

## Give Me That Old-Time Barbera

*Too much wood is ruining one of Piedmont's classic wines.*

TOM MARESCA

**T**he Department of Dashed Hopes: The first morning's session of the 2010 Barbera Meeting, held each March in Asti, started with about 20 of the most unpleasant, overoaked Piedmontese wines it has ever been my displeasure to taste. What, I wondered, has gone wrong here? This is a blessed part of the world for red wines, and this is a variety I love, but what my palate was experiencing was definitely not what I had signed up for.

Piedmont Barbera, I have always thought, is one of the world's best, most versatile food wines. Its juicy acidity and lively, cherry-toned fruit don't merely "go with" almost any sort of food. Barberas enhance the dishes they accompany and are enhanced by them, so that an entire dinner matched with Barbera d'Asti or Barbera d'Alba, Barbera di Nizza (the new subzone is in the process of being approved) or Barbera del Monferrato, can provide a succession of pleasant surprises, as each preparation calls out yet another facet of this seemingly simple wine.

For all that, Barbera never shows well in blind tastings, as those first Barbera Meeting flights forcibly reminded me. Its virtues shine at table and dim in the kind of settings in which other varieties strut their stuff. On its home territory in the Piedmont, Barbera can't hold a candle to Nebbiolo in a formal, water-and-breadsticks-and-wines-only tasting, but alongside some salume or cheese, pasta or risotto, braised beef or roasted chicken, that same Barbera will taste rich and supple and satisfying, while the same Nebbiolo may show itself hard and tannic and unyielding. The Nebbiolo, however, will invariably get the high scores in the blind tasting, while the Barbera is always humbled. In a blind tasting, big, forceful, and tannic trumps medium-bodied, fruity, and acid every time.

Perhaps that fact lay behind the decision (collective or independently reached? Impossible to find out) by so many producers, over the four days of the Barbera Meeting's blind tastings, to show not their lovely, lively, acid-and-fruit-forward Barbera but, instead, their special-selection or single-vineyard, highly concentrated and heavily *barriquet* wine. Barberas in this style are following a trail blazed decades ago by the Braidate estate's now-iconic Bricco dell'Uccellone. Makers of Barbera had always known their wine could age: its acidity saw to that. But Bricco dell'Uccellone first demonstrated Barbera's capacity

for complexity and elegance. It showed that Barbera had an aptitude — in the eyes of some producers, a vocation — for *barriques*, whose judicious use could give it a pleasing veneer of sophistication, as well as supplement Barbera's naturally high acidity and naturally low tannins with structurally important oak tannins.

The key phrase here is "judicious use." Simply putting Barbera in new-oak *barriques* and letting the oak soak in isn't judicious, nor does the taste of oak transform Barbera from a simple wine into a complex one. A luncheon vertical of the very prestigious Barbera d'Asti Quorum, for instance, was less an exploration of winemaking than an exhibition of carpentry. This is a very upscale, experimental wine made collectively by a group of superior Piedmontese producers, the Hastae group — Braidate, Chiarlo, Coppo, Prunotto, and Vietti, and the distiller Berta, currently the most esteemed in Italy — who banded together "with the aim of producing a Superbarbera and a Supergrappa" (the language of their statement). Each partner contributed the yield of one carefully selected hectare of vineyard, and they engaged some of the most important oenologists in Italy to make the wine — initially, Riccardo Cotarella, currently Vittorio Fiore and Barbara Tamborini. All of its producers on their own consistently vinify top-notch Barbera.

The names behind Quorum are an honor roll of Barbera houses — yet their collective effort, vintage after vintage, tasted more of wood than of wine. Even the grappa was, for me, utterly ruined, tasting and smelling entirely of wood and caramel. How does one reconcile a performance like that with the elegance of Chiarlo's Barbera La Court or Vietti's La Crena, to name just two? To my palate, this seems an obvious misdirection for the wine — I found Quorum completely undrinkable with the luncheon — so how can a group of producers so distinguished as this one conspire in it? My only explanation is that they seriously believe — what I heard over and over again that week in Asti — that "this is what the market wants." Since the group of journalists gathered for the Barbera Meeting consisted of members of the print and electronic media from all over North America, Europe, and about six Asian markets, and most of them found the wine in question seriously overoaked, there seems to be a major misconception here.

*"It is a very trivial idea to think that oak makes a wine important."  
The grapes, the vineyard, the soil, the exposure: all those, Fabrizio Iuli  
insists, are fundamental to making a Barbera better than ordinary.*

Fabrizio Iuli, a young winemaker who is already an acknowledged master of the distinctive, mineral-inflected Barbera of the Monferrato zone, keeps his wine in *barriques* far longer than any other producer I know of — but his Barberas taste of the grape, not of the barrel. He believes that oak flavors peak in the wine at about seven or eight months. "It needs more time to smooth out, for micro-oxygenation to take place, for the wine to assimilate the oak." The longer you keep the wine in oak beyond eight months, Iuli believes (he holds some of his wines in *barriques* for 36 months), the more the oak flavor subsides, leaving behind only soft oak tannins to structure and shape the wine. Significantly, this exponent of Barbera in *barriques* also says, "It is a very trivial idea to think that oak makes a wine important." The grapes, the vineyard, the soil, the exposure: all those, Iuli insists, are fundamental to making a Barbera better than ordinary.

Mario Olivero, manager and winemaker of Marchesi Alfieri, also crafts what I consider benchmark Barberas, some of the very best in the Asti zone: His La Tota rests for six to eight months in used *barriques* and *tonneaux*, while Alfiera, which is a single-vineyard Barbera d'Asti Superiore, is produced only in the best vintages and receives about 15 months of *barrique*-aging. I've tasted ten-year verticals of both wines, and both hold beautifully, aging with grace and charm and no loss of liveliness. Olivero is very articulate about what has been happening to Barbera. "In the '80s, we began giving Barbera a complete malolactic fermentation. Giacomo Bologna led the way [with Bricco dell'Uccellone], using *barriques*. *Barriques* stabilize color and aromas, but they aren't the only key: what you do in the vineyards is much more important. We're asking more of Barbera now than we did in the past, but that doesn't mean we've abandoned tradition. *Barriques*, big casks: that's only a small part of the issue. The real trick is to make a wine that is both ready and will last. If *barriques* do that, fine; if big casks do it, fine too. Classic wine means focusing on the grape — its natural acidity, its fruit character."

As I tried to suggest above, even what the producers refer to as their "basic" or "entry level" Barbera isn't in fact as simple as it seems. Paradoxically, the addition of too much oak can in fact make it simple and turn it one-dimensional: vanilla sweetness can become the dominant taste. Worse yet, in a formal tasting, oak flavors — vanilla from new *barrique*, espresso from toasted — build up and take over the taster's nose and palate, so that wine after wine seems to have drowned its varietal characteristics in a bath of wood. That's what I think happened in Asti, at the morning formal tastings.

That suspicion was confirmed for me later when I had the chance to taste at least some of the same wines in different circumstances, no longer one "important" wine after another, but either an individual producer's entire line-up of Barberas, from simplest to most complex, or several different producers' Barberas with food, at lunch or dinner. Then many of them seemed profoundly different wines, charming creatures of a whole different order than the morning's monsters. The obvious inference from this is that blind-tasting scores for any style of Barbera mean absolutely nothing.

This doesn't mean that there weren't any really overoaked Barberas that snowy week in Asti: far from it, alas. *Barriques* and *tonneaux* are a recently imported technology in most Italian wine zones, where very large Slavonian oak *botti* had for years been the norm, and before them chestnut casks (which, by the way, can do wonderful things for some wines — but that is another story). As with any new technology, *barriques* and their kin take time to learn to use properly. With wines, because of the years between harvest and market release and genuine maturity, that learning process is necessarily slow, and the learning curve quite gradual. Other wine zones, with more market presence than Barbera, are way ahead of it in mastering oak: Chianti Classico and Barolo and Barbaresco have already begun to restrain their use of *barriques* and to rein in the palatal presence of oak. It will take time, but Barbera — the "important" Barberas — will get there eventually. In the meanwhile, we are still blessed with the not-so-simple pleasures of "simple" Barbera.

The Barbera Meeting is an annual event, smoothly run by the Wellcom Group, the same people who have for years run the Alba Wine Event, the most important tasting of Barolo and Barbaresco in Italy. This year they introduced a new wrinkle: a group of bloggers, mostly young and mostly American, who valiantly tried to report the doings of the Barbera Meeting ([www.Barbera2010.com](http://www.Barbera2010.com)) minute by minute. They were very straightforward with their immediate impressions, and their unanimous and accurate deploring of excess oak in the wines they tasted drew a lot of attention to the event. The major newspaper *La Stampa* covered it two days running, for instance, thus turning this Barbera Meeting into something of an oenological *cause célèbre* (or, if you prefer, *succès de scandale*).

## BARBERA: THE BEST OF THE UNOAKED AND THE OAKED

Except for dismal, rainy 2002, Barbera hasn't had a bad harvest so far this century. Most growers agree that 2007 was a banner vintage for all denominations of Barbera. I arrived at this list by conflating my notes from the morning's blind tasting sessions and later revistings of as many wines as possible in not-blind circumstances.

- **ALFIERI:** La Tota 2007 and Alfiera 2007 can serve as benchmarks, respectively, for the fresh style and the deeper style in Barbera d'Asti. Top-notch wines from a great Barbera vintage.
- **BAVA:** This house makes several Barberas (as do most), of which Piano Alto, a Superiore from the Nizza subzone, is the most important. The 2006 version shows lovely black cherry fruit with nice wood accents and excellent balance.
- **BERSANO:** A large, traditional Piedmontese producer with several different price levels and styles of Barbera d'Asti, most offering good value. This tasting's standouts were the 2006 from the Nizza subzone and the 2007 single-vineyard Ca d'Galdin, a lovely mid-weight wine smelling and tasting of underbrush and cherry.
- **BOERI ALFONSO:** A small producer, previously unknown to me, who I will try very hard to know better from now on. Two excellent 2007 Barbera d'Asti Superiore: Pörlapà stood out for its graceful integration of wood and Barbera fruit; Martinette was only a little less striking.
- **BOROLI:** The 2007 Barbera d'Alba showed the greater roundness and fullness of the Alba style of Barbera, packaged up with lightly coffee-inflected dark cherry fruit: very, very nice.
- **BRAIDA:** This landmark house always shows well. This year, its 2007 Barbera d'Asti Montebruna and its 2008 Barbera del Monferrato La Monella shone, while its bigger, more complex Bricco della Bigotta (Asti, 2007) seemed closed and needing some time.
- **CHIARLO:** Michele Chiarlo can be considered the grand old man (he would no doubt rightly resent the "old") of Barbera d'Asti. He has been its champion and one of its pioneers for decades now. His 2008 Barbera d'Asti Superiore Cipressi della Court and 2007 Superiore La Court both impressed by their integration of oak and fruit: complex, yet nevertheless completely Barbera.
- **COGNO:** An excellent, small Barolo producer who also turns out fine Barbera. The Barbera d'Alba 2007 Bricco dei Merli showed wonderful fruit and acidity, along with the fine Alba roundness and softness: a delightful wine.
- **DAMILANO:** Two successful entries for this Barolo house — an easy, lively, juicy 2008 Barbera d'Asti, and a slightly more wood-tasting 2007 Barbera d'Alba La Blu.
- **DE GRESY:** And two fine entries for this distinguished Barbaresco estate: a nice middle-weight Barbera d'Asti 2007, marked by good fruit and nice integration of the oak, and a more intense single-vineyard 2006 Monte Colombo.
- **IULI:** One of my favorites from the Monferrato zone, Iuli produces three diverse Barberas. Umberta is done entirely in stainless steel: the 2007 showed lovely, dark-toned Barbera fruit, soft tannins, and fine acidity. Rossore is fermented in steel and aged for quite a while in oak: the '07 was gorgeous in nose, palate and finish, with no oak flavors but plenty of Barbera character. Barabba is made from selected grapes and aged for 24 months in new *barriques*: the 2006 will be a wine for the ages, but still needs time to fully integrate.
- **AGOSTINO PAVIA E FIGLI:** A small estate, previously unknown to me: it showed a really lovely Barbera d'Asti Superiore 2007 Moliss, a beautifully balanced wine of excellent fruit and soft tannins, and a slightly less convincing 2006 Superiore La Marescialla, nicely structured but not as vibrant as the '07.
- **PRUNOTTO:** Once one of my favorite producers, Prunotto now happily seems to be getting back in stride with a really fine 2007 Superiore from the Nizza zone, Costamiolo, and ever-so-slightly too woody 2008 Fiulot (the latter may integrate better with a little more time in bottle).
- **ROCCHES COSTAMAGNA:** A small estate producing almost the whole gamut of Alba wines. I especially liked its 2007 Barbera d'Alba Annunziata, which showed generous dark cherry fruit and fine balance.
- **VIETTI:** Another prominent Alba producer, though this time its best wine was the 2007 Barbera d'Asti Superiore from the Nizza subzone, La Crena, a perennial star in its line-up. The closer-to-home Barbera d'Alba 2007 Scarrone, while it had abundant fruit, also had abundant oak, and needs time to pull itself together. ☒