

Tasting barbera wines

By ERIC ASIMOV, *The New York Times*

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 Braidia 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.

Braidia's 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, six 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

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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.

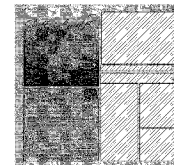
While some wines were indeed marked and even marred by oak, we found much less of it than we had feared. Perhaps, as with barolo, producers are using oak in subtler ways? Or maybe, as Levi suggested, our sample was not entirely representative.

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.

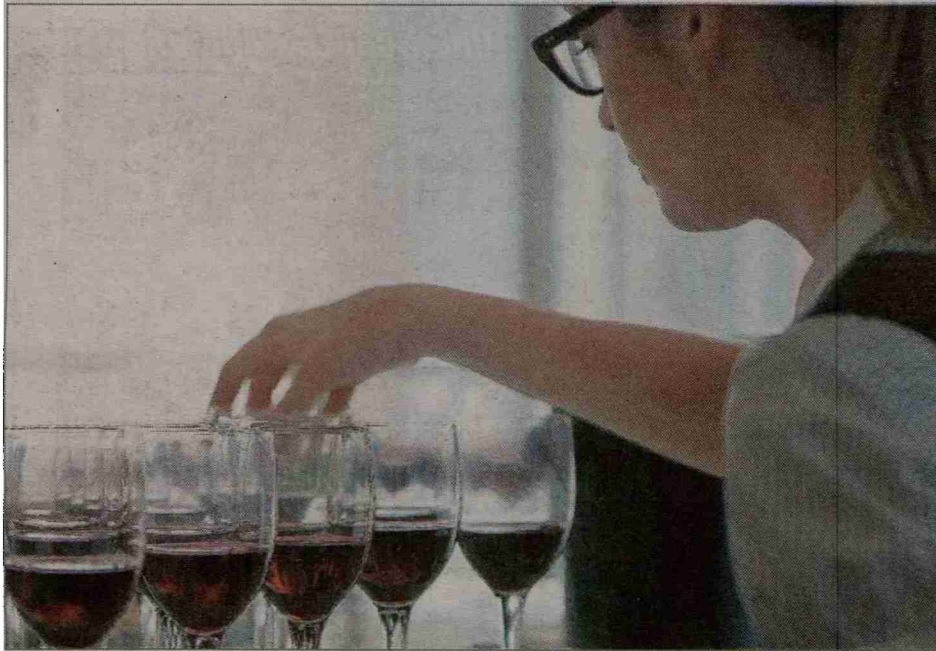
By contrast with our top three, our No. 4 bottle, the 2008 Michele Chiarlo Barbera d'Asti Le Orme, really was inexpensive at \$13. It's a wine reminiscent of the simple barberas of yore, fermented and aged in big, old oak barrels and offering direct, uncomplicated pleasure. Year in and year out this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



Glasses of barbera wines are straightened before a tasting panel in New York. Once the cheaper sibling of barolo and barbaresco, barbera wines have improved in quality and increased in price. **NEW YORK TIMES / TONY CENICOLA**