

ON WINE: JAY MCINERNEY

Barbera, the Cinderella of Italian Reds



Castiglione Falletto, Italy
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.

Barbera was traditionally grown in the cooler and less desirable plots in Alba, the province that encompasses both Barolo and Barberesco, and in the neighboring province of Asti, best known for bubbly Asti Spumante. It is naturally high in acidity, with a very deep ruby color, and full body. For years it played a se-

cret, supporting role in the production of Barolo; it was often used to supplement the color and body of Nebbiolo, which can be low on both.

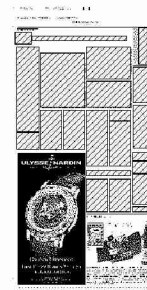
When Luca joined the family winery, his father wouldn’t let him near the Nebbiolo. The young winemaker worked instead with Barbera from family holdings outside the Barolo appellation. The more he worked with Barbera, the more he became convinced of its potential, given the right sites and restricted 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 Scarone 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.

Vietti wasn’t the only producer that saw in Barbera a potential Cinderella; another champion was the late Giacomo Bologna, a motorcycle-riding, jazz-loving bon vivant who inherited a property called Braida some 10 miles east of the town of Asti. Like an old Hollywood studio head ordering cosmetic procedures for a starlet, Mr. Bologna set about to reshape Barbera, which is typically very high in acid and low in natural tannins. (Tannins, which most of us are familiar with from over-steeped tea, act as a preservative, allowing a wine to age and develop complexity over time.) Mr. Bologna planted Barbera on prime, sun-drenched slopes and picked the grapes later than his neighbors, with the idea of softening the sharp acidity of Barbera. He aged the juice in new French oak barrels, which further softened the sharp edges while lending some wood tannins.

The idea of barrel aging for Barbera was first proposed by the famous French oenologist Émile Peynaud, who consulted at a winery in Asti in the 1970s. In 1982, Mr. Bologna created Bricco dell Uccellone, a barrel-



aged vineyard-designated Barbera that changed the perception of the grape in the Piedmont region even as it became the first Barbera to achieve international recognition. Unlike the rustic table wine beloved of Piedmontese farmers, poured out of pitchers at kitchen tables, this was a Barbera that had been to college, maybe even graduate school. It was suitable for high-end wine lists.

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



OENOFILE:
BEST OF
BARBERA

2007 Giacomo Conterno, Cascina Francia Barbera d’Alba, \$40

A very powerful, rich and complex Barbera that seems almost like a Barolo, with leather and tar notes. A very noble example.

2009 Massolino Barbera d’Alba Serralunga d’Alba, \$22

Ripe and fruity with a snappy backlash of acidity. Very pretty and refreshing.

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

2005 Giuseppe Mascarello Barbera d’Alba Superiore, \$35

Very exotic floral and berry nose. Starts out very rich and sweet with an exotic berry core and finishes dry with a bracing acidic slap.

2005 Bricco dell Uccellone, Barbera d’Asti, \$50

This a Bordeaux-lover’s Barbera, rich, full-bodied and fleshy; still young, but approachable and coming on strong.

2007 Vietti, Barbera Tre Vigne, \$22

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.

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.

► Read the On Wine blog at blogs.wsj.com/wine. Email Jay at wine@wsj.com.



BARBERA'S HOMEPLACE Left, the Vietti vineyards in Castiglione Falletto, Italy. Above, Vietti's cantina, for barrel-aging. Below, the Currado family in Castiglione Falletto.





One vintner calls Barbera a bridge between New World and Old World reds: 'It's sexy but earthy.'