In a previous life, Angelo Gaja must have been a diplomat, or an actor even. The truth is, folks enjoy his company and appreciate his opinions. Recently I met up with Angelo again at a luncheon in Vinditaly. I was seated amongst other press delegates—imagine my surprise when the 71-year-old Angelo, the guest of honour, made his way from the VIP table to shake my hand. We had met a month earlier, he recounted. Before long, name cards were being exchanged and every Asian delegate at the table was vying to have his photo taken with him. Suited in his trademark black designer threads, Angelo might have been mistaken for a celebrity. Certainly, in the eyes of wine lovers, he is the star and de facto ambassador of Barbaresco.

Pre-Angelo days, Barbaresco was the plain sister. Wine drinkers wanted only to court Barolo, the handsome brother. It’s no wonder. Historically, much of Barbaresco wines were sold in bulk, with no identity of its own and no merits attributed to it; it was even used to make Barolo. Barbaresco was only recognised as an area in 1894, and it became a DOC in 1966.

THE REVOLUTIONARY
Enter Angelo Gaja and a new chapter for Barbaresco. How did it all begin?

It was Giovanni Gaja, Angelo’s great grandfather who founded the Gaja winery in 1859. Angelo’s grandfather then bought and added vineyards to the winery. In his time, Angelo’s father did much the same but his acquisition turned out to be some of the choicest vineyards in the region. Costa Russi, Sorì Tildìn and Sorì San Lorenzo to name a few.

Then came the fourth generation Gaja, Angelo, who wanted to turn his family’s legacy of winemaking on its head. It was the 60s, the era for change, after all.

Fresh from school with degrees in economics and enology, Angelo was determined to make wines that tasted different from “the ones his father’s customers liked.” He even went on to describe his family’s wines as “having an orange hue that tasted reminiscent of Marsala.” To say that sparks flew between father and son was putting it mildly. Ultimately, young Angelo had his way and set on route a new lease of life for Barbaresco.

True to his word, Angelo began updating the wine style of Barbaresco. He started heavy pruning to obtain better quality fruit. At first, luck was not on his side. Heavy rains destroyed some flowers and reduced his crop. Any man would have been driven to despair but not Angelo. His tenacity was rewarded the following year with an excellent vintage. His old man was pleased.

Next, Angelo introduced temperature-controlled fermentation. Then, French furosques appeared in the cellar. All this imparted a modern taste to the wine. Gone was the oxidised taste of the old wine and instead, came a fruity grape with nuances of vanilla, spice and toast. Not content, Angelo induced malolactic fermentation that softened the ambrosia and made it taste more elegant.

CONVERTING THE MARKET
But how was he to convince the world that his new wine was any good?

Angelo confessed, “I needed people to recognise that the Barbaresco region can make great wine. I decided to make wine from a variety that people are familiar with. To show them we can make as good a wine here as anywhere.”

To prove his point, Angelo began planting French vines—Cabernet Sauvignon—much to the chagrin of the Italians. Ironically, Angelo’s father named the wines from the ‘French’ vineyard Darmagi—which in Piedmontese means ‘what a pity’.

“I decided to make wine from a variety that people are familiar with. To show them we can make as good a wine here as anywhere.”

Champion of the Piedmont
Angelo Gaja, who single-handedly raised the Barbaresco grape to cult status, is on his next mission to transform this region’s wine landscape. By Edwin Soon

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indigenous grape to the French one in 1978,” he shared.

The wines eventually proved the credibility of Barbaresco as a region and Gaja as a fine wine producer. Subsequently, Angelo was able to draw attention to the Barbaresco wines made from the indigenous Nebbiolo grape. He made news in the 80s again when he declassified 12,000 cases of Barbaresco. The wines were sold as bulk wine as they just did not meet his exacting standards.

The rest is history. In 1995, the Wine Spectator magazine cited the Gaja Barbarescos to be “the finest wines ever made in Italy”. In 1998, Angelo was awarded the “Decanter Man of the Year”.

ARMED WITH A NEW CAUSE
Fast forward to present day and the King of Barbaresco is on another mission. This time, to promote the Piedmont region. “Unlike other parts of Italy, there’s lots of good wine to be had in Piedmont, thanks to the undulating landscape. Did you also know we have the best food in Italy? 17 Michelin stars are in our region, imagine that! 15 one-star restaurants and two two-star restaurants,” he exclaims with pride. “It’s all thanks to the land. We have veal, candy, hazelnuts, truffles and more—all of excellent quality. This is because most of us here are artisans, whether we are producing nuts or grapes. You’ll find that each artisan has his or her own vision of making something special from the land.”

“Do not take this lightly,” Angelo goes on and his tone takes on a much more serious note. He mentions communism’s collapse because of its exclusion of artisans, and highlights the need to have “freedom to make mistakes in order to create”.

“But the banking crises showed us that some rules are necessary. In that vein, I wish to highlight that some wines have become a luxury item rather than a drink to accompany food. Thankfully, we have artisans to create wines for the wine lover who wants, every now and then, to discover something new and be charmed,” he adds.

Intrigued by Angelo’s strong opinions, I ask him about global warming, which is every wine producer’s main concern. Not missing a beat, Angelo replied, “Since 1995, we have been experiencing warmer climates in Piedmont. Rain has increased from 500mm to 1500mm and the growing season has gotten longer.

For the Nebbiolo, a late ripening variety, all this change has actually been for the better. In the decades of the 60s and 70s, we would have at least four poor vintages every 10 years. In the 80s, there were three poor vintages and also in the 90s. In 2002 we had rain and in 2003 it was hot. I’d say it’s looking very positive from here on.” Spoken like a true artisan.

THE GAJA WINES
Gaja produces in all 18 different wines from vineyards in Piedmont and Tuscany as well as Grappa.

- **Piedmont:** The Gaja Barbaresco DOCG is the flagship whilst Costa Russi, Sori Tildin and Sori San Lorenzo are the single vineyard Barbarescos. Sperss and Conteisa are Langhe Nebbiolo DOC from Barolo, Dagromis is a Barolo DOCG whilst Darmagi is a Cabernet blend. White Piedmonte wines include the Alteni di Brassica (Sauvignon Blanc), and the Chardonnays of Rossj-Bass and Gaia & Rey. The Chardonnays are named for Angelo’s younger and older daughters and grandmother, Rey.
- **Tuscany:** From the Ca’ Marcanda winery are the wines of Promis, Magari, Camarcanda. In Montalcino, the Pieve S. Restituta’s wines are Brunello di Montalcino, Rennina and Sugarille.

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**GAJA, GAIA & REY 1997**
**Grape variety:** Chardonnay
**Taste:** Deep gold and layered with melon, nuts, truffles, candied fruit, pineapple, preserved lemon, biscuits and finishing smooth and long. Stunning.

**GAJA, BARBARESCO DOCG 1999**
**Grape variety:** Nebbiolo
**Taste:** Medium ruby. Subtle profiled nose of red and black fruit with overtones of tea, camphor and a nuance of smoke. Concentrated yet elegant, fine acids and silky tannins and very long finish. Unforgettable.

**GAJA, SPERSS 1989**
**Grape variety:** 94% Nebbiolo, 6% Barbera
**Taste:** Perfumed with violets and old spice with nuances of leather, mace and earth. Rich and layered yet with purity of fruit. Still evolving, this vintage is the second following the purchase of the 30 acre vineyard in Serralunga, Barolo.

**GAJA, SPERSS 2004**
**Grape variety:** Nebbiolo
**Taste:** Small red and black fruit, a hint of walnuts. Flavours of Chinese plums and leather. Sticky tannins and very long finish.

**PIEVE S. RESTITUTA, SUGARILLE, BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO DOCG 1999**
**Grape variety:** Sangiovese
**Taste:** Sweet core of pure fruit, with nuances of leather, meat and soil. Delicious and mouth-filling. Palate cleansing acids yet very well-balanced with refined tannins and a lingering taste of nougat.

**CA’ MARCANDA, CAMARCANDA, BOLGHERI DOC 2007**
**Grape variety:** 50% Merlot, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Cabernet Franc
**Taste:** Subtle with smoke, red peppers and chocolate intertwined with sweet fruit. Expansive yet supple with silky tannins and a long finish.

*Prices upon request. Available at Pinnacle Wine & Spirits. Tel: 6316 6937*