

Esquire

The BIG BLACK BOOK

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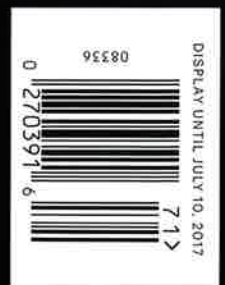


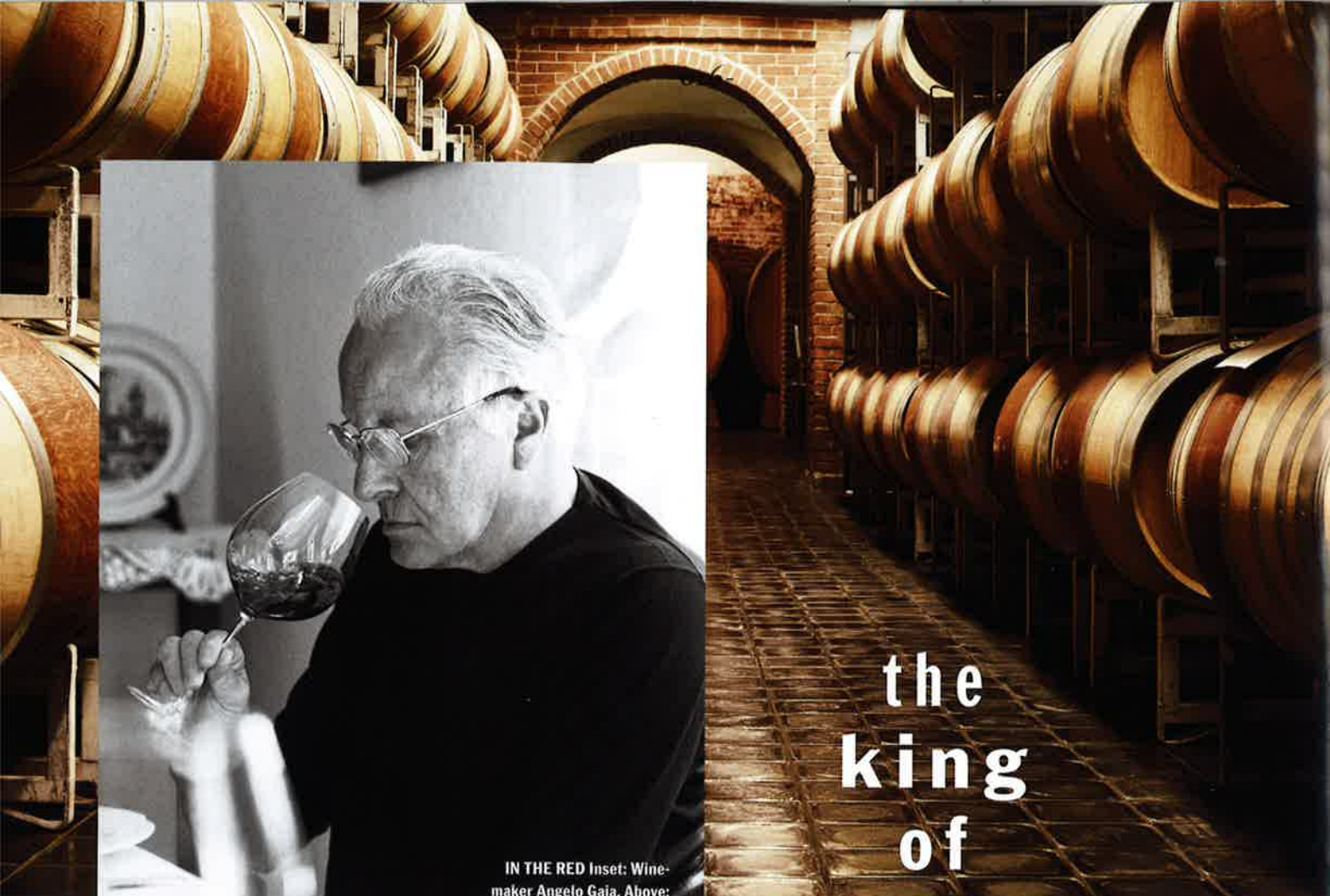
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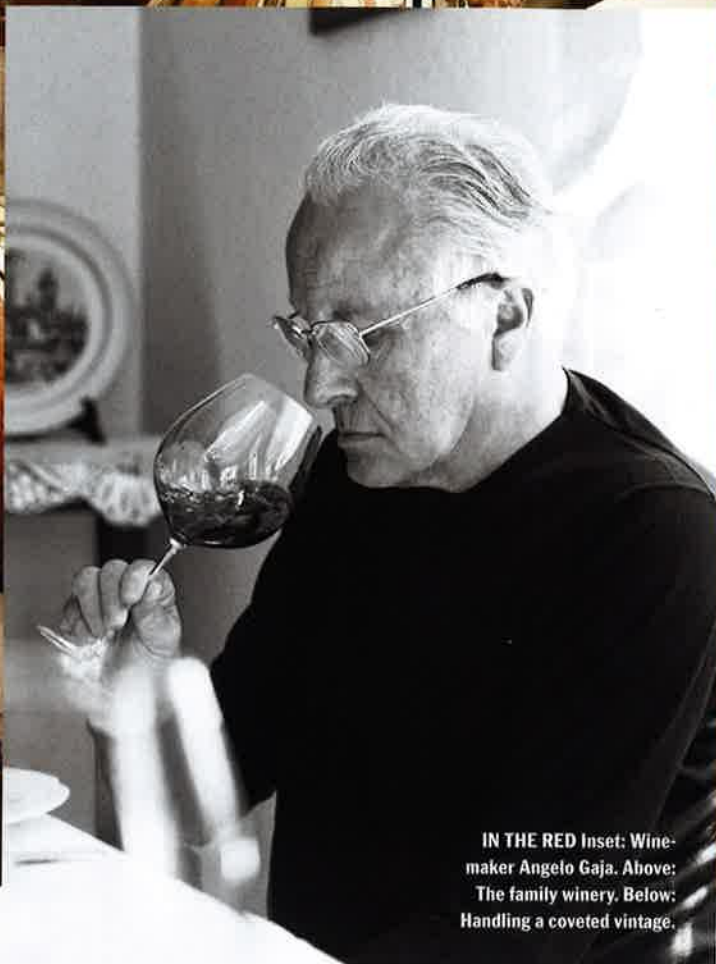
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THE STYLE MANUAL THAT STARTED IT ALL





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IN THE RED Inset: Wine-maker Angelo Gaja. Above: The family winery. Below: Handling a coveted vintage.

B A R B A R E S C O

How did Angelo Gaja and his family catapult Piedmont wines into the rarified league of Bordeaux and Burgundy? By challenging the old way of doing things.

BY JAY McINERNEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CYRILL MATTER



ESQUIRE'S BIG BLACK BOOK

ANGELO GAJA

HAS NO TROUBLE COMPETING WITH THE SOUND of cannon fire. In fact, when the first broadside shakes the restaurant, he seems not to notice. As he declaims about global warming, his voice has a similarly thunderous boom, prompting his daughter Gaia, sitting next to him, to suggest that he lower the volume.

"No," he says. "This is my voice." Gaia looks at me and shrugs while Lucia, Angelo's wife of 39 years, also sitting nearby, smiles serenely, apparently only half listening. Gaia, I've noticed over the years, is a connoisseur of her father's mannerisms and eccentricities, of which there are quite a few.

Later, finished with his jeremiad, Angelo explains to me that the air cannons were installed by the mayor of Barbaresco, a hilltop village in Italy's Piedmont region, where the Gajas live, to be fired at clouds whenever hail threatens the local vineyards. "The neighboring villages get pissed," he says cheerfully. Whether the cannon fire accomplishes its objective seems to be an open question.

Lunching with the Gaja family at Antica Torre, a trattoria named after a 100-foot-tall medieval tower that looms over Barbaresco, I'm struck by the juxtaposition of the domestic and the cosmic, of local and global perspectives. We're dining upstairs—where the owner is making tajarin from very orange egg

yolks and very white flour—and drinking a delicious, complex, and vibrant 1986 Gaja sauvignon blanc as an aperitif. As always, I'm fascinated by the contradictions exhibited by the patriarch of one of the world's great wine dynasties.

Angelo Gaja is passionate—he once smashed the family TV with a sledgehammer because he thought the kids were watching it too much—yet he's also a man of rigid discipline. (Rather than destroying the TV impulsively, he made a ceremony out of it, carrying it first into the courtyard of the family home.) He loves food and wine, about which he can become rapturous, but in his consumption of both he is decidedly restrained, to the point of making me feel like a sot in his company. At Antica Torre he eats a little bit of pasta and a small piece of chicken, and he doesn't finish his glass of 1989 Gaja Sori San Lorenzo, a wine so delicious that I have two glasses in spite of the July heat. (It's possible that he remembers my telling him once that it was my favorite of all the Gaja wines.) He's an intense speaker who, in addition to intoning with that powerful voice, waves his arms and slams his fist for emphasis—yet he also has an impish sense of humor. Finally, while intensely proud of the traditions of his family and his native Piedmont, a hilly region shadowed by the western Alps, he is an innovator who has shaken the local wine industry to the core and who butted heads with his father, Giovanni, after he took over the family business in 1961.

When Angelo took the reins from Giovanni, he was the fourth male Gaja to oversee the winery,



ALL IN THE FAMILY Above: Angelo's grandson. Below left: The hilltop village of Barbaresco, located in Italy's Piedmont region. Below: Angelo's family, from left, his son, Giovanni; his daughter Rossana; his wife, Lucia; Angelo himself; and his daughter Gaia.



which was founded in 1859. Barbaresco was a backwater, its modest reputation as a source of table wine overshadowed by the neighboring region of Barolo. Both areas produced powerful, tannic reds made from the nebbiolo grape, but Barolo, known as the wine of kings, had the advantage of royal patronage because of its association with the Savoy family. Still, even Barolo was not exactly a household word outside Piedmont. Italian wine has long been popular in the U.S., thanks in part to the ubiquity of Italian restaurants. (In 1975, the era of Riunite on ice and Soave Bolla, we imported five million cases of Italian wine a year; since then the quantity has more than quintupled.) Yet when Angelo took over his family winery, Italian wine did not enjoy the prestige or command the prices of the great growths of France.

"Italy became the biggest by selling midrange wines at low prices," says Angelo, who wanted Italian wines to stand alongside those of Bordeaux and Burgundy. A jolt of innovation was needed.

In 1973, Angelo met Robert Mondavi, who at that moment was ushering in Napa's golden age of winemaking. "Mondavi saw the potential in California before anyone else," Angelo says. He recalls that after visiting Angelo, Mondavi said, "Everyone in Piedmont is sleeping." And he was right.

It's hard to imagine Angelo sleeping, however, and in fact he had already embarked on a wide-ranging series of experiments. The two winemakers built an enduring friendship and talked about a joint venture, which Angelo eventually thought the better of, saying that "it would be like a mosquito having sex with an elephant: very dangerous and not much pleasure."

ANGELO IS CREDITED WITH (AND SOMETIMES blamed for) bringing modern winemaking techniques to Piedmont, including malolactic fermentation and green harvesting—the practice of cutting unripe bunches from vines to increase concentration in the remaining grapes. He was one of the first to bottle a single-vineyard Barbaresco; previously producers had blended grapes from different vineyards. He was also the first to bring international grapes, like cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, to Piedmont, a move opposed by his father. Angelo eventually named the vineyard where he planted the cabernet Darmagi—"What a pity" in the local dialect.

EMPIRE OF WINE From top: Angelo's heirs in the garden; medieval Barbaresco; wines that helped put Piedmont on the high-end wine map.



For inspiration, Angelo looked to California and France, just as Mondavi had in borrowing from Bordeaux the practice of aging wines in small new oak barrels called *barriques*. Gaja was among the first to use that method in Piedmont, where huge chestnut vats called *botti* had been used for centuries. According to their proponents, the *barriques* softened the harsh tannins of nebbiolo by facilitating oxygenation; they could also impart toast and vanilla flavors, which many tasters found desirable but which the traditionalists believed were alien. A war of sorts broke out in the 1980s and '90s between the modernists, inspired by Gaja, and the traditionalists, who made wines that often took years to shed their formidable tannins. There was a period, around the time I first visited the region, when the winemaking community seemed split and neighbors weren't speaking to one another.

Angelo stood at the center of the conflict, but while he introduced many of the innovations that formed the toolkit of the modernists, he also retained traditional practices when they seemed to work best, as he showed me in the summer of 2015 in the winery's basement, where the old oval *botti* favored by his great-grandfather Giovanni were still in use. In fact, the older Angelo gets, the more he seems to emphasize tradition. He frequently mentions his forebears, including Giovanni, who started making Barbaresco beneath the family tavern in 1859—and glosses over his father's disapproval.

"My father had a great palate, and he could always tell which vineyards would be best for nebbiolo," Angelo says. Most of his neighbors, too, seem to have found a kind of golden mean between old and new, and peace has broken out on the hillside vineyards of Barolo and Barbaresco, which now enjoy an unprecedented renown, thanks to the King of Barbaresco.

IN THE 1970S AND '80S, ANGELO'S WINES CAPTURED the attention of both critics and the public, partly because of aggressive pricing. Angelo doubled the price of his 1971 Barbaresco, bringing it in line with the prices of top Burgundies and Bordeaux. Some were outraged, but Angelo believed that he was fighting for the prestige of Piedmont and of Italy, and in the end, rather than hurting his market share, the price hike boosted his profile and ended up bur-nishing the reputation of his wines.

Not long afterward, Angelo expanded his reach to Barolo, buying a vineyard in 1988 that he dubbed Sperss, which means "nostalgia." It was the fulfill-

ment of a multigenerational family dream, as Barolo had always enjoyed the bigger reputation. Ironically, Angelo was so successful at promoting his single-vineyard Barbarescos (Sori San Lorenzo, Sori Tildin, and Costa Russi) that they still command higher prices than Sperss and the second wine he makes in Barolo, Conteisa. Which makes the Barolos a good value, relatively speaking, though you'll still have to pay 200 bucks for the latest vintage.

Pricey they may be, but the 1997 Gaja Sperss is one of the best Barolos I've ever tasted—or so I recalled. To check, I opened another bottle recently, and I was again amazed by the wine's richness and depth, along with its subtle floral and herbal highlights and its faint whiff of asphalt on a hot summer day. It's hard to say whether it's greater than my favorite of Angelo's best single-vineyard Barbarescos, like the '82, '89, and '99 Sori San Lorenzos, wines that have given me great pleasure over the years. They are perhaps a little more ethereal and delicate, less powerful and muscular than the Barolos. It's like comparing Jake and Maggie Gyllenhaal: They're different, albeit obviously related.

"Barbaresco is a little sweeter, with notes of balsamic, violets, cumin, and spice," Angelo says. "Barolo is deeper and has more tobacco, mushrooms, and licorice." "Tar and roses" is the time-worn descriptor for the smell of Barolo, and if that sounds strange, it won't after you stick your nose in a glass. Many devotees also find the funky scent of



LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL Clockwise from above: In a Barbaresco garden; Angelo at lunch; outside the winery; the hills of the Piedmont region; a manual meat slicer, for aperitivo time. Opposite: The Gajas in the barrel room.



white truffles, which are native to Piedmont, and it's hard to think of a better accompaniment to a risotto with white truffles than Barolo. Happily, the season for the sublime fungi is upon us.

A shortcut to knowledge of Italian wine is to remember the letter *B*. The country's four most eminent reds are, arguably, Barolo, Barbaresco, Brunello di Montalcino, and Bolgheri. At this point Angelo makes them all, for in 1994 he went farther afield than Barolo, buying a stunning property that encompasses a former parish church in Brunello di Montalcino. Two years later, he bought 150 acres in Bolgheri, home of the so-called Super Tuscans—Sassicaia, Ornellaia, and Solaia being among the wines from the area that seized the spotlight in the '80s and '90s—bold reds made from grapes such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Angelo adhered to that model at his new estate, Ca' Marcanda, presumably benefiting from his experience growing cabernet in Piedmont.



Now, with an empire larger than Angelo's ancestors could have dreamed comes the challenge of keeping the business within the family. He claims to be turning over the reins: His son, Giovanni, recently joined the company after graduating from Università Cattolica in Milan, while his daughters have taken on greater responsibility in recent years. Rossana handles domestic sales, and Gaia, the eldest, has become the international face of the brand. Gaia grew up in Barbaresco; she and her classmates made wine and grappa at school with grapes from their families' vineyards. She has much in common with her father, including a hyperactive demeanor and a wicked sense of humor. Like him, she drums her fingers on the table when she is talking and makes good use of her hands and arms to emphasize a point. And she is intimately involved in all details of viticulture.

Lest anyone doubt that the younger generation is taking over, the company recently announced that the children have collectively reversed one of Angelo's most controversial decisions. In 2000, Gaja stopped using the Barolo and Barbaresco designations for its single-vineyard wines, causing much confusion and consternation. Some saw it as arrogance, as if Angelo thought himself above the region's time-honored labels, though in fact all he wanted, he says, was the freedom to blend a small proportion of barbera into these wines, as the practice supposedly was done in the past. (Italian regulations require that wines labeled *Barolo* and *Barbaresco* be made from 100 percent nebbiolo.) Only a producer of Angelo's stature could have gotten away with such a move, and, personally, I couldn't detect the difference; I'm glad the kids are reversing it. Moreover, it seems only right that the younger

generation should shake things up, as Angelo did in his time.

Another challenge—as I heard loud and clear from Angelo—is global warming, which has prompted the Gajas to shift their focus from the cellar to the vineyards. "Climate change is not so bad in some ways," Angelo says. In his father's day, ripening the nebbiolo grape was often difficult, and good vintages were interspersed with bad ones. Lately, Piedmont has enjoyed an almost uninterrupted stretch of warm vintages—but other problems have arisen. "We have new pests to deal with," Gaia tells me as we walk through the vines of Sori San Lorenzo, "new insects and parasites, and the warmer winters don't always kill them off." Indeed, on this July morning it's 104 degrees.

"Global warming has also dried out the soil," Angelo says. "We have to do more to keep it alive, so in 1999 we started producing our own compost." At this, Gaia starts rolling her eyes. "We instituted compost-making at all the properties, using red worms from California," Angelo continues, "but at Ca' Marcanda the workers were resisting. And I couldn't understand why." Gaia now is forcefully shaking her head. "Well, the reason is that in Livorno [a neighboring town], the Italian communist party was founded. Why are communists against manure? Because whoever votes communist is against the United States, and they want nothing to do with American worms. So I said to them, 'The worms are red in color and they are eating shit.' And then they said okay." Father smiles slyly; daughter groans. Still, aside from a few bumps, I think the transition to the fifth generation of this iconic winery is going pretty smoothly. ■

"BARBARESCO IS A LITTLE SWEETER, WITH NOTES OF BALSAMIC, VIOLETS, CUMIN, AND SPICE," ANGELO SAYS. "BAROLO IS DEEPER AND HAS MORE TOBACCO, MUSHROOMS, AND LICORICE." "TAR AND ROSES" IS THE TIMEWORN DESCRIPTOR FOR THE SMELL OF BAROLO.