

Aldo Conterno

Italy loses another wine giant



A toast is made in the reception area of the Poderi Aldo Conterno estate. From left: A German traveler, Jim Bryant, Aldo Conterno, and one of Conterno's sons.

ON MAY 30, 2012 THE WORLD LOST ANOTHER WINE GIANT. Aldo Conterno, owner of Poderi Aldo Conterno, died and left an immense void in the world of Italian wine. He was born in Monforte d'Alba in 1931, and was one of two famous sons of Giacomo Conterno. Aldo moved to San Francisco in 1954 to start a winery in Napa in conjunction with his two uncles. Soon after arriving in the United States, however, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and served in the Korean War for two years.

After serving, Aldo left the Army and lived in the United States until he returned to Italy after nearly five years here. He and his brother, Giovanni, assumed responsibility for the Giacomo Conterno estate in 1961. Eventually, he and his brother Giovanni decided to go separate ways, over different Barolo production philosophies. Giovanni kept the father's winery and vineyards, and Aldo started his new project a few kilometers away in 1969. Over the years, Aldo built one of the grandest estates in Piemonte and he embraced tenets of



These five wines were chosen for a tasting that Jim Bryant attended at the estate.



Antique wine bottles are displayed at Poderi Aldo Conterno.



A keepsake bottle of Barolo from 1971.

the "new" school of Barolo producers; e.g., smaller barriques maturation. However, he was more of a traditionalist in my opinion as opposed to Giovanni, who was a staunch traditionalist-long maturation in large foudres. For example, I once visited Giovanni and was effusive in my praise for what I thought (and still do) was the greatest wine of my life - the 1971 Giacomo Conterno Monfortino Reserva Especiale. He told me that the wine matured for 10 years in wood only to be outdone by the same wine from 1970 for 11 years in wood. Aldo did not follow such extreme measures, but, in my opinion, seemed to blend the best of the new and traditional schools of Barolo producers.

I spent several of my life's greatest wine visits with him. His winery is situated on a beautiful hilltop in the Monforte zone, a short distance from his birthplace. Each time I saw him I left much smarter than when I arrived. He was kind, gentle, soft-spoken, and a veritable fount of knowledge about life, wine, and Barolo, for sure.

Within his winery were some of the most interesting artifacts regarding wine. I particularly remember an elongated oval cask mounted on a wagon with wooden wheels. This wagon was pulled through the villages in the Middle Ages and centuries later, filled with wine, and the villagers would bring their vessels to the wagon to purchase their wine. As a result of age, the wood, the wine's impact, or all the above, the cask was most similar to petrified wood.

continues on page 94 ➔

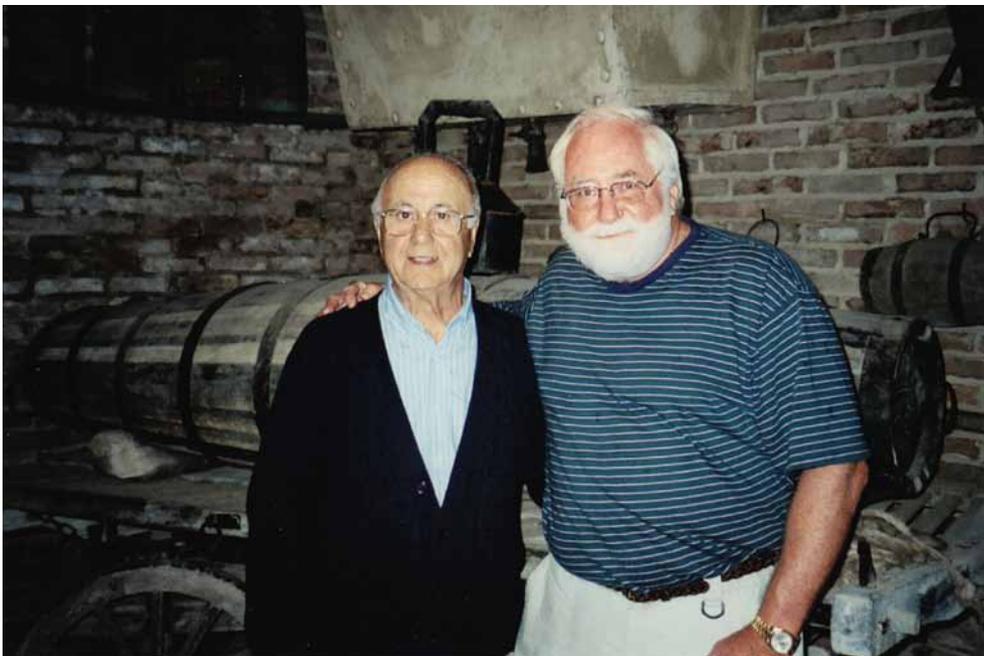


The Poderi Aldo Conterno estate is located in the Piemonte region of the district of Langhe. The winery, located in Monforte d'Alba, chiefly produces Barolo wines.

Another great memory involved a wine press many centuries old. I remarked to Aldo that it must have taken a true craftsman to carve the auger (screw). He agreed, but reckoned that it probably took considerably more skill to carve the female part of the press - touché. Also of interest was the wine bottle collection, including the world's largest known bottle (with a mind-boggling volume).

During a visit in the late 1990s, I invited Sylvia Altare, the daughter of Elio Altare (also one of Italy's most famous vintners and a very close friend

of mine) to accompany me for the experience. She said she doubted I would be able to gain access to Aldo, but she showed up. Aldo, Silvia, and I tasted all of his current release wines and as always each was exemplary for its style, terroir, and vintage. We discussed each, and as I was leaving he asked me to wait for a few minutes. He returned and gave me a bottle of 1971 Aldo Conterno Gran Bussia Barolo - his first vintage for this wine and certainly his greatest from one of, if not the best vintage ever. He said he wanted my opinion on a properly-aged



Aldo Conterno and Jim Bryant stand in front of an elongated, rolled wine cask that was used in the Middle Ages to transport wine into villages where individual bottles would be filled for sale. The cask is located in the estate's museum.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C. Contact him at profwino@comcast.net.

Barolo. When we arrived back at Elio's for lunch, Silvia told her dad that someone in Italy liked me as much as he did. He said that was not true, but when she showed him my gift, he said that maybe it was so. We celebrated the turn-of-the-century with this wine - one of the all-time greatest.

Aldo also gave me my greatest wine compliment ever. We were discussing our favorite foods to pair with Barolo. We agreed that white truffles over risotto or tagliatelle or a simple piece of aged Parmigiano-Reggiano were superb. Aldo had decided that to understand Barolo best, it should be drunk by itself. He said he had only known five people who could understand this experience and I was one of the five.

On my last visit I took a local friend, Bill Pier-son, and we had a wonderful time. I remarked that there was a new bottle in the reception room. He showed me the extremely large empty bottle of Barolo from 1971. He told us that he had taken it to village of Monforte d'Alba in 2001 for a lunch with all the citizens who were born in 1931 for his 70th birthday. At the end of repast, he told them that he had another such bottle and planned to invite them to the centenary. Alas, the great one will be there, if only in spirit. À votre santé! 🍷