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Tasting Room

## The Luke Wilson of Wine, Not Quite the Leading Grape

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Ray Isle Illustration by Kathryn Rathke

It's rare that one family will tolerate two stars. Think about it—Alec Baldwin? Definitely a star. Other Baldwins? Sort of famous, but just not quite real stars. Ditto Owen Wilson and Luke Wilson. Luke, excellent actor, really appealing on-screen, but just doesn't quite have the particular audience-drawing whatever-it-is-ness that his oddly nosed older brother has. Not fair, but hard to argue with.

The same is pretty much true of wine regions. Usually, one grape gets to be the star. The others may have nice careers, may produce really charming wine, but they never quite get the acclaim that the leading variety does. Napa Valley, for instance, produces a lot of very good Merlot, Petite Sirah, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc—but Cabernet Sauvignon is without doubt the leading grape there.

The thing is, you don't always want to hang out with the star. This crossed my mind recently when I was in Piedmont, in Italy, after tasting an ocean (or at least a small lake) of Barolos and Barbarescos, great wines made from the Nebbiolo grape, complex and long-aging (and also pricey). For lunch, though, I often found myself ordering Barbera.

Barbera, while less famous and less regal than Nebbiolo, is a charming grape. It produces an ideal lunch wine, too, by which I mean it tends not to be high in tannins or alcohol. And regarding meals in general, its bright berry-like flavor and brisk acidity make it an ideal partner for all kinds of food. A great Barbera isn't a lesser wine compared with a great Nebbiolo; it just plays a different role or serves a different purpose. In a way, rather than demand that you admire it, it simply asks that you drink it: no more than that, and no less. And that's enough.

**2010 Fontanafredda Briccotondo Barbera (\$12)** A perennial steal, Fontanafredda's lightly spicy, ruby-hued Briccotondo bottling is hard to resist.

**2010 Michele Chiarlo Le Orme Barbera d'Asti (\$12)** Juicy, full of flavor and impressively versatile at the table, Chiarlo's bottling is an ideal dinner-party pour.

**2009 Boroli Quattro Fratelli Barbera d'Alba (\$15)** Boroli's basic Barbera (they have a more expensive single-vineyard one as well) has classic varietal notes of blackberries and raspberries, and a long gentle finish.

**2010 Vietti Tre Vigne Barbera d'Asti (\$16)** One of the top producers in Piedmont, Vietti makes two Tre Vigne Barberas, one from vineyards near Asti, and the other from Alba. The Asti wine is the lighter and more graceful of the two.

**2010 G.D. Vajra Barbera d'Alba (\$22)** More delicate in style but beautifully complex, this perfumed red from a renowned Barolo producer is worth the slightly steeper price.