeaux stands for early drinkability despite the structure for good longevity—but pretty soon it transpired that the 2010 Barolos have the '82 Bordeaux factor in spades. In the words of Kerin O'Keefe, author of the must-read book *Barolo and Barbaresco*, "the long, cool growing

WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE 2010 VINTAGE? DAY/NIGHT SWINGS OF TEMPERATURE WERE A FEATURE, ALLOWING FOR DEVELOPMENT OF COMPLEX AROMAS AND ALL-ROUND RIPENING OF THE FRUIT: RIPE TANNINS AND REFRESHING ACIDITY. IN THE END, THE NAME OF THE GAME, AS EVER, WAS BALANCE

season generated focused Barolos with crunchy red fruit, racy acidity and bracing but fine tannins. The vintage is hallmarked by elegance and impeccable balance. Many wines were surprisingly accessible upon release thanks to the noble quality of the tannins and ripe fruit, *but they also deliver tremendous aging potential and should develop beautifully for decades*" (my italics). The American pundit Antonio Galloni used descriptors like "a modern-day classic" and "spectacular," opining, "As structured as the 2010s are, [...] the wines won't take decades to become approachable. [...] Simply put," he concludes, "2010 is the greatest young Barolo vintage I have tasted in [...] a lifetime of buying, cellaring and drinking these wines."

Our panel was enthusiastically and unanimously in agreement—at least on the quality of the vintage. Five wines were given 19 points ("great wine of spellbinding beauty and resonance, leaving the drinker with a sense of wonder"), and while one of us (me) didn't rise quite to that nirvanic level, he did manage 17–18.5 ("outstanding wine of great beauty and articulacy") fully 15 times, including three 18.5s and two 18s. Parenthetically, let it be noted here that the *WFW* points system—calibrated to avoid "bunching" and "inflation" of scores—is sometimes underestimated by producers, who, inured to the 100-point system, feel slighted at 17 points—when in fact even this is worth 90+ points.

Bruno Besa was "extremely happy" about the overall quality: "wonderfully complex wines [...] no doubt that 2010 is a great vintage." He did comment that they "demand at least a further ten years of aging to fulfill their potential" but noted in the context of specific wines that they had lots of sweet ripe red or black berry fruit and fresh herbs (rosemary, thyme). I interpret this to mean that, thanks to their structure, while these wines will have moved to a new and no doubt better place in ten years' time, there is sufficient merit and complexity in them to warrant earlier consideration.

Andrew Jefford called the tasting "magnificent." There were few wines, he reckoned, that were not "compelling and delicious," whether they be of the new wave (ripe, exciting, generous, fleshy) or the old (grace, limpidity, restraint, understatement). He felt that the tasting offered confirmation that Barolo should henceforth be taken more seriously by collectors. "They won't be disappointed," he commented of those "fine-wine drinkers" who pluck up the courage to "tiptoe beyond Bordeaux and Burgundy."

Time will tell

So, is 2010 the greatest of all Barolo vintages, given that, with the exception of a handful of producers, Barolo has only really got its quality act together over the past 20–30 years? It still has the excellent if slow-developing 2006s to contend with, as well as the 2004s, 2001s, 1999s, and 1996s. A comparative tasting in five to ten years' time would probably provide answers, but that is unlikely to happen. Perhaps in a few years, 2010 Barolo will slip into a shell the way 1982 Bordeaux did. If so, I'll wager that it will, like '82 Bordeaux, blossom again into one of the greatest vintages. Ever.

Francesco Rinaldi Barolo Le Brunate | 18

NB | Bright garnet. Classy nose of cherry and spice. In the mouth, potent, perfumed, a little too concentrated and spirity if anything, but fine and beautifully typed. Fine Barolo. | 17

BB | Deep garnet to tawny. Restrained, complex nose, with orange marmalade, small red fruits, cedarwood, and rosewater. Full body, clean and refined palate, with a long, mineral, fresh herbs finish. A classic Barolo of considerable personality. | 18.5

AJ | Deep black-red, though no longer opaque. Soft, warm, rich, truffley, and enticing. A gentle, teasing nose of great refinement. Rich, vivid, deep, and graceful wine, open-pored and not in any sense aggressively concentrated—indeed, it seems certain that these are not the lowest yields in the tasting. But for limpid, unfussy grace, balance, composition, and refinement, how can a wine like this be surpassed? Absolutely riveting and compelling, and a masterclass for all those who might wish to make wines here that will, above all, work at table, for drinkers, to satisfy, to slake but also to lift toward the sense of the sublime inherent in the place. Awesome. | 19