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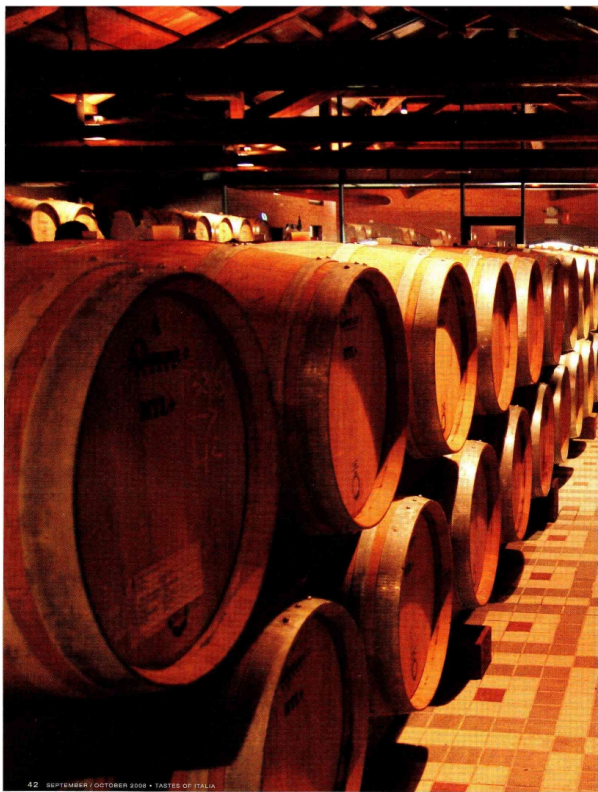
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A Piedmont Fable

A humble little grape works hard, is ignored for years, but finally gets noticed and has a chance to impress at the wine-tasters ball.

Text and photography by Patricia Thomson

If Cinderella were a grape, the story would go something like this: Once upon a time, a grape named Barbera lived in the hills of Piedmont among kings and marchesi. She was a rustic, peasant grape, but an excellent worker. While her pampered, needy sibling Nebbiolo got the very best vineyard plots—southern slopes where he could bask in the sun, slowly ripening to make regal Barolo wine—Barbera produced bounteous fruit even on the poorest parcels of land. And so, this lowly native was planted everywhere. Her wines were simple, but they appeared on farmers' tables throughout the land. Truth be told, they were often thin, pale, and harsh, but the farmers drank them anyway.

One day, Prince Charming came along. Giacomo Bologna, from the village of Rocchetta Tanaro near Asti, saw a potential in Barbera that others did not. He began to give her tender loving care: the best vineyards, all the necessary pruning, sometimes even a quiet rest in French barrique. The results were dramatic. Barbera became grand and luscious, offering intense fruit, lively acidity without harshness, and ample structure. Barbera began to compete on the world stage.

Today, Barbera is one of the stars of Piedmont. It's the region's most widely planted red grape, and is second only to Sangiovese in Italy overall. Reliable, sturdy, and adaptable, Barbera was even more ubiquitous a few generations ago, after phylloxera ravaged Piedmont's vineyards in the late 1800s and farmers turned to this workhorse grape to help them back on their feet.

Until recent decades, however, Barbera was thin and harsh, clobbering the palate

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with high acidity, its dominating feature. While it's precisely this zippiness that makes barbera such a great food wine, it needs taming.

Giacomo Bologna had grown up on this rustic style of barbera. After he took over his grandfather's vineyard and began bottling in 1962 under his nickname 'Braida', he traveled abroad to learn more about winemaking. (This in itself was a radical move, Piedmont then having a provincial farmers' mentality resistant to change.) In 1970 he went to Burgundy with Angelo Gaja, a pioneering winemaker from Barbaresco. In the land of pinot



THE BRAIDA vineyard, members of the Bologna winemaking family, a selection of European wines



noir, Bologna first encountered small French oak barrels, called barrique.

But it was a trip to California in 1982 that proved the turning point. California then had 24,000 acres of barbera grown by Mondavi, Gallo, and other Italian-American winemakers. Tasting their barberas, Bologna was stunned; they were riper, smoother, and undeniably better than Piedmont's own. This owed to two factors: Sourced in the hot Central Valley, these barberas had the advantage of climate. The grapes were picked when fully ripe, resulting in lush fruit and subdued acidity. In contrast, many of Piedmont's bulk producers harvested barbera during the mid-August festa, when vacationing employees from Fiat could moonlight as harvest workers. The grapes came in, ready or not.

Second, California wineries contained virtual forests of French oak. The lesson Bologna started learning in Burgundy sunk in: barrique could elevate barbera by softening its acidity, endowing it with tannins (naturally low in the grape), and adding a hint of vanilla, which harmonizes with barbera's dark fruit flavors as perfectly as



PLANTING BARBERA IN RESPECTED VINEYARDS WAS CONSIDERED SCANDALOUS. ALL THE FARMERS WERE STOPPING MY FATHER IN THE VILLAGE SAYING, 'YOUR SON IS CRAZY!' RECALLS LUCCA CURRADO.

blackberry jam goes with toast.

Initially, Bologna was flummoxed. "He phoned his wife and said, 'We have to sell the winery! I see hundreds, no thousands of barrique, and we have twenty! What am I going to do?'" says Norbert Reinisch, Braida's export director and husband of Raffaella Bologna, who has run the winery with her brother, Beppe, since their father's premature death in 1990. "For a couple of weeks, Giacomo didn't see any friends," Reinisch continues. "He was really thinking about the future." Bologna then bit the bullet, against everyone's advice. "He started to buy more and more barriques"—a costly venture—"and treat barbera like a noble variety, not a farmers' variety. He treated it like pinot noir. He was a big drinker of pinot from Burgundy; we still have lots of Romane Conti in our cellar from the 1970s," says Reinisch. Applying the lessons he learned abroad, "Giacomo started to reduce yields, especially in the old vineyards, which at that time were already 20 to 25 years old. He picked the grapes very late; he was usually the last to pick barbera in Piedmont. And he put the wine in oak barrels for aging—50 percent new barrique and 50 percent old—encouraged by Gaja to leave the wine there for quite a long time."

Barbera's transformation was fully realized when Bologna introduced Barbera d'Asti Bricco dell'Uccellone in 1982. This award-winner bears all the hallmarks of modern barbera: opaque ruby color, intense berry fruit backed by notes of vanilla and spice, and a full-bodied structure that benefits from a few years of aging.

While Bricco dell'Uccellone represents Cinderella decked out for the ball, there are simpler barberas for less dressy occasions. Braida alone makes five versions: In addition to Bricco dell'Uccellone, there's La Monella, a frizzante or lightly fizzy quaffer from the region of Monferrato; Montebona, a classic barbera aged in stainless steel; Bricco della Bigotta, a

more concentrated, oak-enhanced Barbera d'Asti from selected old vines; and Ai Suma, a riserva made only in the best years.

When shopping for barbera, there's no surefire way of knowing which style is in the bottle, but there are clues. Barbera del Monferrato is young, fizzy—and rarely imported. As for the rest, a simple barbera is going to have a simple label. If it says merely "Barbera d'Alba" or "Barbera d'Asti," this means the grapes were sourced from somewhere in the province of Alba or Asti. It also suggests the wine was aged in stainless steel, so it's likely to be fresh, fruity, and zippy—well suited for pizza, pasta, barbeque, and cheese.

If the name stretches on to include a cru or single vineyard, barbera's power moves up a notch. The grapes are likely to come from older vines and be meticulously selected, which means more concentrated flavors. It's also likely to have spent time in barrique. Coppo's Barbera d'Asti Pomorosso and La Spinetta's Barbera d'Asti Superior Bionzo are two knockout examples. These warrant more elegant dishes, like creamy risotto with porcini or roasted pork loin.

Not all powerhouse barberas come from Asti, however. A half-hour down the road is Alba and the Langhe region, famous for its Barolo and Barbaresco. Here barbera's pioneer was Vietti, in the town of Castiglione Falletto. After World War I, Mario Vietti planted a small parcel of barbera smack in the middle of a Barolo cru.

"It was a scandal for the time," said his grandson Lucca Currado on GrapeRadio.com. Years later, after Currado completed enology school and was entrusted with Vietti's barbera production, the young winemaker expanded those plantings within the Scarrone cru. "That was another huge scandal," he says. "All the farmers were stopping my father in the village saying, 'Your son is crazy! He wants to destroy your estate! Why are

you planting barbera in a top vineyard?'"

As Currado recalls, "At the beginning, it was not easy to present barbera like this. But my family is known to be very determined. We continued, and now barbera is considered one of the best wines—and Scarrone is an incredible barbera."

Indeed it is. Lucky for us, the Cinderella of Piedmont now has many devoted princes: In addition to those above, there's Prunotto, Michele Chiarlo, Elio Altare, Renato Ratti, Fratelli Revello, G.D. Vajra...the list goes on.

The best part is, no matter how Cinderella is dressed—whether in her finest or in casual attire—she's always a superb dinner companion.

A BARBERA SAMPLER

Michele Chiarlo, Barbera d'Asti Superiore Le Orme; \$13 - A great everyday wine that's a pure expression of Barbera.

La Spinetta, Barbera d'Asti Ca' di Pian; \$25 - A smoother styled, full-bodied wine, with Bing cherry, blackberry, and a touch of vanilla.

Fratelli Revello, Barbera d'Alba Ciabot du Re; \$40 - Part of a new generation in Barolo, the Revello brothers also craft this luscious, single-vineyard Barbera.

Vietti, Barbera d'Alba Scarrone; \$42 - Powerful and seductive, this inky, modern-style Barbera is a "wow!" wine from a prized cru.

Giacomo Bologna/Braida, Barbera d'Asti Bricco dell'Uccellone; \$60 - The granddaddy of modern Barberas, which improves with some age.

Patricia Thomson is a wine journalist and president of La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.