



Tasters from around the world assess wines at Nizza Monferrato's 200-year old Foro Boario (cattle market) during the Barbera Meeting 2010



The hardworking but always cheerful sommeliers at Barbera Meeting 2010

Photo: Do Bianchi/Jeremy Parzen



Barbera vineyards in Piedmont

Although the more glamorous Nebbiolo and Sangiovese varieties may overshadow it, Barbera is the second most widely planted red grape in Italy, writes **Stuart George** who tasted the Barberas presented at the Barbera Meeting 2010 held at Asti in Piedmont.

**VINES, GRAPES AND WINES**

At its best on calcareous or clay loam soils, Barbera ripens late and yields generously, though volumes are restricted to a maximum of 70 hectolitres – equivalent to 9,333 bottles – per hectare for Barbera di Monferrato; Asti and Alba are even lower.

The Barbera d’Asti production zone is huge, covering 118 communes in the Province of Asti and a further 51 in Alessandria. Barbera di Monferrato is made in the same 118 villages in Asti but extends to 99 municipalities in Alessandria.

Barbera d’Alba comes from 54 villages spread across the Langhe, the hilly area to the south and west of the River Tanaro, surrounding the town of Alba. These villages include the most privileged vineyard sites of Piedmont in Barolo and Barbaresco but here Barbera is always second best to the mighty Nebbiolo.

Barbera d’Asti and di Monferrato must be made from a minimum of 85% Barbera, with up to 15% of the blend permitted to be Freisa, Grignolino and/or Dolcetto. Barbera

d’Alba cannot include any other grapes.

The minimum natural alcohol level for Asti and Alba is 12%, and 12.5% for Barbera d’Asti/d’Alba Superiore. For Monferrato it is 11.5% and for Monferrato Superiore 12.5%.

**SPAGHETTI JUNCTION**

Since the 2000 harvest, the subzones of Nizza, Tinella and Colli Astiani have been recognised and defined by law within the wider Barbera d’Asti Superiore production zone. The best area for Barbera d’Asti is claimed to be in the Nizza subzone, southeast of Asti. Formed in November 2002, the Associazione Produttori del Nizza’s membership includes 43 producers in 18 towns and villages surrounding Nizza Monferrato, a small town 140 metres above sea level.

The production rules are more demanding than they are for Barbera d’Asti Superiore: The maximum yield is seven tons, or 49 hectolitres, per hectare (Barolo is eight tons!),

and the wine must be aged for at least 18 months from the first day of January after the harvest, of which six months must be in “botti di legno” (wooden barrels).

Italian wine law requires only 85% of the wine to be made from Barbera but the Produttori del Nizza insist on 100%. As the extra oak ageing and lower yields suggest, Nizza is intended to be a richer and more structured version of Barbera d’Asti.

**DOLCE STIL NOVO**

Because of its low tannin but high acidity levels, Barbera is supposedly ideally suited to ageing in wooden barrels, particularly barriques, the 225-litre barrels used for Bordeaux wines. The late Giacomo Bologna pioneered the use of barriques in Piedmont with his Barbera d’Asti Bricco dell’Uccellone, which is now one of the most sought-after and expensive Barbera wines. It was the dolce stil novo (sweet new style), in the words Dante Alighieri used to refer to poetry, of Italian wine.

There are four ways of ageing Barbera before it is released – in steel tanks; in barrique; in botte or a mix of steel and wood, the latter either barrique or botte. Ageing in bottle can then follow any of these.

Botte is the ‘traditional’ method and often gives good results,

though many wines of this style tasted at the Barbera Meeting lacked freshness. The tank-only versions, which showcase Barbera’s juicy fruit, can give much pleasure but lack the structure of wines that have been enhanced by wood-ageing.

**BARBERA AND FOOD**

Barbera is distinguished by its very high acidity, which makes it a deliciously refreshing wine to drink with many different foods. But oak must be used carefully. Many of the wines tasted at the Barbera Meeting 2010 were as soaked in oak as the Piedmont landscape was in snow. These wines had tannins as thick as an Italian ragù sauce. Some winemakers claimed that the wines were ‘young’ and needed some ageing, but Barbera does not age well. Even with all that acidity, it lacks the fruit and tannin concentration necessary for extended bottle ageing. It is at its best when young and fresh. So diverse were the colours, aromas and textures of the wines that it stretched credence to credit them all as Barbera. Britain has few laws but on the whole they are obeyed. Italy has so many laws, with wine and everything else, that most Italians totally ignore them. This makes finding a definitive version of Barbera almost impossible! ♦

## TASTING NOTES

The following wines were tasted at the Barbera Meeting 2010 held in Asti from March 8 to 11, 2010. All wines were tasted blind.

### BARBERA D'ASTI

**2008 Cantina Sociale Barbera dei Sei Castelli Barbera d'Asti DOCG** Recently bottled? A bit stinky on the nose. Lush fruit and very moreish. A good example, the fruit showing lots of typical Barbera character.

**2008 Fratelli Trinchero La Trincerina Barbera d'Asti DOCG** Crisp acidity and some rustic tannins on the finish. A good example of Barbera in the yeoman style.

**2007 Marchesi Alfieri SRL SA La Tota Barbera d'Asti DOC** Fleshy and brightly flavoured. A good example of il dolce stil novo that shows how oak – second and third fill in this instance – and Barbera can work together in harmony.

**2007 Tenute Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Gresy Barbera d'Asti DOC** Lighter colour. Similar styling to the Tenuta La Tenaglia but with less stuffing. Tasty finish. Yum.

**2007 Coppo SRL Pomorosso Barbera d'Asti DOC** Barriques here but better integrated than many other wines. A sexy, modern style – but not really what Barbera is for!

**2007 Dezzani SRL La Luna e le Stelle Barbera d'Asti Superiore DOC** No excess oak. Characteristic high acidity and light tannins.

**2007 Borgo Isolabella S.S. Augusta Barbera d'Asti Superiore DOC Nizza** A successful version of il dolce stil novo, with some oak flavours apparent, but not dry or harsh on the palate. Nice finish.

**2007 Tenuta La Fiammenga Paion Barbera d'Asti Superiore DOC** This is in the rustic style that for me epitomises Barbera from Piedmont. It also recalls the Tenuta La Tenaglia.

**2007 Tenuta La Tenaglia Giorgio Tenaglia Barbera d'Asti DOC** One of the best examples in this tasting – plentiful acidity, dark cherry flavours and some tannin. Probably great with food. Yum.

**2007 Azienda Agricola Tenute dei Vallorino La Ladra Barbera**

**d'Asti DOC** A modern, lower-acidity style. Appealing.

**2006 Cascina Castlet Litina Barbera d'Asti Superiore DOC** Morello fruit and a rustic texture. What Barbera d'Asti is all about! An exception to the rule that Barbera does not age well.

### BARBERA DEL MONFERRATO

**2008 Azienda Agricola Morando Silvio Barbera del Monferrato DOC** Fruity, relatively simple, juicy and unpretentious. What Barbera – and Italian wine – is all about.

**2006 Cantina Iuli Barabba Barbera del Monferrato Superiore DOC** Modern style but very crisp acidity means that this might go well with food.

**2006 VICARA Visconti Cassinis Ravizza Vadmò Barbera del Monferrato Superiore DOC** Mature. Like a Nebbiolo wine from Barolo or Barbaresco in its structure and aromas. Drink with lots of protein!

### BARBERA D'ALBA

**2008 Cascina Chicco Granera Alta Barbera d'Alba DOC** Rather neutral flavours but really nice texture. Good wine.

**2007 Cascina Ballarin Giuli Barbera d'Alba DOC** The best one yet – rich fruit, not over-oaked, and a crisp finish.

**2007 Cascina Ballarin Pilade Barbera d'Alba DOC** A bit more acidity than the Giuli but otherwise similarly styled.

**2007 Bric Cenciurio Naunda Barbera d'Alba DOC** Just a bit oak-dry on the finish but otherwise good – rich fruit, plenty of acidity and quite elegant.

**2007 Parusso Armanda Vecchie vigne in Località Ornati Barbera d'Alba Superiore DOC** Slightly dusty nose. Palate not all that appealing in the middle but finishes bright, sweet and juicy.

**2007 Vietti Scarrone Barbera d'Alba DOC** Dusty nose but pleasantly supple and juicy palate.

**2006 Azienda Agricola Scarzello Giorgio Barbera d'Alba Superiore DOC** A bit oxidised on the nose but a Nebbiolo-like texture on the palate – silky tannins buttressed by plenty of acidity. This is not a coincidence – the grapes are from Barolo!



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