

Barbera, the Cinderella of Italian Reds

By Jay McInerney



Just outside the walls of the turreted medieval castle that crowns this hilltop village is the gate to the Vietti winery, which clings to the steep hillside. Spreading out below the compound on all sides are vineyards, which produce some of the most coveted of Barolos.

Made from the difficult Nebbiolo grape in villages in the Piedmont region of

northwest Italy, Barolo has been known since the 19th century as "the king of wines, and the wine of kings," thanks in part to its association with the House of Savoy. Luca Currado, whose family has grown grapes here for centuries, directs my attention to an anomaly on the hillside, an area with slightly darker, redder leaves. "That's Barbera," he says. "My secret Barbera vineyard."

Barbera is a grape that is usually planted on less expensive real estate, and it is generally thought of as a less noble variety, producing table wine for the region. "Barbera was the wine of the people," Mr. Currado explains. Thanks to Vietti and a few other determined producers, Barbera has become a star in recent years.

When Luca joined the family winery, his father wouldn't let him near the Nebbiolo. The young winemaker worked instead with Barbera from family holdings outside the Barolo appellation. The more he worked with Barbera, the more he became convinced of its potential, given the right sites and restricted yields. When a patch of Vietti vines in the grand cru region of Castiglione required replanting, Luca took charge of the project, secretly replacing the Nebbiolo vines with Barbera. Eventually some of the neighbors noticed. "They were laughing," he says. "They went to my father and asked why we'd planted Barbera in prime Barolo land. My father was pissed off." But, eventually he seems to have forgiven Luca on the basis of the quality of the wine from those rogue vines.

In fact there was a precedent for Luca's experiment. His great-grandfather went to America, becoming an engineer, after his older brother inherited the winery. (He worked on the Sumner Tunnel in Boston among other public-works projects.) When the elder brother died, he returned to Italy to run the family business. He planted a small patch of Barbera on the hill beneath the house for his personal consumption, out of nostalgia for the table wine of his youth. These vines have survived to the present, although many of the Vietti vineyards were confiscated by the Fascist authorities when it was discovered that the family was supporting and sheltering the Partisans.

The wines produced by these very old vines, planted in 1932, are a testament to the potential of Barbera planted in ideal sites. A 1990 Vietti Scarrone Vigna Vecchia (old vine), which Mr. Currado opened for me at the winery alongside a flight of Barolos, pretty much stole the show, even as it demonstrated a family resemblance with its tar, leather and mushroom notes. Like Mr. Currado himself, who wore a very well-tailored bespoke shirt over dirty jeans and work boots, it seemed to oscillate between sophistication and rusticity.

Other makers have followed the examples of Bologna and Vietti, planting the grape in better real estate and giving it the spa treatment in the cellar, creating premium barrel-aged examples in both Asti and Alba. According to Mr. Currado, the Barberas of Alba are typically more feminine and sophisticated—designated as La Barbera d'Alba—while the Astis are more powerful and bold, and therefore referred to as Il Barbera d'Asti. He likens Asti to Angelina Jolie and Alba to Grace Kelly.

Undoubtedly he knows whereof he speaks, although winemaker styles can sometimes trump terrain. Some 30 years after Mr. Bologna started experimenting with French oak barrels there are many styles of Barbera, including simple table wines meant to be consumed early. In this category, price is a reliable indicator of quality and ageability. Wines in the \$15-to-\$20 range should be easy to appreciate on release tossed back with a pizza or a simple pasta. There are Barbera specialists, like Bologna and Hilberg-Pasquero. But some of the best come from makers of Barolo and Barbaresco, like Vietti, Giuseppe Mascarello, Sandrone, Giacomo Conterno and La Spinetta.

It's a great wine to keep in mind when you pick up the list at an Italian restaurant. Even when it is softened with barrel aging, Barbera is relatively acidic for a red, which makes it the ideal companion for many dishes, including those made with tomatoes. Mr. Currado sees it as a bridge between New World and Old World reds:

"It's sexy but earthy," he says. "Barolo is more reserved and severe." And while Barolo can take years and even decades to mellow out and become palatable, even the most sophisticated Barbera is approachable—and downright convivial—in its youth.



2007 Vietti Barbera d'Alba Tre Vigne

Dried fruit on the nose with a nice mouthful of red-berry fruit in the glass. This is a great pizza or pasta wine. Buy it by the case.