Barbera in Piedmont
DOC and DOCG

Barbera is Piedmont’s most important red grape variety in terms of its presence in the region, occupying around 35% of the entire area under vine, which totals approximately 50,000 hectares, or nearly 124,000 acres.

Historical Overview
Barbera was first mentioned in 1512 in a cadastral document from the municipality of Chieri, near Turin. A document from the Municipal Archive of Nizza Monferrato, dated 1609, instead tells us that special delegates were sent “to the countryside of Nizza de la Paglia to taste the wine from these vineyards and, in particular, Barbera wine for the service of His Most Serene Highness, the Duke of Mantua, and to pay a fair price for them.”

According to the entry on Barbera in Ampelografia della Provincia di Alessandria, published by Carlo Leardi and Pier Paolo Demaria in 1873, “It is a very famous variety and one of the main bases for the wines of the Asti area and Lower Monferrato, where it is a native vine and has long been cultivated.”

In the nineteenth century viticulture developed enormously in Piedmont with the rise of small farming estates. The Barbera variety was chosen for its qualities. Nizza Monferrato and its district, lying essentially between the Tanaro River and the first hills south of the Belbo torrent, form the area in which Barbera has been grown as a monovarietal the longest, while in the other areas of Monferrato and Tortona “mixed” vineyards were more common. In all of these areas, for as long as people can remember Barbera has been the most widely grown variety, while in the Langhe and Roero districts it is surpassed in acreage by Nebbiolo and Dolcetto, though it is nevertheless present.

Why did the vigneron of the last century prefer Barbera? It produces regularly and has a high must yield, it makes wines with good color and alcohol content, and the high fixed acidity of its wine – above all back then – meant that it kept well. The reasons they continue to prefer it today have changed to some extent: wine is no longer a low-cost food but one of the pleasures in life, and when Barbera is grown in the best-suited areas its wines are immensely appealing to consumers. Although many famous experts and producers such as Renato Ratti and Arturo Bersano were well aware of Barbera’s potential for producing high-end wines, for years this potential was rarely expressed, finally emerging powerfully in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1980s the optimization of Barbera wines was initially encouraged by only a few Piedmont producers, but their ranks continued to grow, ultimately allowing what was once a simple “people’s wine” to express its finest qualities. Better quality was pursued through improved techniques. In the vineyard this involved clonal selection, measures to attain better resistance to viruses, lower yields in order to promote higher quality, and careful selection of the harvest time. In vinification it meant controlling malolactic fermentation, the mechanism of which was unknown until just a few decades ago and which decidedly improves the wine by making it smoother, and aging in oak barrels and barriques.

The Variety
Barbera is not a “cosmopolitan” cultivar, and it achieves the best enological results in certain parts of southern Piedmont, producing wines with good body, structure and complexity. Elsewhere it can yield wines that are good but simpler. It ripens late and is harvested between the end of September and the middle of October. Barbera has significant temperature requirements and does not do well in standing water. As a result, it is grown in well-drained, well-aspected and sunny hillside
vineyards. The bunch is medium sized and the berry slightly oval and very rich in sugar, with a relatively thin skin that is rich in color and not very tannic. Barbera is quite tolerant of both cold winter weather and summer heat, and it readily withstands drought, thanks also to the pubescence on the underside of its leaves, which minimizes transpiration. In Piedmont it is grown without irrigation. The variety is also very fertile (referring to the number of bunches per shoot). This means that, in certain years, there is a risk of overproduction, which is addressed through bunch thinning or, more recently, short pruning (spurred cordon) to reduce the fertility of the buds.

The choice of the harvest date is a critical factor. In well-aspected vineyards, high sugar levels are reached as early as the first or second ten days of September, but growers must fight the temptation to start harvesting the grapes, in order to allow fixed acidity to decrease and attain fuller ripening of the tannins in the seeds, skin and coloring matter. Since the bunches are sensitive to gray rot, this waiting period is always a source of anxiety among growers, because the arrival of prolonged and heavy rain – always a possibility in the fall – can create problems, above all in the most vigorous vineyards. With the climatic warming of recent years, however, the grapes tend to ripen early and this risk is generally averted.

The Terroir

The best growing area for Barbera is the hilly zone of southern Piedmont, situated between the Po Valley to the north and the Apennines to the south.

The variety prefers a warm, sunny position and calcareous soils that are rather rich in fine-grained fractions (silt and clay) and carbonates. The growing area of Piedmont’s main Barbera-based DOC wines largely coincides with the vast hilly district referred to by geologists as the Tertiary Piedmont Basin, which originated when the seabed was uplifted in the Tertiary Period; the Po River marks its northern boundary. Barbera is present throughout this vast area, with the biggest concentration in the southern Asti district, between the Tanaro and the Belbo (Nizza, Vinchio, Agliano, Costigliole, etc.), predominantly with Barbera d’Asti DOC. It is also present as the main cultivar, albeit to a lesser extent, north of the Tanaro (northern Asti district and Monferrato Casalese, with both the Barbera d’Asti and Barbera del Monferrato DOC wines). Lastly, it can be found in the districts of Acqui and Ovada or, in other words, upper Monferrato in the province of Alessandria. Located to the east of the Scrivia River, at the eastern end of Piedmont, is Tortona. Founded by the Romans, the town is encircled by hills that represent another excellent terroir for Barbera, which is the main variety here with Colli Tortonesi Barbera DOC.

Barbera is traditionally present in the Langhe and Roero districts, where it is grown in the warmest areas.

The lands of Barbera are formed entirely by rolling hills with an elevation of 150 to 400 meters above sea level, with several taller “crests” in upper Monferrato and the Langhe district. The zone is in the heart of the temperate zone, as it is crossed by the 45th parallel. It is characterized by a subcontinental climate, with rather hot summers (the average temperature in July is 24–25 °C/75–77 °F) and relatively mild winters for this latitude (the average temperature in January is 1 °C/34 °F), moderate average annual rainfall (700–800 mm/27.5–31.5 inches) and little snow. The annual thermal summation (Winkler DD> 10 °C) is around 1800 degree-days.

Territories and DOC

Going from west to east, first we encounter Barbera d’Alba DOC in the province of Cuneo, with the Langhe and Roero districts, divided by the Tanaro River; we then come to the production areas of Barbera d’Asti and Barbera del Monferrato, which overlap to some extent – creating some confusion – and cover two provinces, Asti and Alessandria. The Barbera del Monferrato zone is the largest, as it includes several municipalities in the areas of Alessandria and Ovada, which do not have the right to use the Barbera d’Asti appellation. The other territories, i.e. all of the Asti area and, in the province of Alessandria, Monferrato Casalese and Acquese, can use both appellations.
Further east, in the Tortona area (bordering with Lombardy) the territorial appellation is Colli Tortonesi Barbera DOC. All these territories may use Piemonte Barbera DOC as the regional appellation.

**Barbera d’Alba DOC**
Vines must be planted on hillsides, but not on northern slopes. The wine must be made from using 85–100% Barbera, but may be blended with up to 15% Nebbiolo. The “Superiore” type must be aged for a year before it can be sold.

Consortium for the Defense of Barolo, Barbaresco, Alba, Langhe and Roero

**Barbera d’Asti DOCG**
Vines must be planted on hillsides, but not on northern slopes. The wine must be made from using 90–100% Barbera, but may be blended with other non-aromatic varieties authorized in Piedmont, up to a maximum of 10%. The “Superiore” type must be aged for at least a year before it can be sold, of which at least six months in wooden barrels, followed by bottle aging. Barbera d’Asti is generally produced as a monovarietal.

Consortium for the Defense of the Wines of the Asti and Monferrato Districts

**Barbera d’Asti DOCG, Subzones (particularly high-quality areas)**
**Nizza**
The town of Nizza and the nearby villages mark a historically renowned growing area, particularly for the production of wines with excellent structure that can be barrel aged, a practice that is mandatory in the case of “Nizza”.

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**Tinella**
The subzone borders with “Nizza” to the east and is named after the Tinella torrent that crosses it.

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**Colli Astiani**
It is north of the other two subzones, towards the city of Asti.

Consortium for the Defense of the Wines of the Asti and Monferrato Districts

**Barbera del Monferrato DOC**
This is the most extensive DOC and includes the winegrowing hills of the province of Asti and three of the five viticultural districts in the province of Alessandria, namely Acqui, Casale Monferrato and Ovada. Production regulations establish that, in addition to Barbera, other varieties may also be used – Freisa, Dolcetto or Grignolino – up to a maximum of 15%. There is a traditional version that is slightly sparkling and is made to be drunk young.

Consortium for the Defense of the Wines of the Asti and Monferrato Districts
Barbera del Monferrato Superiore DOCG
This is the most austere and prestigious version of Barbera del Monferrato. Like Barbera d’Asti, it has been a DOCG since 2008. Regulations call for aging in small or large oak barrels. It can be made with 100% Barbera (done in most cases) or blended with no more than 15% of Freisa (used in Monferrato Casalese), Dolcetto (used in Alto Monferrato) or Grignolino (used only rarely).

Consortium for the Defense of the Wines of the Asti and Monferrato Districts

Colli Tortonesi Barbera
This is the main DOC of the Tortona area. Regulations permit blending with up to 15% of other non-aromatic varieties grown in the area and a maximum yield of 9,000 kg per hectare, or 9 metric tons per hectare. Colli Tortonesi Barbera can be very full-bodied with good structure, and in this case it lends itself well to barrel aging as well as a few years of bottle aging.

Consortium for the Defense of Colli Tortonesi Wines

In the Glass
What are Barbera wines like? They have different nuances depending on the territory and vineyards in which the grapes were grown, and the winemaking techniques that are used. Nevertheless, what they have in common is a ruby red color – particularly intense in the Superiore types – that tends to turn garnet with aging. It has a characteristic and very fruity aroma reminiscent of cherries, plums and dark berries, evolving into scents of jam and fruit in alcohol, followed by rather intense balsamic, spicy and sometimes floral notes. With barrel aging, it develops overtones of cinnamon, cocoa powder and licorice. It has a round palate with an impact of great immediacy, warmth and harmony. The variety’s typical touch of tartness, which in modern wines is balanced and not excessive, makes it refreshing and very easy to pair with food. Aging gives it complexity, with a wealth of sweet velvety tannins and a long finish.

Pairings
Piedmont’s Barbera DOC wines are extremely versatile at the table, fully meritng the title of “king of food wines.” They are excellent with hearty first plates, meat entrées, charcuterie and medium-aged cheeses. A young Barbera also pairs beautifully with savory fish dishes, as it has great acidity and little tannin, whereas in the Piedmont tradition Barbera d’Asti Superiore or Barbera del Monferrato Superiore accompanies roasts and braised meat, as well as the region’s classic boiled meat.

Barbera wines are traditionally employed in cooking as well, adding flavor to risotto, braised meat and the mixture used to make traditional salami, in which it is blended along with spices and then put into the casing.

Text by Maurizio Gily.
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