

The world's best wine magazine

Decanter

Italy 2019



Your guide to what's new
and exciting in Italian wine

Reimagining BARBERA

In the right hands, Piedmont's most planted red variety can be a serious contender, finds Tom Hyland

BARBERA IS THE perfect match for simple foods at Piedmont trattoria or osteria, but it's not just the restaurant-going locals that have overlooked this grape – leading vintners in the region have regularly disparaged it too. Early in his career, Luca Currado, winemaker at Vietti, remembers his father telling him that Barbera was a good way of honing his skills, as few would even notice if he spoiled what was considered a lowly table wine. 'Work on Barbera, so you can ruin your first wine,' he

quipped, only half-joking. But times are changing: producers in several districts in the region now treat Barbera with a great deal more reverence, as they craft 'serious' versions of this wine worthy of cellaring.

Piedmont's most planted variety remains the ideal partner for a humble lunch, especially when the antipasti consists of local salumi. Barbera's fresh acidity cuts right through the fat of meats such as these, while its soft tannins make the wine instantly

Below: Michele Chiarlo's beautiful Tenuta La Court estate is a single 20ha parcel across two hills within the Nizza DOCG



approachable. Many examples are fermented and aged in stainless steel, which highlights the plummy characteristics of the variety, while other offerings, aged in large wooden casks, are more rustic in nature (ideal for strongly flavoured pastas). But the basic concept of Barbera being an everyday staple in the region is one that will continue as long as producers work with the grape.

Local rivalry

In the late 1970s and early '80s, a small group of Asti-based producers believed that Barbera offered greater potential. This belief may have originated in a feeling of insecurity: Asti lacked the fame of the neighbouring province of Alba, where the Nebbiolo grape flourished in Barolo and Barbaresco. The best sites in Asti were less suitable for the production of ageworthy Nebbiolo, so growers settled upon Barbera as their grape of choice. While it made viticultural sense, the best versions of Barbera failed to capture the grandeur – and the lofty ratings – of the finest Nebbiolo offerings.

Photograph: Alessandro Belluscio

The late Giacomo Bologna was one of the most influential in elevating the image of Barbera. In the small village of Rocchetta Tanaro, the family's Braida estate produced just one style of Barbera until the late 1970s – a frizzante named La Monella. His daughter Raffaella, who currently manages Braida with her brother Giuseppe, notes that this wine is still produced, and loved by area residents.

'It is a contemporary wine with historic roots and is still very popular in Piedmont as a wine that is fun and delicious, especially when paired with traditional rustic foods such as fried anchovies or bollito misto.'

Breaking the mould

Bologna decided he could produce wines of 'greater longevity, structure and elegance'. After years of experimentation, in 1984 he released a single-vineyard 1982 Barbera named Bricco dell'Uccellone. The fruit was harvested more than a week later than usual and matured in oak barriques rather than large casks, marking a radical departure – ➤



Tom Hyland is a Chicago-based wine writer and educator with a particular interest in Italian wines. He is the author of The Wines and Foods of Piemonte (CreateSpace, 2017)



it divided opinion within the winemaking community, recalls Raffaella: 'It was controversial around Italy. Winemakers were split 50/50 traditionalist versus revolutionary.'

The wine received critical acclaim from the wine press and Bologna soon introduced another single-vineyard Barbera, Bricco della Bigotta, which was followed up with a super-ripe style, Ai Suma. More than 35 years since the first Bricco dell'Uccellone, Braida remains one of most accomplished Barbera producers, and Giacomo Bologna's legacy will remain intrinsically linked with this variety.

It wasn't long before other Asti producers sought to emulate Bologna's success with Barbera, combining late-picked grapes and maturation in small oak barrels. Late harvesting posed no problem for Barbera due to its naturally high acidity levels, but many producers were over-zealous with oak, using a high percentage (more than 50%) of small new oak barrels for their new releases. This often resulted in wines that may have offered flash and sizzle early on, but lacked harmony and finesse, soon drying out.

While much attention is paid to Barbera from Asti, there is important work being undertaken in Alba. In the village of Vergne, above the town of Barolo, lies the Viberti estate. Winemaker Claudio Viberti produces several Barbera wines, and has introduced higher density planting since 2006 in an effort to make more intense and complex wines. He also employs shorter pruning which, he claims, 'forces the vines to produce fewer bunches of grapes', and has adopted new clones that result in lower vigour. He matures the wines in the same 5,000-litre casks that he uses for Barolo, and the result of this oak regime in combination with his meticulous viticulture is a serious Piedmont red. A single sip of one his Bricco Airolì wines should be enough to convince any sceptics of Barbera's credentials.



Alberto (left), Michele and Stefano Chiarlo

Best of Barbera: Nizza DOCG

In a sign of the times, Barbera's rising star has led to the creation of a tightly controlled denominazione dedicated to the variety. The Nizza DOCG could perhaps be seen as the culmination of Giacomo Bologna's early work, seeking the perfect place for Barbera in the Asti province.

'Nizza is the grand cru of Barbera,' says Stefano Chiarlo, winemaker at his father's eponymous estate Michele Chiarlo. 'In the future, it will be the third Piedmont appellation, with Barolo and Barbaresco, for ageworthy reds.'

At their best, the wines made under the Nizza banner are powerful. Despite the variety's lack of tannin, these wines have the stuffing and structure to age for more than a decade. That's likely down to tight boundaries and stringent regulations to qualify for the designation. High-density planting and low yields are a must in the vineyard, and the wines must be matured for 18 months, six of which must be in barrel. Most Nizza wines are matured in small oak, but the woody flavours are generally well integrated.

Since 2014, the Barbera d'Asti Superiore Nizza DOCG status has been replaced by Nizza Superiore DOCG, meaning the grape variety does not even have to be listed on the label. In effect, the lawmakers and wine producers hope that the word Nizza will become synonymous with quality Barbera, just as Barolo's identity is infused with Nebbiolo.



Above: Raffaella Bologna of the Braida estate at Rocchetta Tanaro in Asti (wines pictured left)

Visionary producers

It is a short drive to the city of Alba where Pio Boffa, proprietor of Pio Cesare, sings the praises of Barbera, while emphasising the importance of site. 'Our Barbera is planted in top vineyard locations – in both the Barolo and Barbaresco appellations – in order to produce a very serious and elegant wine.'

His signature Barbera, Fides, is based on a single-clone vineyard in Serralunga d'Alba, which Boffa planted with his father in 1991. Fides is Latin for faith, which the Boffas placed in Barbera rather than the more respected and more lucrative Nebbiolo grape. While the 2015 vintage is sophisticated, silken and ageworthy, the vineyard has since succumbed to disease. From the 2017, Fides will be sourced entirely from a vineyard in the neighbouring Monforte d'Alba commune. Boffa believes the wine will be just as good, 'if not more refined'.

Clearly the path ahead for Barbera is now paved, thanks to the efforts of visionary >

producers across Piedmont. The variety has come a long way from its role as a simple osteria wine, as examples from Nizza (*see box, p8*) and beyond offer complexity and ageing potential. Admittedly, there is still work to be done to maintain the momentum generated by

Bologna and other trailblazers, but there is a buzz of positivity, as Boffa concludes: 'The quality of Barbera has grown a lot in the last 25 years. All the producers of our region are emphasising the quality and authenticity of the grape. We predict it has a great future.' **D**

Hyland's 10: top-quality Barbera from Piedmont

① Pio Cesare, Fides, Barbera d'Alba 2015 94

£40 Laytons, Whole Foods Market

Ideal ripeness, good acidity, moderate tannins and beautiful spicy notes of coriander and cardamom, with blackberry, black plum and grilled meat notes. Subtle oak provides an overall harmony and superb varietal character. **Drink** 2019-2026 **Alc** 14.5%

② Braida, Bricco dell'Uccellone, Barbera d'Asti 2015 93

£55 Sommelier's Choice

A rather ripe example, characteristic of this vintage. A little flashy and opulent, yet well balanced with powerful aromatics reminiscent of black plum, molasses, clove and tar. Fine, medium-weight tannins. **Drink** 2019-2026 **Alc** 15%

Michele Chiarlo, La Court, Barbera d'Asti Superiore Nizza 2013 92

£36.95-£45 Asset Wines, Exel, Great Wines Direct, Hallgarten & Novum

Expressive and flavourful with aromas of red and black cherry, coffee bean and a hint of balsamic. It is ripe and powerful,

balanced by good acidity with woody notes and a slight bitter finish. Needs more time in bottle. **Drink** 2020-2026 **Alc** 14%

③ Giovanni Viberti, Bricco Airoli, Barbera d'Alba Superiore 2015 92

£14.96 The Vintner

Beautifully made, has true varietal character offering aromas of cherry, blueberry, chocolate and sun-dried tomato with subtle oak notes. Excellent ripeness balanced by fresh acidity. Great value. **Drink** 2019-2024 **Alc** 14%

④ Vietti, Scarrone, Barbera d'Alba 2016 91

£36.40 Walker & Wodehouse

A more opulent style than most 2016 Barberas: very ripe blackberry, black plum and anis aromas, medium-full with a richly concentrated mid-palate, ample oak and notable persistence. Needs a lot more time. **Drink** 2020-2026 **Alc** 15%

Marina Coppi, Sant'Andrea, Colli Tortonesi Barbera 2016 90

£20.60-£21.99 Carruthers & Kent, Exel, Hedonism, Liberty Wines, The Wine Reserve

This bright, purple-hued Barbera is upfront with bright and juicy red plum, sour cherry and purple orchid. Medium to full in body with zesty acidity, modest tannins and very good persistence. **Drink** 2019-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

⑤ Coppo, Pomorosso, Barbera d'Asti 2015 90

£73.66 Mondial

A ripe, forward style. Deeply coloured with rich aromas of dark chocolate, blackberry and incense. Excellent persistence with distinct notes of sage and oregano lingering. While it is a bit disjointed now, time will round out its rough edges. **Drink** 2020-2026 **Alc** 15%

Braida, La Monella, Barbera del Monferrato Frizzante 2017 89

£18.50 Sommelier's Choice

An unoaked, zesty style of slightly sparkling Barbera with lively acidity. Expect a deep purple hue in the glass with a lively froth and appealing aromas of raspberry, black plum and violets. Ultra delicious! **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 14%

Scarpa, Casa Scarpa, Barbera d'Asti 2014 88

N/A UK www.scarpawine.com

A textbook unoaked Asti Barbera: medium-bodied with lively acidity and bright, ripe black fruit, plum and purple orchid perfume. Straightforward and rather tasty. **Drink** 2019-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

Vietti, Tre Vigne, Barbera d'Asti 2016 88

£21.50-£22 The Solent Cellar, Walker & Wodehouse

Deeply coloured, ripe and forward with aromas of black plum, cocoa powder, raisin and purple iris. Masses of ripe fruit, modest tannins and fresh acidity. Chocolate and subtle black spice lingers on the finish. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 14%

