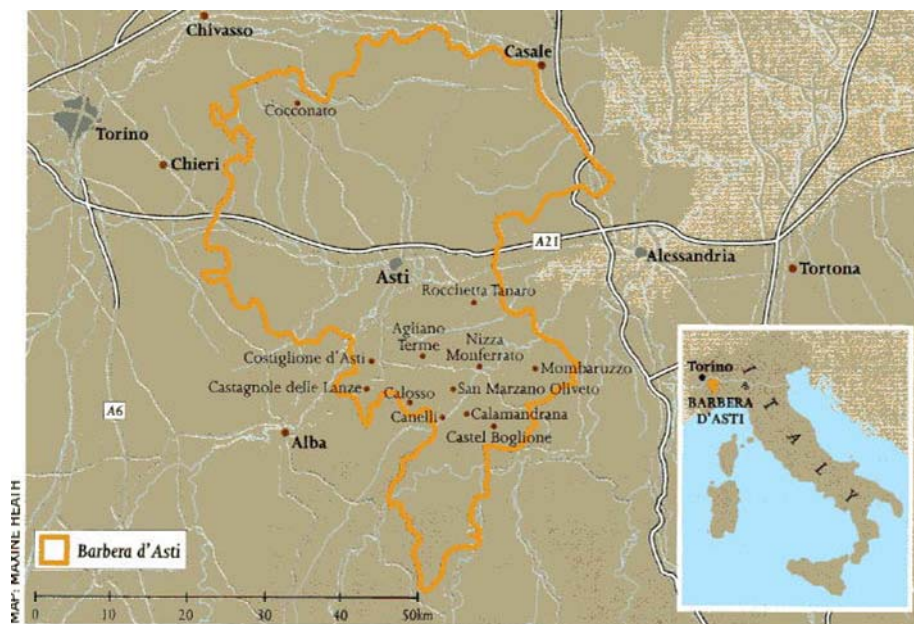


Guide to: BARBERA D'ASTI

Since the early 1980s Barbera has seen a huge leap in quality as producers have realized the potential of this delicious grape. STEPHEN BROOK reports on the Piedmont rising star.

Barbera is like the old provincial repertory actor who, in middle age, is recognized to have exceptional talent and becomes a major star. For decades Barbera quenched the thirst of north Italians. A prolific grape, it retains colour and alcohol even at high crop levels, delivering cheap quaffable wine. If its high natural acidity can be troublesome, it sinks into the background when the wine is consumed with the rich food of Piedmont. Many versions were produced with a light spritziness that transformed the acidic structure into what seemed like an invigorating tartness.

In the Alba region Barbera played second fiddle to Nebbiolo, but in the neighbouring Asti region, where Nebbiolo ripened less easily: Barbera took pride of place. It was Giacomo Bologna of the Braida estate who realized that Barbera could and should be taken



seriously. Traditionally, Barbera, like Nebbiolo, was aged in large Slavonian casks. Bologna reduced yields and aged the wines in barrique. The results, from 1982 onward, were sensational.

It was not the use of barriques as such that turned Barbera into a class act, but the reduction of yields. Bologna knew that a crop levels of 150hl/ha, barbera can deliver drinkable if coarse wine; but at 50hl/ha or less, it gives a wine of deep colour, floral aroma, a wealth of blackberry fruit on the palate, and depth and structure that allow the wine to age harmoniously. Bologna, and the many producers who followed his lead, also replaced the over-productive clones that had been planted in the 1960s

and 1970s. Better plant material, as well as more careful vinification, transformed Barbera.

Barbera d'Asti DOC covers most of the Asti region, so quality is inevitably variable. Growers who take it seriously and plant on the best south-facing slopes can make sensational wine. Sensible crop levels ensure the grapes ripen fully in most vintages, helping tame Barbera's high acidity: In the 1960s, acidity levels of a searing 10g/litre were common; today a good Barbera would have around 6,5g: the right level to keep it fresh and lively.

There's no stylistic consensus when it comes to Barbera: It can be light and frizzante, fruity and zesty, or so richly structured it can age for a decade or more (I'm still drinking top 1989s): If Nebbiolo is an intellectual's grape, Barbera is a hedonist's:

Above all, a good bottle should give abundant pleasure.

Decanter award ★★★★★

<p>■ Azienda Agricola Erede di Chiappone Armando, Superiore-Nizza, RU 2000 £11.40</p> <p>'Pronounced nose, smoky, gamey, intense. Really develops on the palate. Massive length – endless with the stuffing to really carry it along. Delicious. 5–10 years.' (MP) SeV</p> 	<p>■ Azienda Agricola La Spinetta, Superiore 2000 £9.95</p> <p>'Sophisticated, polished nose. Fruit ripe and black. Beautiful, complex, appealing palate. Integrated with hints of cinnamon, cherries, vanilla, minerals and tannins. Up to 10 years.' (AD) Wtd, WTr</p> 	<p>■ Azienda Agricola Scagliola, Superiore, Sansi 2000</p> <p>'Rich, dense, chocolatey nose, cloves. Rich but fresh and zesty, bright cherry fruit, sweet but not confectioned as it's backed by high acidity. Needs time, good length. 2–10 years.' (SBr)</p> <p>N/A UK. +39 014 185 3183</p> 
<p>■ Ca' del Matt, Tere Caude 2001 £9.95–11.95</p> <p>'Spicy fruitcake, quite exotic. Solid but melted tannins and chewy ripe fruit with good depth. Excellent. 2–5 years.' (GW) Lib</p> 	<p>■ Castello Calosso, Rodotiglia 1999 £24.99</p> <p>'Leather and spiciness – mature fruit, complex earth. Tannic, pungent and spicy. Liquorice, long, long length. Good balance. 2–10 years.' (LG)</p> <p>Orb</p> 	

THE FACTS

Vineyard area: 9.130
 Production: most of the province of ASTI; and parts of the province of Alessandria
 Growers: 6.800
 Production: 178.800hl
 Varietals: Barbera, plus up to 15% of other grapes, Freisa, Grignolino or Dolcetto
 Yield: maximum 58 hl/ha
 Regulations: minimum 12, any wine labeled Superiore must have 12,5, and at least one year aged in wood.