

Oxygen-obsessed Parusso

13 Jul 2011 by Walter Speller

During [Nebbiolo Prima](#), I was invited to taste eight vintages of Armando Parusso's Bussia going back to the mythical vintage 1999. I felt it my duty to comply. The Armando Parusso estate is run by Marco Parusso and his sister Tiziana in Monforte d'Alba, the commune of Bussia fame, and it is on this hill that Parusso have some of their finest plots. Parusso is often considered a true modernist because of his enthusiastic use of new French oak, at least for his Bussia. However, his aim is not to be modernist, or the reverse for that matter. This man is driven by an obsession with fruit ripening.

When dealing with a grape variety as tannic as Nebbiolo, it is mandatory to aim for maximum ripeness, but fruit ripeness in the eyes of Parusso is something completely different from prolonged hang time and the consequent accumulation of sugar. And he has some pretty unorthodox methods of reaching this all-important goal. The key is the role played by oxygen, which Parusso regards neither as potentially harmful, nor as something that needs to be avoided at all costs in winemaking. He believes that oxygen doesn't necessarily lead to oxidation, and that it plays an important role in the vineyard.

Parusso wants the soils to be aerated as much as possible, either by mechanically turning the soil or by adding humus. It is added only to vineyards whose soils are particularly poor, but in tiny quantities only. It should never be enough to make the vine give up on the laborious task of developing a deep root system. The deeper the roots penetrate the soils, the more resistant the plant will be during very hot or arid periods, and the more balanced its growth. Another advantage of forcing the vine to spend its energy on root development is that unbridled canopy growth, something Nebbiolo is notorious for, is naturally kept in check.

Parusso picks the fruit as late as possible and, according to him, ripening continues to play a crucial role even after the grapes have been harvested. Stored in crates, the fruit is left to 'relax' for a period up to 10 days, the length of time depending on the vintage. This procedure is not to be confused with the grape drying process for wines such as Amarone, for example, as the period is too short for any substantial water loss in the berries. The actual goal is the drying, or 'maturation' of the stalks. Stalks only begin to dry and become more 'woody' (the same goes for canes, by the way) after the leaves have fallen off the vines in

autumn. Storing the bunches for up to 10 days after picking induces a similar process chez Parusso. The drying of the stalks makes the tannin more mature, and, according to Parusso, the stalks absorb oxygen in the process.

Unsurprisingly, the grapes are not destalked prior to fermentation. Not only does Parusso want to keep as much of the ripe tannin as possible; the oxygen, apparently absorbed by the stalks together with the 'relaxed fruit', will help the indigenous yeast to start the fermentation when ambient temperatures in the cellar are quite low this late in the season. The whole concept seems a little similar to micro-oxygenation, whereby tiny amounts of oxygen are injected into the wine during the final stages of the fermentation. These tiny amounts react with the tannin in the wine, making it softer, and more round. Apparently, another benefit of the oxygen-saturated stalks is that hardly any remontage is needed to aerate the must to start the fermentation.

All this should not imply that Parusso is a fierce traditionalist. The grapes are fermented in rotofermenters after a cold maceration in the tank for five days at 10 °C followed by 10 days at 32 °C for optimal extraction. Temperature control is used to keep the wine fairly cool in order to preserve as much of the Nebbiolo perfumes as possible. And as a true modernist, Parusso uses 100% new oak, in which the wines go through malolactic fermentation and stay there for a total of 24 months.

Prior to 2001, Parusso bottled their three prime sites separately. Bussia Vigna Fiurin, which, before the very recent 'Flurbereinigung' (see [Barolo, Barbaresco to expand](#)), was part of Bussia Sottana; Bussia Munie, which, before the official cru system implemented as from this year, was very much considered an independent vineyard in its own right; and Bussia Rocche, historically considered part of Bussia Sottana, but in actual fact a continuation of the Rocche di Castiglione vineyards, of which a couple of pieces overspill into the Bussia demarcation. However, Rocche, as a vineyard name, was never really in use, and the very few plots were historically considered part of Bussia Sottana.

After 2000 Parusso started to blend the three plots into one 'Bussia', a practice which apparently was very much the norm in the past before the single-vineyard bottlings became so popular in the Langhe.

Our image, incidentally, shows a detail from Parusso labels.

Parusso, Bussia 2007 Barolo 17 Drink 2014-26

Monforte d'Alba. 3,000 bottles produced. Crimson with just the beginning of age. Very fine fruit with understated oak and hint of lead pencil. Very concentrated, sweet fruit with well-balanced acidity and laced with oak. Masses of sweet, sandy tannin. Very young. Look at that alcohol! (WS) 15%

Parusso, Bussia 2006 Barolo 17 Drink 2016-30

Monforte d'Alba. 9,000 bottles produced. Concentrated ruby with deep core and orange tinge in very narrow rim. Multilayered cherry nose, just beginning to open up. Beautiful compact red fruits with almost completely integrated acidity and only a touch of oak. Lots of stalky tannins dominate a long, succulent finish. Unapproachable, really. (WS) 14.5%

Parusso, 35a Annata 2005 Barolo 17 Drink 2014-24

Monforte d'Alba. A blend from the crus Mariondino, Bussia, Le Coste and Mosconi. 2005 is considered a difficult vintage by Parussa, as about 40% of their total production was lost. They decided to blend all the estate's crus together, and bottle it under a blue-coloured label. The Parusso blue label is used only for wines that fall out of the normal range, and in this case was also used to commemorate the first 35 years of bottled production. Concentrated ruby with small orange rim. Ever so slightly dusty, but much more accessible on the palate. Has a certain lightness of touch on the palate. Elegant wine with refreshing acidity with masses of crunchy, bittersweet tannin. Only the merest suggestion of oak. Very elegant on the finish. (WS) 13.5%

Parusso, Bussia 2004 Barolo 18 Drink 2016-26

Monforte d'Alba. Concentrated ruby with broad orange rim. Elegant, understated, almost cool, minerally nose with the merest hint of oak. Amazingly fine palate of sour cherry and raspberry and just a pinch of oak. Very youthful, pronounced red fruits with vibrant acidity. Signature gentleness and elegance followed by muscular but finely textured tannin and hints of black tea, liquorice and raspberry. Fist in a silk glove. (WS) 14%

Parusso, Bussia 2003 Barolo 17 Drink 2014-22

Monforte d'Alba. Medium ruby with narrow orange rim. Ripe, but fresh fruit nose hinting at dried cherry and notes of straw. Generous, silky attack with intense cherry and notes of dry fruit. Waves of grainy big tannin and long, sweet fruit finish. Needs more time. (WS) 14.5%

Parusso, Bussia 2001 Barolo 18 Drink 2016-32

Monforte d'Alba. First time Bussia was bottled as a blend of the separate vineyards of Munie, Fiurin and Rocche. Very even, concentrated ruby

with tiny orange rim. Very elegant, maturing nose, with touches of undergrowth and minerals. It slowly opens up to cherry. Wonderful fresh cherry palate, very elegant and complete with persistent powdery tannin. Still not at its peak. (WS) 14.5%

Parusso, Bussia Vigna Rocche 2000 Barolo 17 Drink 2011-20
Monforte d'Alba. Deep ruby with orange rim. Ripe nose already showing some age. Complex, though, with notes of lead pencil and hints of tobacco. Intense Nebbiolo nose with dried fruit and cherry notes. Hints of oak and spice and slightly rustic tannin. Very long and satisfying. (WS) 14.5%

Parusso, Bussia Vigna Fiurin Riserva 1999 Barolo 18.5+ Drink 2014-26
30 months in new oak, bottled and aged on the estate until its release on the market in 2010. Concentrated ruby with deep core and very narrow orange. Lifted and complex with hints of fruit cake, dried cherry sweet strawberry multilayered underlaid with fantastic ripe acidity and only hinting at oak. very finely woven, muscular tannin. elegant and with lots of strength and finesse as well as power. (WS) 14.5%

Tags: Piemonte, Nebbiolo, Barolo