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Barbera: I Knew It When

By Eric Asimov

[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. 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.**



Vietti Barbera d'Asti, \$50, * La Crena 2006**

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



BEST VALUE Vietti Barbera d'Asti, \$18, ** 1/2 Tre Vigne 2008

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