

Wine Producer of the Year

By Ed McCarthy



Vietti is my wine producer of the year. For many years, this winery has been a leader in Piedmont's Langhe region, for both its Barolo wines and its Barberas. It seemed fitting to name Vietti my producer of the year in 2010, with the passing this year of Alfredo Currado, the wine genius responsible for establishing Vietti as a great winery. Alfredo died on April 30th at the age of 78, after battling Parkinson's disease for 12 years.

A trained oenologist, Currado took over as winemaker in 1960 after the death of his father-in-law, Mario Vietti. He immediately began innovations. In 1961 Vietti was the first winery in the region to make a single-vineyard Barolo, from the Rocche vineyard in Currado's home village, Castiglione Falletto. Currado also made a single-vineyard Barbaresco Masseria that year. Currado's reasoning was that there are some vineyards so special that they should not be blended with the grapes from other vineyards—an idea well-established in Burgundy, but novel in traditional Piedmont at that time. Rocche remained Currado's favorite Barolo vineyard his entire life.

In 1967, Alfredo Currado revived the white variety Arneis from obscurity and near-extinction (a few farmers were blending it with other varieties). Now, of course, many producers in Piedmont are making an Arneis wine.

For me, one of Alfredo Currado's most brilliant moves was establishing his home vineyard, Scarrone, as a source of great Barbera. Up until the mid-70s, Nebbiolo (the wine grape of Barolo) had been growing in Scarrone. Currado decided that the quicker-ripening Barbera would be more successful in Scarrone than the late-ripening Nebbiolo, and ripped up the vineyards to plant Barbera. His neighbors thought Currado was crazy. Who would rip out Nebbiolo to plant Barbera, thought to be a far less noble variety—which sold as a wine for one-fourth or one-fifth that of Barolo? Time proved Currado to be right; his Barbera Scarrone has become one of the great wines from this variety, especially Vietti's "Vigna Vecchia" bottling, made from the oldest vines in Scarrone.

Today, Alfredo's 41-year-old son, Luca Currado, continues making some of the best Barolos and Barberas around. Vietti has other wines, including a very good Barbaresco and Dolcetto, but Barolo and Barbera are its stars. For me, Vietti's two great Barolos are its single-vineyard Rocche and the Villero Riserva, produced in superior vintages. Vietti's 2006 Barolo Rocche is the current vintage; it's a powerful long-lived wine that needs another eight to ten years to mature. The 2006 Vietti Villero Riserva has not yet been released; only small quantities of the Villero are made.

Probably because Alfredo and Luca Currado have always given Barbera the respect it deserves, not treating it as a second-class citizen, Vietti is regarded as one of the elite—if not the best—producers of Barbera. Vietti's two under \$20 Barberas, Barbera d'Alba Tre Vigne and Barbera d'Asti Tre Vigne, always sell out rather quickly. They are made with just a touch of oak aging. I am currently enjoying the 2007 Vietti Barbera d'Asti Tre Vigne; 2008 is the current vintage.

For a truly sublime Barbera experience, try one of Vietti's single-vineyard Barberas: Barbera d'Asti La Crena (my favorite)—the 2006 is currently retailing for about \$45; Barbera d'Alba Scarrone—2006/2007 about \$40 to \$45; and the exquisite Barbera d'Alba Scarrone "Vigna Vecchia"—2006/2007 about \$80 to \$85. Only small quantities of the Vigna Vecchia are made.

Vietti is the only winery that owns vineyards in all eleven Barolo-producing communes. Alfredo Currado was a firm believer in owning and controlling his own vineyards. Fortunately for all of us Piedmontese wine lovers, Luca Currado is following in Alfredo's footsteps admirably, making Vietti a name to look for when choosing a great Barolo or Barbera.

