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[Aging Barbera](#)

March 15, 2010

After spending a bit of time in the province of Asti tasting Barbera last week (thanks to the organizers of Barbera Meeting 2010), I can report on one aspect that is rarely mentioned regarding this variety; the ability of Barbera to age well.

In reality, it shouldn't be a surprise that Barbera can age; after all, this is a variety with naturally high acidity. Yet, as the grape also has extremely low levels of tannins, many wine publications emphasize this factor. The writers of these journals naturally compare Barbera to Nebbiolo, a very tannic variety that does produce long-lived wines, such as Barolo and Barbaresco. But of course, the potential to age is not just the amount of tannins, it's a balancing act, as some vintages of Barolo such as 1989, 1996 and 2001 age better than vintages such as 1990 and 2000, as the latter two vintages don't have the proper acidity levels for long-term pleasure.

Yet, given the history of Barbera as a simple, high-acid wine best served with *antipasti*, it's easy to see why few have considered Barbera as a variety that would be thought of for its longevity. The most widely planted red variety in Piemonte, it has been referred to as the "Coca-Cola" or "Pepsi-Cola" of the region, hardly a term of endearment. So when a few producers started to focus on making a more "serious" Barbera (for lack of a better term), these vintners turned heads in the area.

One of those quite famously was the late **Giacomo Bologna**, who started to experiment with aging in French barriques for Barbera instead of the usual large casks (*botti grandi*). He focused on specific vineyards and decided to harvest the grapes a bit later than normal, looking for a riper, more powerful wine that could age. A later harvest meant that the acidity would decrease, but given its naturally high levels to begin with, Bologna and other producers reasoned the wine would still have sufficient acidity and balance.



Raffaella Bologna, Braida di Giacomo Bologna (Photo ©Tom Hyland)

I attended a special tasting at the winery (known as **Braida di Giacomo Bologna**) in Rocchetta Tanaro, a short ride from the town of Asti, which was hosted by Giacomo's daughter Raffaella and son Giuseppe. There are three top-end bottlings of Barbera d'Asti: **Bricco dell'Uccellone**, **Bricco della Bigotta** and **Ai Suma**. The last, meaning, "I've got it," in local dialect is a wine made from very late harvested grapes and has a notable ripe quality when young, yet rounds out nicely with several years in the bottle. The other two wines have rightly been celebrated as among the finest of all Barbera; from year to year, the press has favored one or the other – Uccellone from older vineyards and displaying greater intensity, while Bigotta is generally a bit lighter on the palate, though this is all relative, as it is a deeply concentrated wine in its own right.

Here are notes on the wines presented in this tasting at the winery:

2001 Bricco dell' Uccellone

Roast coffee and dried cherry aromas; beautifully balanced from start to finish with excellent concentration and very good acidity. 5-7 years more on this.

1999 Bricco della Bigotta

Medium-full with very good concentration and excellent acidity; nice complexity with a lengthy finish with distinct herbal notes. 3-5 years on this.

1998 Bricco dell' Uccellone

Raspberry and dried brown herb aromas; notable acidity- wonderfully elegant. 3-5 years on this.

1997 Ai Suma

Maple and dried coffee aromas with a light raisiny note; excellent concentration with notable grip in the finish. Though 1997 was not as great a year in Piemonte that some have proclaimed, it was ideal for this late-harvest wine. 5-7 years more.

1996 Bricco della Bigotta

Coffee, dried strawberry and cherry aromas; excellent concentration; very good acidity; quite round and complete; 5-7 years on this – maybe longer?

1995 Bricco dell' Uccellone

Nearing peak, this has distinct herbal notes and very good concentration; 2-3 years on this.

The other producer I visited this day was **La Ghera** in the small commune of Moasca (population 461, as it was proudly pointed out), near the town of Castelnuovo Calcea. This estate is run by Massimo Pastura and with a last name like Pastura, you can imagine how nature plays an important part in his winemaking!

My fellow journalists and I were treated to a vertical tasting of seven vintages of their **Vignassa** bottling. Produced from a single vineyard planted in the first decade of the 20th century, this wine is a Nizza Superiore, one of the most restrictive DOC designations in all of Italy. Yields are quite low and vineyards must be south or south-east facing to catch as much of the sun as possible; these factors combine to yield deeply concentrated wines.



Instead of giving notes on each wine, a few overall comments. The differences in the wines were due to vintages – 2000 being rather simple with moderate acidity, while a wonderful year such as 2004 showing excellent depth of fruit and structure. This tells me two things; the consistency of the winemaking as well as the excellence of the site. The oldest wine we tasted was the 1989, a legendary vintage for Piemontese

reds; this has wonderful balance and complexity and was quite stylish, though nearing peak. I'd have to say that my favorite wine was the 1996; Massimo commented on how this is not a vintage that is discussed much for Barbera, but after tasting this wine as well as the Bricco della Bigotta (noted above), I'd have to state that 1996 was an outstanding year for Barbera. There is plenty of still-fresh black cherry fruit and the mid-palate is wonderfully generous, while the acidity is simply beautiful. The lengthy finish and fruit persistence argue for another 5-7 years.

These wines offered more proof not only of the excellence of Barbera, but also the surprises one finds in Italian wines. Barbera as the everyday soda pop wine of Piemonte? Not from these two producers!

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