



CASTELLO DI TASSAROLO

*Marchesi Spinola dal 1367*

# Decanter

• MAY 2013 •





**Above: Massimiliana Spinola of Castello di Tassarolo with her horse Titouan, who has replaced tractors in the biodynamic vineyards**

## Castello di Tassarolo, Piedmont

*Recommended by Monty Waldin*

Gavi is a spritzily crisp white wine that punches way above its weight. Gavi is a small region but has the good fortune to be located near where France's Côte d'Azur morphs into Italy's Ligurian coast. Think sun, sand and expensive fish restaurants tailor-made for slender, neutral white wines.

Perhaps because Gavi sales are so healthy, the wine itself has become predictable and formulaic. But change is afoot in the form of Massimiliana

*'Massimiliana Spinola is quite the revolutionary. In fact, she's become Gavi's most anti-modernist grower'*

Spinola. Although her family has owned Castello di Tassarolo estate since the 13th century, Spinola is anything but a blind follower of tradition – she's quite the revolutionary. In fact, she's become Gavi's most anti-modernist grower. From 2006 she ditched modern vineyard sprays in favour of certified organic methods and hand-stirred biodynamic teas (the first in Gavi). She is replacing vineyard tractors with horses. And in the winery she is even stripping Gavi down to its bare bones with a range of preservative-free wines. These come in both still and sparkling form and are labelled 'NS', meaning they contain no added sulphite preservatives. Gavi is well suited to this style because its grape, Cortese, is almost as naturally tangy as the lemon juice you'd



sprinkle over a freshly prepared fruit to help it retain its freshness. Castello di Tassarolo's Gavi NS is everything that personality-free modern Gavi is not.

**Castello di Tassarolo, Spinola Gavi NS 2011**  
18 (93)

£8.99 **Vinceremos**

Soft apple-crumble flavours, tangy and broad not spritzly and lean, with an enveloping savouriness. **Drink 2014 Alc 12.5%**



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• JANUARY 1999 •





## STEVEN SPURRIER

### Four Pillars of Piemonte

Less known in wine circles than Vinaly, yet of prime importance for the gastronomic soul of the country, is the Salone del Gusto that was held in Turin last November. The Salone represented another advance of the Slow Food movement, founded a dozen years ago by Carlo Petrini, a political gastronome, to revive awareness of the history, culture and pleasures of good food and drink. This was not just an exhibition of the finest foods that Italy has to offer, along with her most famous wines, rather it was an international smorgasbord of everything gastronomically and oenologically true, with over 150 'taste workshops'. Taking part in some of these were Champagne's Remy Krug, Bordeaux's Michel Rolland, California's Bob Thompson and our own Hugh Johnson.

The small group of wine and food writers that I travelled with split into two from the first morning. The only tasting we wine writers managed to attend was an overview of top Barolos from 1982 to 1995. Most of our time was in the vineyards, which allowed us to visit four pillars of Piemontese wine, the cellars of Renato Ratti, Giacomo Bologna, Angelo Gaja and Count Paolo Spinola.

Our first visit was to the Ratti estate, where 28-year old Pietro Ratti had just returned from the US, his largest market after Italy. The estate was created by his father Renato, a researcher, writer, historian and collector, who built up a private museum dedicated to the wines of Barolo in the adjacent Abbey of Annuziata, where the Benedictines first planted vines in 1162. Now it spreads over three separate vineyards, 38 hectares (ha). If wine is culture, which the Piemontese firmly believe, Renato Ratti was among the first to understand so. His efforts have left an indelible mark on the region, not least because the elegant 'Albese' bottle, used by many producers of Alba wines, is a copy of an 18th-century bottle in his museum.

The Piemontese also like to call a spade a spade. Confronted by the creation in 1995 of *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (IGT), similar to the French *vin de pays* classification, they would have none of it, opting to go totally DOC(G), or nothing. The tradition in Piemonte is to make wines from one grape alone – Nebbiolo, Dolcetto, Barbera or Cortese – and although Pietro Ratti agrees that the new laws protect the region, he points out that the grapes can be planted elsewhere, so that it is more important to protect the appellation, in his case Barolo, that can never be reproduced.

The charming and sophisticated Pietro Ratti, aided by his oenologist cousin Massimo Martinelli, could well be viewed as the Prince of Barolo. If so, the late Giacomo Bologna, a man of great vision matched by gargantuan appetites, would have been the Baron of Barbera. The Braida estate (called after his father's nickname which




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Giacomo inherited) was founded in 1961. Passionate in his belief that the hills around Rocchetta Tanaro – the birthplace of the Incisa Della Rocchetta family of Sassicaia fame – and the Barbera grape had no reason to envy the slopes of Burgundy and the Pinot Noir, he decided in 1982 to age a batch of wine in new French oak. The result was named Bricco dell'Uccellone, a wine that catapulted Barbera d'Asti into the ranks of Barolo and Barbaresco. This was followed by Bricco della Bigotta (the hill of the bigot) in 1985 and Ai Suma (the summit) in 1989. Giacomo Bologna did not live to see this wine bottled, but his 24-year old son Beppe has continued the tradition in creating a superb Barbera-Pinot Noir blend that he has called Il Baciato, or marriage broker.

After a cheerful lunch in the Rocchetta restaurant, which happens to be owned by Beppe's uncle, we went to see Angelo Gaja. The charismatic and restless Gaja, *Decanter's* 1998 Man of the Year, who is busy restoring the castle opposite his winery that he ostensibly purchased for its splendid wine cellars, is the acknowledged King of Barbaresco. His philosophy from the start has been that great wine can only be made from very low yielding vines to achieve proper ripeness and concentration. His Barbarescos and Barolos leave one in no doubt that this is so. These wines recently graced the cover of *Sortheby's* Finest and Rarest New York auction, with

estimates at well over \$100 a bottle. He plans ('inevitably, some families will have to sell') to expand his 16ha in Montalcino to 35ha, and pursue his aim to make, as in Piemonte, long-lasting, classic wines based on a single varietal. But as to his recently acquired holdings in Bolgheri, this is: 'Just for relaxation after all the hard work elsewhere.'

In contrast to these fictitious titles, that of Count Paolo Spinola is the real thing. This ex-film director's family dates back to 900, his Gavi estates have been in their hands since 1367, his ancestors financed the voyages of their fellow Genovese, Christopher Columbus, and on one of his wine labels Count Ambrogio Spinola is seen receiving the key to the city of Breda in 1625, immortalised by Velazquez's famous painting in the Prado. From the Castello di Tassarolo, which housed the Spinolas' private mint, now comes some quite delicious Gavi, the best of which is barrel-fermented and barrel-aged Vigneto Alborini. A magnum of 1987, Count Paolo's first vintage of this wine, was as fresh as a daisy, and would put many more famous wines to shame.

*Wines from the Ratti, Bologna and Tassarolo estates are imported by Danmar International, the wines of Gaja by John Armit.*

Steven Spurrier is a wine consultant and writer. For this column, he is winner of the 1997 Lanson Black Label award for wine writing