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# Ode to Barbera

It has come in for serious flack, but don't dismiss Barbera, which can produce great and complex wines in the right hands, says Stephen Brook - especially in Asti, where the grape variety is king



## BARBERA D'ASTI

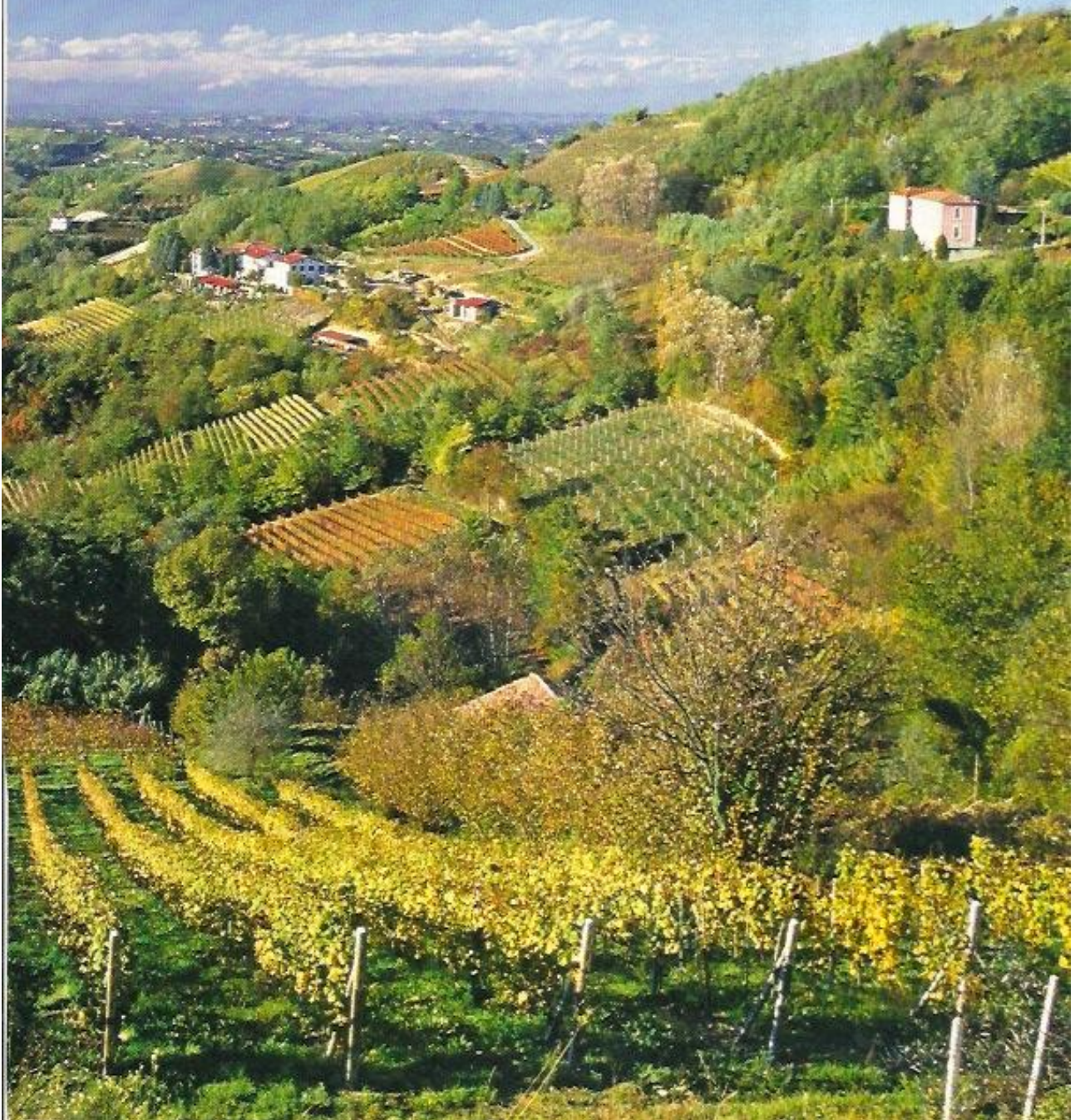
EVERY TWO YEARS the Barbera producers of Asti host the Barbera Meeting, a celebration of their wonderful grape variety. It's traditional for many of the journalists present to slate growers for a heavy-handed use of new oak and other misdemeanours. Sometimes they are right.

However, in 2010 some bloggers let rip. One of them wrote: 'Stinky feet marinating in barley... The incredible stench of trapped, humidified flesh... The fetid stink of horrid, diseased wood...' It gets worse. There were flaming rows as some writers

accused the producers, in effect, of ruining their own wines. This motivated me to come, again, to the defence of Barbera.

It was once a grape much abused: overcropped, over-acidic, weedy and astringent. It was meant to be a wine without pretensions for everyday drinking, yet certain producers were very much aware of its greater potential. The veteran producer of single-vineyard Barberas, Albiero Boffa, says of the bad old days: 'In the 1950s and 1960s Barbera was usually bottled with around 10 grams of acidity (today >

**In Asti, Piedmont, the king of grapes is Barbera. There is more clay in the soil here than in Alba, which suits Barbera well**



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Above: Giorgio Rivetti of La Spinetta chooses to use 'Superiore' on the label only for his top bottling

Fortunately the top estates usually produce a range of styles. Giuseppe Bologna at Braida produces five: Ai Suma is made from late-picked grapes, whereas La Monella is uncooled and slightly sparkling, ideal for some summer salami. The three single-vineyard wines are far more muscular – in 2009 they came in with 16% alcohol, not that I could detect it on the palate. Raffaella Bologna, Giuseppe's sister, says that other producers have similarly high alcohols but are less honest in their labelling.

At Cascina Castlèt there are four Barberas, from the aforementioned Passum, to a crisp, early drinking wine called Coj, Chiarlo, La Ghersa and, indeed, most serious producers pursue a similar policy.

Wines such as Braida's Ai Suma and La Ghersa's Munschae strive to impress, and for my taste these producers' middle-range wines show the best balance and drinkability. Braida's Bricco dell'Uccellone and Bigotta are fabulous wines of real complexity, and my favourite among the La Ghersa range is Vignassa. The first release was in 1989 and yields are tiny. Fermented with indigenous yeasts, the wine is aged in new oak for up to two years. In a vertical tasting of Vignassa, the 1989 (fermented without temperature control and never saw new oak) still had a perfumed

red-fruits nose, a taut structure, firm tannins and remarkable purity of fruit. So there is no doubt that these wines can age. Vintages tasted recently from the late 1990s and early 2000s, from Braida, are still magnificent and full of energy, even the late-picked Ai Suma, which despite its chocolatey tones, remains vibrant, sumptuous and harmonious.

The beauty of top Barbera is, however, that there is no necessity to cellar the wines. They can certainly be enjoyed within a year of bottling, but the best wines do develop more complexity and subtlety if you are prepared to give them eight or more years in bottle. If ageability is one of the criteria of a noble wine variety, than Barbera – at the top level only – certainly qualifies, despite those who scorn its alleged rusticity.

There are, of course, plenty of stewed, clumsy, tarry Barberas on the market, just as there are bland, overpriced Burgundies. But ignore the carping critics – that doesn't detract from the quality and versatility of the best wines, which are worth seeking out. **D**

Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to *Decanter* for 17 years

### Brook's recommended Barbera d'Asti



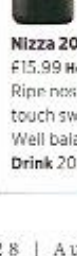
**Braida, Bricco dell'Uccellone 2009** 18/20pts (93/100pts)  
£46.50 **Hedonism Wines**  
Spicy, vibrant, black cherry nose, with remarkable elegance. Sweet but not jammy; bright and fresh, with lively acidity and integrated alcohol. Limpid and long.  
**Drink 2013–2020 Alcohol 16%**



**Marchesi di Gresy, Monte Colombo 2007** 18 (93)  
£29–£31 **Blanco & Gomez, Cheers, Flagship, Swig**  
Smoke, tobacco and berry nose. Fine attack, with ample acidity and red-fruit flavours. Vibrant Barbera, with a sleek texture and tangy finish. **Drink 2013–2020 Alc 15%**



**Prunotto, Costamiole, Nizza 2007** 18 (93)  
£30–£35 **AG Wines, Alastair Nugent, Raisin Wines**  
Lush, vibrant red-fruits nose. Piquant red fruits on the palate, concentrated, elegant and moreish. Admirable length.  
**Drink 2013–2020 Alc 14%**

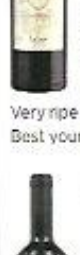


**Villa Giada, Bricco Dani, Nizza 2007** 17.5 (91)  
£15.99 **Hennings**  
Ripe nose with a savoury, balsamic tone. A touch sweet but intense and with fine acidity. Well balanced with a long mocha finish.  
**Drink 2013–2017 Alc 14.5%**

**Bava, Stradivario Superiore 2007** 17 (90)  
£38.40 (2000) **T&W Wines**  
Fragrant, oaky cherry aromas. Medium bodied and fresh, with intensity and poise rather than weight and power. Long and stylish. **Drink 2013–2017 Alc 13.5%**



**Chiarlo, La Court 2009** 17 (90)  
£55.99 **Wimbledon Wine Cellars**  
Ripe cherry nose, savoury, with a hint of tobacco. Concentrated, with spice, firm acidity and a long, sweet finish. **Drink 2013–2010 Alc 14%**



**La Ghersa, Camparo Superiore 2009** 17 (90)  
£13.99 **Domus Cella**  
Bright cherry fruit on the nose. Very ripe yet delicate, with finesse and charm. Best young. **Drink 2013–2015 Alc 13.5%**



**La Spinetta, Ca' di Pian 2008** 17 (90)  
£14–£19 **widely available via Wine Treasury**  
Zesty, spicy, cherry nose. Suave and spicy but limpid and accessible. The most forward of the La Spinetta range, best drunk young. **Drink 2013–2015 Alc 14%**



**Marchesi Alfieri La Tota 2009** 17 (90)  
£15 **Decorum**  
Aged in older barrels, this has muted

red-fruits aromas. Rich, suave and juicy, with good weight and concentration. Delicious but less complex than the top wine Alfiera.  
**Drink 2013–2017 Alc 14.5%**

**Ollm, Bauda Superiore, Nizza 2008** 17 (90)  
£25.50 (2010) **Carruthers & Kent, Colasanti**  
Shy cherry and red fruits nose. Lively and concentrated, with a sweet, light tannic finish. **Drink 2013–2016 Alc 14%**

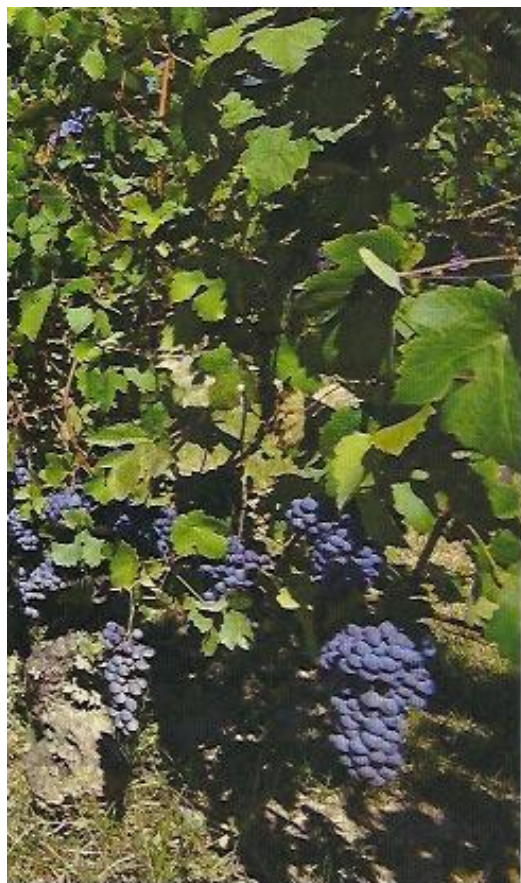
**Pico Maccario, Tre Roveri 2010** 17 (90)  
£14.40 (2007) **London Wine Deliveries**  
Smoky, slight jammy nose. Ripe, rounded and juicy, with upfront fruit, but also some complexity and solidity. Quite long.  
**Drink 2013–2017 Alc 14%**



**Dezzani, Gli Scagliotti 2005** 16.5 (88)  
£17.50 (2005) **Eurowines, Harrods**  
Complex nose of ripe cherry, liquorice and leather. Assertive, spicy and concentrated, with lively acidity and plenty of drive.  
**Drink 2013–2016 Alc 14%**

**Bertelli, Montetusa 2009** 16 (86)  
£35.99 (2001) **Dalla Terra**  
Suave, oaky, plummy nose. Quite soft on the palate, with high ripeness and fairly low acidity. Very fruity but lacks flair.  
**Drink 2013–2015 Alc 15%**

For UK stockist details, see p86



## BARBERA D'ASTI



Photograph: Mauro Sordani/Corbis; Inset: AFP/Getty Images; Dario Scattolon/Corbis; Massimo Sestini/Corbis

excessively low yields: 'Below 50hl/ha you run the risk of very high sugars and alcohols.' The vineyards must be located on hillsides, and the wine aged for at least 18 months, of which six months must be in wood. By 2012 some 40 producers were releasing around 400,000 bottles. Quality seems to be generally high. Some growers want to see the appellation simplified to Nizza DOCG alone, with no mention of the variety.

Opinions vary on whether this is a good idea. Chiarlo is in favour: 'Consumers are reluctant to buy expensive Barbera because the name of the grape is a hindrance.' Giorgio Rivetti disagrees: 'Superiore is already hard enough for consumers to understand, and so to introduce Nizza pure and simple would make it even worse.' My own view is that it would be a marketing nightmare.

### Food friendly

The slight lack of subtlety in Barbera is seen by many as an advantage. Mario Olivero, winemaker for Marchesi Alfieri, says: 'Barbera is not a difficult wine to understand.' Rivetti is emphatic: 'Barbera is the best food wine in the world. It's so versatile and it doesn't require complex cuisines to show at its best.' The key to its food-friendliness is surely its naturally high acidity. Massimo Pastura of La Ghersa notes: 'Even in hot vintages, such as 2000, Barbera's acidity keeps the wine elegant.' But Claudio Dacasto, winemaker for Bertelli, believes the question of acidity is not quite that simple: 'Even very ripe Barbera grapes retain acidity, which is positive, but it's the winemaker's job to increase other elements in the wine, such as roundness and tannin.'

Compared to Cabernet, Merlot or Syrah, Barbera is far trickier to work with.'

And that surely is the role of barriques in ageing Barbera: it contributes those additional elements, and more nuanced aromas and flavours. The variety is low in tannin, but tannin is required to give structure and ageability. Simple Barbera can be enjoyed young for its fresh fruitiness, but the variety is capable of greater complexity, which is what barrel ageing can provide. The late Aldo Conterno once told me: 'Barbera is suited to barriques because it has no tannins and high acidity. Barriques round out that acidity and contribute spice and vanilla flavours.'

If the goal is concentrated, powerful wines, then there are other ways to achieve this. As in Valpolicella, and to a lesser extent Bardolino, there is a fad for partial drying of the grapes. It's the Amarone principle, but not taken to the same extreme. An experienced practitioner of this style is Mariuccia Borio of Cascina Castlet, whose Passum is made from semi-dried, old-vine Barbera. After the grapes have been dried for up to six weeks, they are added to regular Barbera must for fermentation, then aged in a mixture of large casks and mostly new barriques. The wine, unlike some Amarones, is fully dry. Highly concentrated and intense, it can be overbearing, although good acidity delivers a long finish. Not to everyone's taste, perhaps, but it has an avid following. La Ghersa's Musasche is made using one-third of grapes dried for four months and aged for 18 months in mostly new oak. It's imposing though not raisiny, but, like Passum, strikes me as too much of a good thing. >>

*'Simple Barbera can be enjoyed young for its fresh fruitiness, but it is capable of greater complexity, which is what barrel ageing can provide'*