



learnitalianwines – by tom hyland

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2014 – A Challenging Year – in more ways than one



They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but maybe when we talk about wine, we should retool this statement to beauty being “on the feel of the palate.”

These days, when everything moves so fast, people want to learn about any number of subjects in as quick a manner as possible. This includes wine of course, and for that, sadly, the vintage rating tells consumers what they need to know – or at least what they think they need to know.

Take the example of the 2014 vintage from Italy. 2014 was what we in the industry these days call a “challenging” vintage (it sounds more polite than bad or lousy, doesn’t it?). It was rainy and relatively cold; the ripeness factor was lessened throughout many parts of Italy in 2014, especially in the north. What this means is that 2014 wasn’t a vintage one would go out of one’s way to recommend. You certainly wouldn’t label it “great” (what an overused word- how many things in life are truly “great?”), nor would you call 2014 an excellent vintage.

So imagine an Italian producer trying to sell his or her 2014 whites or red. They have to deal with this notion of that vintage being a “challenging” one. Then there are the inevitable reviews, often by critics looking for intensity in their wines. 2014 is not that kind of a vintage, so these reviewers are not handing out big scores for these wines. So consumers have been hit by a double whammy regarding 2014.



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Recently, I visited Raffaella Bologna at Braida, one of the most famous producers of Barbera d’Asti. We tasted through all of her wines, and when we came to the Bricco dell’Uccellone, one of her company’s signature wines, and one of the most famous of all Barberas from Piemonte, Raffaella told me a quick story about her importer in New York. It seems that they can’t sell much of the 2014, as “no one wanted it”, thanks to less than stellar reviews. Their followup with her? Send us more of the 2015, a wine from a warmer vintage that has been rewarded with more positive reviews.

Well, I tasted both vintages side by side that day, and it was crystal clear to me why reviewers had their opinions about the two vintages. The 2015 is a powerful wine, one that is very ripe and forward. This is a style that is easy to understand, and it gets many high scores.

The 2014 meanwhile was a more reserved wine; it’s still got plenty of weight and notable varietal character, but it isn’t forward; rather it’s a more reserved wine. What it does have is excellent structure, as a cool year such as 2014 guaranteed very good acidity (yes, Barbera is known for its acidity, but in a hot year such as 2015, that acidity is lower than normal).

The final verdict for me? I preferred the balance, structure and overall harmony of the 2014 to the power, ripeness and forward nature of the 2015 (both wines are 15% alcohol, by the way). The understated nature of the 2014 is much more appealing to me than the intensity of the 2015, although I like both wines very much.

So stop and think about those vintage descriptions for a change. Don’t assume that challenging means “bad” or “below average.” Wines vary from year to year, and it’s all about personal style. I think we all agree that no one can tell us that our tastes or our preference of styles is wrong.