

YOUR NEXT LESSON: BARBERA

A Refreshing Partner

THE PIEDMONT REGION of northwestern Italy is best known for its Barolos and Barbarescos, magnificent wines made of the nebbiolo grape. But these wines, which can age for decades and touch both the head and the heart, are generally saved for special occasions.

For everyday, most people in the region turn to easier, cheaper, more accessible red wines like dolcetto and barbera. Among their many virtues, these wines are great with food. Barbera, especially, with its bracing acidity, is a brilliant accompaniment, refreshing the mouth and stimulating the appetite.

Next up in Wine School, we'll take a closer look at barbera; in particular, the barberas from Alba and Asti, the two leading regions for barbera. I have a sentimental attachment to barbera. Back when I was a graduate student living on a tight budget, a modest \$8 splurge on a Barbera d'Alba from a great producer, Giacomo Conterno, opened my eyes to the ways that wine could be more than a background accompaniment to a meal.

Conterno is one of the great Barolo producers in the Alba area. Most of them also grow barbera; the grapes dovetail well. The barbera grape ripens earlier than nebbiolo, which gets pride of place in the sunniest parts of the vineyard. Barbera generally occupies the areas where nebbiolo won't thrive. In the Asti region, which is not in the Barolo zone, barbera often gets the best sites. You would think this would make Barbera d'Asti superior to Barbera d'Alba, but that's not necessarily true.

Here are the three wines I recommend:



TONY CENCOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alessandro e Gian Natale Fantino Barbera d'Alba Superiore
 Cascina Dardi 2013
 Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif. \$20

Vietti Barbera d'Asti Tre Vigne 2013 (Della Terra, Napa, Calif.) \$16

Bruno Giacosa Barbera d'Alba 2013 (Folio Fine)
 Wine Partners, Napa, Calif. \$26

If you can't find these, I would try any barbera that comes from a good Barolo producer, though that \$8 Giacomo Conterno Barbera d'Alba is now about \$60. So is the wonderful Barbera d'Alba from Bartolo Mascarello. But other bottles are more reasonable, including the Giacosa, whose Barolos and Barbarescos are priced on a level with Conternos and Mascarellos. Less expensive names to look for include Oddero, Prunotto, Coppo, Burlotto, Pio Cesare, Luigi Pira and G. D. Vajra. Barberas are versatile partners with food. They are great with pizza, naturally, but also with all manner of meat sauces and with many grilled meats. If you're throwing burgers or sausages onto the grill, get out the barbera.

Serve cool, with maybe a 20- to 30-minute spell in the fridge.

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Characteristics to Consider

Aromas

Please describe.

Acidity

Barbera is known for its high level of acidity and low level of tannins. Can you tell a difference from other red wines?

Food

Is barbera as versatile with food as its reputation suggests?

