

## Barbera - Piemonte's third B

3 Nov 2004 by JR

Barbera is a bit of a Bob Geldof of a grape variety. For years it was thought of as rather coarse and inconsequential but in recent times its reputation has been so rehabilitated that it is now taken extremely seriously – and is worth rather a lot of money.

Until not that long ago Barbera, the most planted vine in Piedmont, home of Italy's world-famous, venerated but overpriced red wines Barolo and Barbaresco, was viewed as almost a weed. The vine was thought capable only of providing tart, early-maturing basic red for everyday drinking in the region itself. But following the example of the late Giacomo Bologna's mould-breaking Bricco dell'Uccellone bottling, an increasing number of Piemontese growers have been taking it seriously, ageing it in small French barrels and charging serious money for it. Today Piedmont is the land not of two but three Bs, with Barbera no longer a simple wine at all. Expect to pay anything from £6 to £20 (\$11-40) for a bottle, the more expensive and extensive the oak, the higher the price.

Barbera is increasingly Piedmont's international calling card with newcomers to Italian wine. Nebbiolo may be the region's most revered and demanding grape, responsible for majestic Barolos and Barbarescos, but it is difficult to grow and reasonably difficult to appreciate. It makes wines of great subtlety that, typically, need many years in bottle before they seem to warrant their high price tags. Barbera on the other hand is a thoroughly modern wine if its open fruitiness can be maximised, often with some slightly obvious oak.

As ever in Piedmont, the question of oak is a controversial one. Many producers use small French barriques, especially for their best lots of fruit and most expensive bottlings. Some use the traditional large Slavonian oak *botte*, much bigger, more neutral casks. Others use a mixture or succession of the two, while there is no shortage of completely unoaked Barbera. Some view this last style as inescapably the least interesting. Others, including some who have in the past been guilty of over-oaking their Barberas, suggest that we may see more and more top quality Barbera fruit bottled with no or minimal oak in the future – especially as global warming may result in Barberas with more natural tannins and phenolics of their own than in the past.

The grape being naturally high in acidity and low in tannin, growers have been picking it later and later in an effort to reduce that acidity – and the barriques can add a useful layer of their own tannins too. But some producers are not content with expressing Barbera's admittedly rather bland flavours of ripe berries, perhaps blackberries, they use the permitted 10 per cent addition of another strongly flavoured grape to beef up its colour and/or impact.

Tasting scores of Barberas in Asti recently, I developed rather a soft spot for those that tasted as though they contained a little Nebbiolo. At least this blend is definitively and characteristically Piemontese. There were others that tasted as though a bit of Cabernet Sauvignon had been imported from France for colour and tannin that seemed to have internationalised the wine, not always to its benefit.

The outside world may associate the unremarkable town of Asti with sweet fizzy stuff but it sees itself as the world capital of Barbera – with good reason since Barbera d'Asti is the most common of the grape's geographical denominations. Perhaps for this reason it is generally less expensive than wines from the smaller Barbera d'Alba district but Barbera d'Asti has some geographical advantages. Since both Nebbiolo and Barbera are relatively late-ripening vines, they both

have a claim to the most propitious sites on Piedmont's rolling hillsides. Around Alba however, Nebbiolo can command such high prices that Barbera is virtually always planted on second-best sites, whereas around Asti the Barbera vine reigns supreme and the best sites are devoted to it. And in hot summers, on the white soils around Alba, Barbera can easily become overripe.

It is notable that seven of the nine Barberas nominated for Italy's coveted tre bicchiere awards this year were Barbera d'Asti rather than Barbera d'Alba. (There is also Barbera del Monferrato, usually relatively simple but certainly very characteristic since this is claimed as the birthplace of Barbera.) The commune of Nizza within the Barbera d'Asti zone is petitioning to have its very own DOC.

Thus it was that I found myself insisting to a driver at Turin airport carrying a sign saying 'Barbera Meeting' that yes, it was me he was meant to be speeding to Asti in his Mercedes. He was dubious. I was the first woman he had even seen participate in this annual week of Barbera tastings apparently. Not that the legendary Italian gallantry was much in evidence at next morning's tasting when an old (Italian, male) hand insisted I move to the other place at the table I happened to have chosen, for the sole reason that he had been sitting in that particular seat for the last seven years' tastings.

The Barbera Meeting shows off Barbera after Barbera to journalists visiting from all over the globe, so seriously is the grape now taken. The wines are served blind in sensible flights of five poured into top quality glasses by experienced and capable sommeliers. Only at the end did we discover who had made what – although we did always know the wines' DOC and vintage. My 70-plus tasting notes taken in Piedmont are supplemented on my website's purple pages by more than 40 more I seem to have accumulated over the past few months.

Vintage differences in recent years are extremely apparent in Piedmont – a fact confirmed by other tastings of a wider range of grape varieties. Some producers even bravely showed us their 2003s, made very obviously from last year's exceptionally hot summer. Many of these Barbera 2003s, even from such admired practitioners as Elio Altare, are just too ripe, soft and simple to seem worth the money being asked for them.

The 2002 vintage was, famously, a bit of a washout in Piedmont quite literally and some producers did not even bottle some wines in that vintage – although Barbera's late ripening meant it was less badly affected than, say, Piedmont's third red grape Dolcetto. Although some 2002s were more successful than others, the vintage is dramatically outshone by the 2001s which generally look several notches above the norm. My scores out of 20 are notably higher for 2001s than for any other recent vintage, including the soft, supple, ultra-fruity and sometimes overripe 2000s. And as the list shows, all my favourite wines were made in this beautifully balanced vintage.

## MY FAVOURITE BARBERAS

Carlo Ferro, Roche 2001 Barbera d'Asti Superiore

Azelia, Vigneto Punta 2001 Barbera d'Alba

Damilano 2001 Barbera d'Alba

Grimaldi, Pistin 2001 Barbera d'Alba

Cantina Sociale di Mombaruzzo 2001 Barbera d'Asti Superiore Nizza

Bersano, Crenosina 2001 Barbera d'Asti Superiore

Tenuta La Meridiana, Tra La Terra e Il Cielo 2001 Barbera d'Asti Superiore

See [tasting notes](#) for details and scores on more than 100 Barberas