

# Perfect in its youth

IT LOOKS intense and deep purple in the glass but it's not a cabernet sauvignon. It's fragrant and alluring on the nose but it's not a pinot noir. On the palate there's crunchy acidity tempered by juicy, vibrant fruit and yet it's quite soft and approachable. Ah, gotta be barbera, one of the most widely planted red varieties in Italy – and totally delicious.

At Italy's leading wine fair, Vinitaly, the Piedmont tasting area is inevitably one of the most popular thanks to the beguiling nebbiolo, the indigenous variety that goes into making barolo and barbaresco. But barbera, also native to that region, shouldn't be overlooked because it's the perfect wine to drink in its youth.

And one of the most appealing barberas is from Chiara Boschis, owner/winemaker at E. Pira & Figli, based in Barolo. And yes, she makes stunning nebbiolo, too – her top wine known as Cannubi is quite extraordinary.

"Sure, our most important variety is barolo," says Boschis, "but after that it's barbera, which is also very important and so versatile. You get from it an explosion of fruit, and it can look like nebbiolo but it's shorter on the palate."

She adds that barbera has loads of acidity so the grapes must be perfectly ripe to temper that, but it's also low in tannins, which means it's not really built for long-term ageing. But that's part of barbera's charm – its approachability when young. However, Boschis believes that just some extra time in the barrel or bottle will add to the wine's expression and balance. Hers sees a minimum of one year ageing in old barrels.

"You know, you have to wait for good things," she says. Patience is one thing, but then there's a matter of price. In Italy, barbera is relatively inexpensive for the quality – about \$18 to \$30 – so make the most of trying such bargains if you are visiting.

However, add our crippling wine tax laws, plus our lousy exchange rate, plus the importer's and retailer's cut, and the everyday drinking wine of Italy becomes almost a luxury item here.

Despite barbera's apparent suitability to our climatic conditions, the variety is yet to really take off in Australia.

King Valley winemaker Michael Dal Zotto, who has been growing barbera for 13 years, is optimistic that the variety will become better known – it's just a matter of getting people to try it. So why has barbera been slow to catch on?

"The main reason is a lack of understanding of the variety," says Dal Zotto, "but once customers taste barbera, they immediately fall in love with it. It is a wine that is not like any other."

Italian wine importer Michael Trembath, who brings in Boschis' wines, agrees, adding that the charm of barbera lies in its good fruit definition, medium-weighted tannins and body.

"Plus, when a barbera is poured by the glass, say, at a restaurant, everyone likes it and you hear, 'Wow, that's good.' It is best with food and stays fresh in the glass long after the bottle has been opened. How can you not love it?"

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## **E. PIRA & FIGLI BARBERA D'ALBA 2006 \$50**

HOW good is this barbera, with its core of juicy, vibrant red fruits, lifted herbal note and touch of eucalypt, but quite refreshing, with fine acidity and soft, almost grainy tannins. Beautifully balanced and delicious, you'll want to keep drinking this wine.

