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August 15, 2011

Barbera: I Knew It When

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

OH, me. Oh, barbera. Are we growing old together? My once youthful scruff now comes in gray, while you, Giacomo Conterno Barbera d'Alba, who sustained me in my graduate-school days at \$8 a bottle, cost \$50 now!

Inevitable, of course — I mean the graying. But \$50 for barbera, what can this signify?

Partly, I suppose, the price indicates that more people appreciate this once-humble wine. More important, though, it demonstrates how the estimation of Giacomo Conterno as a great producer has risen spectacularly in 30 years, as has the worldwide thirst for Barolo, Conterno's primary stock in trade. Just as an unassuming little Bourgogne rouge made by an exalted vigneron costs as much as another Burgundy producer's premier cru, so have the prices risen for barberas from top Barolo and Barbaresco producers.

In the Langhe region of the Piedmont, in northwestern Italy, barbera largely remains the little brother to nebbiolo, the grape of Barolo and Barbaresco. Around Alba, prime Barolo country, nebbiolo hogs most of the best vineyard sites. Barbera must settle for leftovers, some choicer than others. This was the natural order of things. Barolos sold for big bucks and were socked away to age, and age, and age. Barberas were bottled for immediate pleasure, were sold cheap and were opened at dinner.

That's how it was when I was first developing a taste for wine. Those memorable, and inexpensive, bottles of Conterno captured me with their gorgeous, juicy, yet bitter red fruit that danced a tightrope between sweet and savory, propelled along by an energetic, vivacious

acidity. For me, it was an easy-to-swallow lesson in how wine could be both pleasurable and thought-provoking, while performing its basic function of making food taste better.

Barberas from the hilly Asti region to the northeast of the Langhe would seem to have it a little easier than their Alba siblings. Nebbiolo is not grown so much around Asti, so barbera gets the best vineyard sites. Indeed, in the 1980s Braida di Giacomo Bologna, a producer of Barbera d'Asti, pioneered the aging of single-vineyard barberas in barrels of new French oak, winning critical acclaim and raising prices accordingly.

Braida's success inspired other producers to age their wines in new oak, often with unfortunate results. The lively immediacy of this honest wine often ended up buried beneath vanilla and chocolate cheesecake, wiping away any trace of regional identity.

Nonetheless, my affection for barberas remains both sentimental and real. To check in on barberas currently in the marketplace, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles, 14 from Alba, 6 from Asti. Indeed, the tasting confirmed our belief that top Barolo and Barbaresco producers tend also to make the best barberas, at prices that reflect the esteem in which they are held.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Lacey Burke, a sommelier at Del Posto, and Levi Dalton, a sommelier at Bar Boulud.

All of us, I think, came away with the feeling that barbera has settled into a more confident period after a prolonged, awkward battle with its oak issues. While some wines were indeed marked and even marred by oak, we found much less of it than we had feared. Perhaps, as with Barolo, producers are using oak in subtler ways? Or maybe, as Levi suggested, our sample was not entirely representative.

In any case, we had bigger issues than oak: namely, balance. The structure in barbera comes from its buzz-saw acidity, which keeps it fresh and cuts through rich fatty foods. If the acidity is out of whack, barbera can be unpleasantly aggressive, like heartburn in a glass.

Other issues with balance emerged as well. The 2008 vintage of my old favorite, the now \$50 Giacomo Conterno Barbera d'Alba, still showed robust fruit and mineral flavors, but something seemed disjointed. It was a bit sweet and a little hot, from high alcohol.

We had no such problems with our top wines. Our No. 1, the 2006 Vietti Barbera d'Asti La

Crena (another \$50 barbera) was gorgeous: zesty and energetic as barbera ought to be, with lovely flavors of red fruit and earth. Our No. 2, the 2008 Bartolo Mascarello Barbera d'Alba, a \$45 bottle, was beautifully balanced on that knife's edge between sweet fruit and mouthwatering acidity, the tension keeping the wine lively.

Our No. 3 wine, the 2008 Barbera d'Alba from Bruno Giacosa, was by comparison downright cheap at \$30. It was what Levi called "real-deal barbera," with that pull between sweet and bitter that exemplifies many good Italian wines but is impossible to imagine in, say, a French wine.

By contrast with our top three, our No. 4 bottle, the 2008 Michele Chiarlo Barbera d'Asti Le Orme, really was inexpensive at \$13. It's a wine reminiscent of the simple barberas of yore, fermented and aged in big, old oak barrels and offering direct, uncomplicated pleasure. Year in and year out this wine is a good value.

Of the 13 Barberas d'Alba, 6 made our top 10, as did 4 of the 7 Barberas d'Asti. One that did not was the 2007 Bricco dell'Uccellone from Braida. Aside from being the most expensive at \$65, the wine was powerful, hot and a bit clunky at 15.5 percent alcohol. It was not oaky, though.

Are differences between the Asti and Alba barberas discernible? Levi, along with many producers, says the Barberas d'Alba tend to be plusher and fruitier while the Barberas d'Asti are tauter in texture. Honestly, with so many variables in the vineyard and cellar, it's very hard to tell the difference.

Barbera remains a good friend, even if I don't see as much of it as I once did. My gray beard is just temporary. High prices for barbera, I'm afraid, are here to stay.

Vietti Barbera d'Asti, \$50, ***

La Crena 2006

Ripe, energetic and tangy, with lively flavors of fruit and earth. (Dalla Terra, Napa, Calif.)

Bartolo Mascarello Barbera d'Alba, \$45, ***

San Lorenzo 2008

Zesty and beautifully balanced with subtle, savory fruit and smoke flavors. (Robert Chadderdon Selections, New York)

Bruno Giacosa Barbera d'Alba, \$30, ** ½
2008

Classic barbera, slightly bitter and tensely balanced between sweet and savory. (Leonardo LoCascio Selections/Winebow, New York)

BEST VALUE

Michele Chiarlo Barbera d'Asti, \$13, ** ½
Le Orme 2008

Densely textured yet understated with floral aromas and flavors of purple fruit. (Kobrand, New York)

Cigliuti Barbera d'Alba, \$24, ** ½
Compass 2008

Lingering fruit and floral flavors with a touch of oak. (David Vincent Selection, New York)

Elio Grasso Barbera d'Alba, \$35, ** ½
Vigna Martina 2008

Straightforward and savory with earthy fruit flavors and a little oak. (Martin Scott Wines, Lake Success, N.Y.)

Vietti Barbera d'Asti, \$22, ** ½
Tre Vigne 2008

Pleasing, long-lasting flavors of plums and spices. (Dalla Terra)

Giacomo Conterno Barbera d'Alba, \$50, **
Cascina Francia 2008

Brash, spicy flavors of fruit and minerals, but slightly unbalanced. (Polaner Selections, Mount. Kisco, N.Y.)

Coppo Barbera d'Asti, \$19, **
Camp du Rouss 2007

Direct and sprightly with earthy, floral flavors. (Leonardo LoCascio Selections/Winebow)

Pio Cesare Barbera d'Alba, \$25, **
2008

Silky texture and flavors of black fruit, but oakiness is overbearing. (Maisons Marques et Domaines, Oakland, Calif.)