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Bootstraps to Barolo

More than 40 years ago, Luciano Sandrone began making wine in his garage. Now, he eyes his legacy



The family operation, built over time from a meager 1,500 bottles to an annual production of 8,000-plus cases, relies on Luciano as winemaker, his brother Luca (left) to manage viticulture, and Luciano's daughter, Barbara, to oversee exports. (Molchen Photo)



By Robert Camuto

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Growing up in Barolo, in Piedmont's Langhe wine region, Luciano Sandrone dreamed of creating his own wine label. All he lacked was money, a vineyard and a winery.

After finishing agricultural high school in 1963, Sandrone worked for what were then some of Barolo's top producers. But he believed he could do something great only by striking out on his own.

His break came in 1977, when a retirement-age grower insisted that Sandrone buy his Nebbiolo plot on Barolo's famous Cannubi hill. The parcel was small, but prime. "For him, the vineyard had become a weight," says Sandrone. "He would pass by [my] house and say, 'When are you going to buy my vineyard?'"

"It started as a joke," Sandrone continues. "Then it became more serious. He came by one evening and sat on the steps, and he said, 'I won't leave until you say OK.'"

At the time, Sandrone was cellar master at Marchesi di Barolo. His wages left no room for him to buy a vineyard, even one less than an acre in size. "My heart was in Cannubi, but I had no money," Sandrone recalls, rubbing his fingers together. "No matter," the man responded, 'you will pay me when you have money.'"

For the 1978 harvest, Sandrone took over the tiny plot in the Cannubi Boschis *cru*, and with the help of his wife, Mariuccia, made 1,500 bottles of Barolo in a former auto mechanic garage below their home.

In the two decades that followed, Sandrone, working out of that garage, became a key player in the so-called "Barolo Boys," a group of young producers that rocketed Barolo out of its doldrums. The group, corralled by American wine broker and importer Marco de Grazia, also included Elio Altare, Domenico Clerico, Giorgio Rivetti and Enrico Scavino of Paolo Scavino.

De Grazia, who imported Sandrone's wines for more than 20 years, describes Sandrone as the shy, methodical loner of the group. Others could be louder and more daring, says de Grazia, but in hindsight, Sandrone was the master. "He dedicated more thought to perfecting his wines and cared less about what others thought," says de Grazia. "As a winemaker, his wines are long-lasting proof of the quality we wanted to bring to Barolo. He went further. He perfected it."

"He interpreted Cannubi in a way no one had done before—with power and elegance," says Chiara Boschis, who in the 1990s at her E. Pira & Figli became Barolo's first female winemaker. She describes Sandrone's wines as "an inspiration for everybody."

Now 74, Sandrone has produced more than 50 Barolos earning outstanding scores (90 or more points) from *Wine Spectator*, with nearly half of those rating a classic 95 points or higher. He no longer works out of the garage below the house in which he and Mariuccia, 69, still live. Since 1999, he's owned a state-of-the-art gravity-fed winery, built to resemble a classic old farmstead, where he makes 8,000 to 10,000 cases a year, selling his production in 50 countries.

Yet despite the global success, Luciano Sandrone remains a mom-and-pop enterprise. Mariuccia acts as an administrator, cook and den mother who keeps things running. Luciano's brother Luca, 53, oversees cultivation of approximately 65 acres across the Barolo appellation and in nearby Roero. Daughter Barbara, 49, runs exports and distribution, and her two adult children are training to one day take over.

But Sandrone isn't stopping yet. He shows up for work every morning and dons a blue work apron that hangs from his sturdy yet now slower-moving frame. On weekends, he goes for walks in his vineyards—partly to survey the work of his team.

With characteristic humility, this man of few words sums up what drives him as he shrugs and says: "We can always improve quality."

Sandrone, the son of a carpenter, was born in Barolo's neighboring town of La Morra. An allergy to sawdust precluded him from taking his father's trade, and he became fascinated instead with agriculture.

He was 17 when he went to work as an all-around hand for Barolo's historic Borgogno winery (renamed as Giacomo Borgogno & Figli in 1967). There, he met his wife-to-be, who worked as a housekeeper and nanny for patriarch Cesare Borgogno's grandchildren—one of whom is Chiara Boschis.

Sandrone learned important lessons from Cesare Borgogno—a gentleman who had exported his wines throughout the world and was knighted in Italy's Order of Merit. "From Borgogno I learned that class comes from inside a person," Sandrone says.

At 20, he left to do his year of compulsory military service in Turin, and on his return was recruited by the larger producer and négociant Marchesi di Barolo, where in the course of a few years he became cellar master.

Felice Scarzello, patriarch of one of the two families that controlled the winery, nurtured Sandrone's wine passion and his curiosity by encouraging the young man to travel. "You know your work well," Scarzello told him. "But after your work is done, feel free to escape."

Sandrone visited France, which he calls "the symbol of quality," several times a year. He was drawn to the intimate vineyards of Burgundy and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. There he learned techniques to improve red wines—from how to reduce crop yields to the heating of must for faster and cleaner fermentations from wild yeasts. But his patrons weren't ready for such investments.

"At the time in Barolo, there wasn't an exigency for great wines—it was the demands of practicality and work," says Sandrone. He recalls that after harvest, the old wooden fermenting casks were closed until Christmas, with the new wine still in them, while workers plowed and seeded fields

for wheat. Some wines of the day underwent secondary fermentations in bottle, resulting in off-putting flavors and carbonic fizz.

After he began to vinify in his garage, Sandrone continued to run the Marchesi di Barolo winery for another 13 years, while Mariuccia worked on Marchesi's bottling line—giving the family needed funds to buy equipment and slowly assemble more vineyards.

In 1981, with three vintages under their belt, Luciano and and Mariuccia joined a group of Barolo producers who rented a booth at national wine fair. De Grazia, then a young, wild-haired importer, discovered Sandrone there and offered to buy his whole stock. Sandrone, acting cautiously, hedged his bets, selling de Grazia half and contracting the rest to a Swiss importer. "When I realized I could sell these bottles," Sandrone recalls, "it was a moment of euphoria."

Sandrone was often viewed as one of Barolo's modernist revolutionaries. But that label didn't really fit. For one thing, he never bought into increasingly fashionable methods such as aging wine in new French oak *barriques* or using roto-fermentors to increase extraction from his grapes. Instead, he favored gentle fermentations and relied on larger, used 500-liter Burgundy barrels that imparted less wood tannins to his wine.

"He believed strongly in what he did, and he didn't let himself get waylaid by new things that others—including myself—got excited about," says de Grazia. "He was more thoughtful, cautious and precise. He would never talk about it. He would just do it."

Working under lean conditions in a cellar that spilled out in front of his house, Sandrone continued his practice of renting vineyards from retiring growers for a few years before buying them. He eventually built his Cannubi Boschis vineyards to 2 acres. He also branched out to wines from local grapes Dolcetto and Barbera.

With the 1985 vintage, encouraged by Italian wine journalist Luigi Veronelli, Sandrone became one of the first producers to put the name of

his vineyard *cru*, Cannubi Boschis, on the label of his Barolo.

As a proposed label for that vintage, a Tuscan restaurateur friend had given Sandrone a hand-painted mockup featuring gold-and-white lettering in a cobalt blue square—intended as a riff on Sassicaia’s gold star in a blue circle.

“My father said, ‘Oh my god this is *not* going to be the label of my Barolo!’” Barbara Sandrone recalls.

Someone stuck it on the refrigerator door in the Sandrone kitchen, where it remained for more than two years. When the 1985 vintage was ready for release in 1988, Sandrone capitulated. He began using the eye-catching motif not only for his prized Barolo but also adapted it for the rest of his wines.

Kick-started by the great 1985 vintage, Barolo was on a roll, and so was Sandrone. In 1990 he quit his day job at Marchesi di Barolo to focus exclusively on his own wines. His debut vintage of Barolo Le Vigne, 1990, a complex blend of Nebbiolo from vineyards across Barolo, scored 98 points in *Wine Spectator’s* official blind tasting of the wine in 1994.

“It was a beautiful vintage in 1990,” Sandrone says matter-of-factly while on a morning walk through Cannubi Boschis in late fall. “There was a lot of curiosity about Barolo in the world, and few producers of quality. That created the legend.”

The last decade of the 20th century produced a string of great vintages. Sandrone’s garage was bursting at the seams. He and his brother Luca, who joined him in 1992, rented an old abandoned cooperative winery in Barolo to gain storage space.

At the same time, the brothers ventured north of the Tanaro river into the Nebbiolo-dominated Roero region. Sandrone had a specific destination in mind—the steep and sandy hillsides known as Valmaggioro. He’d known

the locale as the “reference point for Nebbiolo” in Roero from his days at Borgogno.

“The Roero has a tradition completely different than ours,” explains Sandrone. “Wine was more a part-time vocation of families who worked in the textile and iron plants.”

The Sandrones quickly assembled tiny familial plots, totaling about 7.5 acres, from 28 individual property owners, and made their first vintage from the holdings in 1994. Over most of the next decade they replanted what is today a stunning, steep amphitheater of terraced vines.

Sandrone speaks of the site as “romantic landscape,” and of his Nebbiolo d’Alba Valmaggiore as though it were a second—but no less loved—child. “The Nebbiolo of Valmaggiore is much closer to Pinot Noir, with softer tannins and finesse,” he says.

In the mid 1990s, Sandrone sensed he was at a critical juncture. He’d done all he could in his patchwork winery. He needed to build a facility after his own vision. His wife remembers him saying in those years, “We either abandon everything and sell or take a big leap forward.”

The Sandrones went forward. Luciano had purchased land in the fields below Cannubi in 1994, and a few years later borrowed the investment money for his state-of-the-art winery, completed for the 1999 harvest.

“Practically nothing changed, and everything changed,” says Sandrone, padding around his winery today. “The philosophy is the same. But here we have room for everything. When we need to move to press the wine, we can do it in an hour-and-a-half to two hours. We don’t have to wait two days.”

Sandrone’s latest project, called Vite Talin, is arguably his most eccentric, taking 30 years of experimentation to bring to fruition.

It began in the 1980s, when Sandrone was leasing a small parcel in the Le Coste *cru* on the south side of Barolo. There, he noticed a dwarfish vine with small leaves and tiny grape bunches and berries. Curious, he did a microvinification of the grapes in 1988—in a 2-liter glass jar. “The wine immediately had a more intense color, bigger structure, a lot of tannins and good acidity,” he states.

He worked with the University of Turin to study the unusual plant. Ampelographers concluded it was either Nebbiolo or a close relative, infected with a series of viruses. Sandrone field-cloned the vine on small plots throughout Barolo and experimented with larger and larger vinifications, but sold the resulting wine off in bulk. They then replanted the original plot in Le Coste with the clone—and continued to experiment.

In the 2013 vintage, Sandrone was sufficiently satisfied with the results—arrived at by fermenting in an oak vat and aging in a large cask—to bottle the wine. A DNA test in 2017 proved the plant to be Nebbiolo. Late last year, Sandrone released the 1,800 bottles of that maiden 2013 vintage, produced from 2,000 vines.

“We didn’t do it to make a wine, it was first a game,” Sandrone says of his new, rich and intense Barolo.

After Talin, Sandrone says, he plans no more projects. “*Basta*,” he says, with a shake of his head. But later that same day, at lunch with his family, he talks excitedly about a high-altitude vineyard in Monforte d’Alba that he hopes to buy in 2020. It would be the fifth site producing grapes for his Le Vigne *cuvée*, and its cool microclimate could help balance hot vintages, which have become more frequent.

In late 2015, Sandrone suffered a heart attack while working in his cellar. After placing an artificial valve into Sandrone’s heart, his surgeon told him: Stop working.

“I was back at work in 15 days,” Sandrone recounts with a sly grin. “I am not a person to go the bar and play cards or read the papers all day. I need

movement.”

In 2017, marking Sandrone’s 40th harvest under his own name, he made an announcement that shocked Barolo lovers and collectors worldwide. Commencing with the 2013 vintage, he was changing the name of his signature Cannubi Boschis bottling to “Aleste”—combining the names of his two grandchildren: Alessia, 21, and Stefano, 19.

“Cannubi Boschis was the most precious thing to our family,” says Barbara Sandrone. “But we understood [my father] really wanted to leave something special to his grandchildren. Once he made up his mind, we didn’t ask too many questions.”

Stefano seems destined to handle sales on the world market, like his mother. Alessia will likely run the winery, says Sandrone. “She can work with her hands and head at the same time,” he says. “She’s strong and she doesn’t tire.”

Sandrone it seems has thought it all through—crafting the future as if it were a Sandrone *cru*. “To have my grandchildren working here,” says Sandrone, “that will complete the dream.