

Book and Film Reviews

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PAOLO CASALIS and TIZIANO GAIA (Directors): *The Barolo Boys: The Story of a Revolution*. Documentary, Stuffilm Creativeye, Bra (Piedmont, Italy), 2014, 64 minutes, Italian with English subtitles, NTSC (all regions), \$19.99.

Once upon a time there was an Italian king of wines, known also as the wine of Italian kings. It was called Barolo, and it survived in the same form for a century or more. Then, only three decades ago, there was a revolution. Unlike other revolutions, this one did not aim to dethrone the king. Instead, the revolutionaries wanted to promote the king but put him in modern dress.

The Barolo Boys tells the story of this group of wine revolutionaries. In the 1980s, a group of young winegrowers and winemakers started to introduce new techniques to the Barolo region that were drawn mainly from France. The story begins with a young winemaker, Elio Altare, who visited Burgundy and found himself comparing the financial wealth of French *vignerons* to the misery of the Barolo producers. He concluded that the reason for the misery was that Barolo wines did not satisfy modern palates and were poorly promoted. As a result, a small group of young winemakers started to experiment. They aged their wines in *barriques* instead of the traditional casks, and they changed their vineyard practices to emphasize ripe fruit.

The new wines were a huge success among critics and consumers, and they were promoted widely. But these new Barolos also inspired a passionate controversy, and a “Barolo war” started. The “traditionalists” defended the old ways of making wine and stressed the typicality of Barolo, refusing to make a wine in the new “international” style. The “innovators” claimed that they had amended the flaws of the old way of making wine and that the new wines better matched modern consumers’ tastes.

The controversy was also a generational conflict. In one dramatic episode of the story, Elio Altare used a chainsaw to destroy the big old casks in his family’s cellar, which led his father to disinherit him, convinced that the young Elio had lost his sanity. Also linked to the generational divide was the collaborative spirit of the group of “revolutionaries,” who collectively shared the results of their experiments in the cellar and vineyard. This collaboration accelerated the progress for the revolutionaries, but it was something simply inconceivable among the old winemakers, who remained jealous of their techniques and suspicious of their competitors.

The film focuses on the human side of the revolution and on its economic and social consequences. The interviews with the protagonists (Elio Altare, Chiara Boschis, Marco de Grazia, Giorgio Rivetti, and Roberto Voerzio) and Carlo Petrini, founder and president of the Slow Food movement, are punctuated by clips filmed using Super 8 cameras and by scenes of a local brass band marching and playing in the lovely vineyard landscapes of Langhe. Though it leans on the side of the innovators, the film also presents the arguments of the traditionalists. The film does a good job of capturing the protagonists in revealing moments. And you meet some fascinating characters, such as an unforgettable old worker—a perfect example of the old mentality—grumbling because he is ordered to prune imperfect bunches, which he clearly considers an inexcusable waste of grapes. The film provides a vivid picture of the rise of the movement, the controversy, and the passion of the protagonists. But it also becomes apparent that the cohesion of the group today is not what it once was and that the “revolutionaries” experience some nostalgia as they recall their “heroic times,” as in the film *The Big Chill*.

If you appreciate human interest stories, you will enjoy this film, as did I. And if you do not know anything about the story, you will find it a good starting point. If, instead, you are looking for more technical information, this film might leave you

unsatisfied. One unanswered question is: of what did the “revolution” actually consist? Though the use of *barriques* was at the core of the controversy, the “revolution” comprised many other technical changes that are not discussed in the film. These changes in the vineyard and in winemaking technology included everything from thinning the grape clusters to reducing the time of fermentation. The innovators were looking for wines that required a shorter aging period (which provided an obvious economic advantage), had more color, and had a taste more in line with the international standards promoted by Robert Parker. Some innovations, like dropping grape clusters, were also widely adopted by traditionalists, and, in general, the movement led to a greater focus on technical progress and on quality throughout the Barolo region. In the end, the traditionalists settled into a sort of peaceful coexistence with the revolutionaries, and both benefited from the increased media attention and tourism. Though there are some hints about these issues in the film, they are not fully developed.

From an economist’s perspective, this film raises some interesting questions. First, why did only some of the winemakers follow the new movement? Negro et al. (2007) have documented how the shift to modernism paid off in terms of both ratings from the critics and wine prices. The second and related question is: why was there such a passionate fight between traditionalists and modernists? After all, they could each make and sell their wines the way they liked and still find consumers. I have two hypotheses to offer. The first is that both parties believed that the existence of the other producers acted as a negative externality, threatening the reputation of their business. This was probably truer for the traditionalists, who considered the typicality and the link to traditions and to the *terroir* as important assets. The second explanation concerns the nonpecuniary benefits from wine production. It is evident from the film that winemakers (from both groups) were interested in more than just the income from their activity. Much more was at stake: prestige, acceptance, and recognition, all of which had a social dimension. Nonpecuniary issues are often disregarded in economic analyses, and, I suspect, they are particularly relevant in the wine industry, especially for the highest-quality segment, in which creativity is crucial. Perhaps these considerations lead winemakers to disregard the motto of modern management schools: “be market oriented, not product-oriented.”

Finally, as a personal note, I was delighted by a tale told by Elio Altare at a showing of the film that I attended. Altare related that the much-admired Bartolo Mascarello,¹ who was a leader of the traditionalists, had told him: “Look, you use *barriques* and you must go on doing so. You know that I’ll never use *barriques*. But eventually, the result will be that those who buy six bottles from you will also buy six bottles from me, and vice versa.” What a fine statement of the rationality of exploiting the segmentation of consumers’ tastes and their search for variety!

¹ Mascarello passed away about ten years ago. He was a famed anti-Nazi partisan during World War II, a friend of philosophers and writers, a leader of the traditionalists, and a great personality. He drew his own labels, two of which exclaimed: “Barricades, not *barriques*,” and “No *barriques*, no Berlusconi.”

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doi:10.1017/jwe.2015.4

Reference

Negro, G., Hannan, M.T., Rao, H., and Leung, M.D. (2007). No *barrique*, no Berlusconi: Collective identity, contention, and authenticity in the making of Barolo and Barbaresco wines. Stanford University Graduate School of Business Research Paper No. 1972, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1008367/.

HUDSON CATTELL: *Wines of Eastern North America from Prohibition to the Present: A History and Desk Reference*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2014, 400 pp., ISBN 978-0-8014-5198-0, \$40.00.

This remarkable book represents a lifetime of work for Hudson Cattell, its author. Now 83 years old, he has been around the wines of the Eastern United States long enough to have personally known and photographed (he receives the credit for many of the photos in the book), the characters who were instrumental in the slow rebirth of the Eastern wine industry at the end of Prohibition. Despite the rebirth's origins in the work of Konstantin Frank and Philip Wagner, the movement began to reach critical mass only in the past decade. As Cattell shows, from 1975 to 1995 the total number of wineries in the East grew from about 200 to 600. By 2005, however, there were over 1,200 Eastern wineries, and by 2011 there were nearly 3,000. These numbers trace a growth curve that has not yet reached its inflection point. To put things in perspective, California has around 3,500 wineries, and Washington and Oregon combined have about 1,200. The largest Eastern producer state is New York, with 320 wineries, but Virginia is not far behind, with 223. Believe it or not, at last count Nebraska and Kansas each had 29 wineries, and an experimental hybrid grape (a cross between *riparia* and *tempranillo*) called *Temparia* had been developed and successfully grown in Nebraska.¹

Cattell begins his story with chapters on Frank and Wagner, who clearly had different views of how progress in the creation of Eastern wines would evolve. Konstantin Frank believed that Americans should plant *vinifera* grapes, the source of the dry table wines of Europe. As Cattell explains, Frank, an agricultural scientist who immigrated from Ukraine and landed in upstate New York, had worked with *vinifera* in his home country. He was convinced that these grapes

¹Cuthills Vineyards in Pierce, Nebraska sells this wine for \$26.00 a bottle. See <http://www.cuthills.com/scripts/wineList.cfm>, downloaded February 16, 2015. It is apparent that many of these wineries are commanding premium prices for their finest wines.