

- [Wine & Visitor Center](#)
 - [Directions/Map](#)
 - [Visitor Center Events](#)
 - [Online Store](#)
 - [Wine Club](#)
- [Wineries](#)
 - [Wine Trail Map](#)
- [Vineyards](#)
 - [Appellations](#)
 - [History](#)
 - [Climate](#)
 - [Soils](#)
 - [Varietals Grown](#)
 - [Old Vine Zinfandel](#)
 - [Growers](#)
- [Events](#)
 - [Calendar](#)
 - [Zinfest](#)
 - [Treasure Island WineFest](#)
 - [The First Sip](#)
 - [Wine & Chocolate](#)
- [Certified Green](#)
 - [Lodi Rules](#)
 - [History/Timeline](#)
 - [Farming Standards](#)
 - [PEAS/Environmental Impact](#)
 - [Certification](#)
 - [Sustainable Practices](#)
 - [Growers](#)
 - [Wines](#)
- [Store/Wine Shop](#)
- [Blog](#)

Food wine or not, Barbera kicks butt



Barbera grapes in Borra's home estate

In Northern Italy, the [Barbera](#) grape produces reds many consider to be the ultimate “food wines.” Sometimes this moniker is code for *thin-and-boring-when-drunk-by-itself*, but not in this case: anyone who has experienced top drawer Barbera from the [Piemonte](#) region knows what a dense, viscerally moving experience it can be. These are soulful, blood red wines usually stuffed with aromas and flavors of red (raspberry, cherry, cranberry) and/or black fruits (like blackberry without the jamminess of, say, Zinfandel), with handsome tertiary qualities suggesting charred red meat and/or soft, expensive Italian leather.



It is the taste of Barbera on the palate, however, that really turns wine loving foodies on: a combination of slightly elevated acidity, moderate tannin and a medium-to-full body that is rarely heavy in the feel. Zesty, earthy foods associated with the top half of the Italian boot seem to come alive in this context: think those flat ribbons of pappardelle pasta coated stewy sauces with ground lamb or pork; orecchiette (those *al dente* chewable “ears”) in chunky Bolognese sauces; heartier risottos made with pungent mushrooms and earthy beef stocks; gnocchi in herby, homemade tomato sauces... getting hungry?

The good thing about Lodi’s Delta moderated [macroclimate](#) is that ripening Barbera to optimal fruit qualities in this Mediterranean-like setting is never really an issue: Lodi grown Barbera tends to retain a natural balance — soft and round enough to enjoy, yet still zesty and edgy enough to turn the primavera or roasted peppers in the most pedestrian pasta dishes into culinary epiphanies.



Steve Borra & mighty tall vine

One of Lodi’s most coveted heritage wines is produced by Steve Borra Sr., owner of [Borra Vineyards](#), primarily from the Barbera grape. Borra calls this his *Field Blend*, and it is made from a combination of two of his vineyards: a “younger” (38 years being young by Lodi standards), trellised planting of pure Barbera located around the Borra winery on E. Armstrong Rd.; and a mixed planting ([Carignane](#), [Petite Sirah](#) and [Alicante Bouschet](#) grapes) of 80 year old vines in his Church Block, located next door to the winery (purchased from the Catholic diocese in 1995). The *Field Blend* is picked on the same day each year, and all the grapes are co-fermented in the same tank, in the “old” style.

“The *Field Blend*,” Mr. Borra tells us, “is sort of a homage to the way my grandfather made wine. He was very Old World — he’d pick the grapes all at once, and everything would go into one vat, no matter what kind of grape it was. Of course, he used wild yeast, and everything was natural — he didn’t know about stuff like sulfur and cultured yeasts — and he’d siphon the wines into one gallon jugs, one jug at a time, one barrel at a time. Bear in mind, my grandfather could easily polish off a liter of wine at a time — and that was just lunch. He’d finish another bottle and a half for dinner.

“Of course, by the time he’d get to the bottom of a barrel, the wine would no longer be stable, exposed to so much oxygen. And so every time it came time to pop open a new barrel, he’d fill his jug, bring it back to the house, pour himself a glass, and say, *oh, this barrel is so much better than the last one!*”



2010 Barbera harvest at
Borra

The 2009 Borra Vineyards *Field Blend* (\$14), which is only now being wakened from its beauty sleep in the barrels, consists of approximately 55% Barbera, 20% Carignane, 14% Petite Sirah and 11% Alicante Bouschet. Tasted out of the barrel mid-January, the wine was wild with raspberries and piles of rose petal and black tea leaves, and tasting of sweet, thick, honeyed framboise (raspberry liqueur), yet completely dry, meaty, and full of zest — lighting up the palate like a finger in an electric socket.

Okay, the bad news: only 250 cases of the Borra’s ‘09 *Field Blend* will be bottled (in early March), and almost all of it will be instantly sucked up by the thirsty, and ever-loyal, members of Borra’s wine club. So if you want in on this wine representing both a piece of history and the beauty of the Barbera grape, you may wish to sign yourself up, pronto!

You might have also heard that 2010 was an incredible year in Lodi, which is an understatement. Borra’s winemaker, Markus Niggli, summarizes the overall quality of red wines from this cooler-than-normal vintage as “just insane... beautifully dark colors, pH much lower and acidity much higher than usual... perfect for Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, and even better for our *Field Blend*.”



Markus Niggli tastes his Field Blend

Naturally, Mr. Niggli also gave us a sneak preview of his 2010 *Field Blend*, slumbering in the barrel, earlier this month. In a word: superfreak. In several more words: the 2010 sports a vivid, almost neon, impenetrable purplish color, with a preserve-like, raspberry liqueur nose as thick as it tastes in the mouth, jam packed with sweet fruit and oak, with hefty underlying tannin. The grape percentages in the 2010 *Field Blend*: 47% Barbera, 22% Petite Sirah, 18% Alicante Bouschet and 13% Carignane.

Now for the good news: Markus crushed enough to produce 450 cases — so hopefully you're still paying attention when the wine is finally released in spring of 2012!

Ah, but who among us can actually wait once our palates are already teased and tingling with anticipation? Here is a short list of *prêt-à-porter* bottlings of Lodi grown Barbera — ready-to-go, instantly buyable, and thoroughly enjoyable right this instant:

2009 [St. Amant](#), *Leventini Vineyard Lodi Barbera* (\$18) – Here, the Barbera grape character is manifested as black cherry, almost strawberryishly sweet fruitiness in the nose, unadorned by oak or earthiness, almost virginal if not for the typical varietal snap — like a black haired waif, puerile, lippy, pierced body parts and all. On the palate, those qualities are wrapped in a perfectly dry, soft and smoothly textured medium body; yet bright and bouncy, the fruit sensations defined by zesty edges..

2007 [Uvaggio](#), *Lodi Barbera* (\$18) – Sourced from the same vineyard utilized by St. Amant, Uvaggio's version sports true-to-the-grape blackberry jam aromas with smidgens of reddish berries peeking out from underneath; firmly dry and zippy in the mouth, bolstered by moderate tannin and just touches of newish vanillin oak, finishing with both the sweetness and snappy acidity typical of the varietal.



2008 [Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi](#), Lodi Barbera (\$12) – Visitors to Woodbridge’s tasting room on E. Woodbridge Rd. in Acampo are always rewarded by a plethora of small batch, spectacularly well priced, specialty grape bottlings not found on normal retail shelves. This Barbera expresses black cherryish varietal character tinged by maple syrup-like nuances, transitioning into plump, satisfying flavors strapped upon a zesty medium body.

2008 [Grands Amis](#), [Mokelumne River-Lodi](#) Barbera (\$20) – Grands Amis proprietor Jonathan Wetmore, and his winemaker Roger Nicholas, have made Barbera one of their areas of expertise; and oh, what a wonderful job they do with the grape: ultra-rich, concentrated blackberry fruit in the nose wrapped in cedary, cigarbox nuances; and velvety yet zesty edged flavors in the mouth, undiminished by firm yet polished tannins in a medium weight body. As good as it gets for any Barbera grown west of the River Po!



Borra's 80 year old Church Block: an historic mixed planting

Tags: [Alicante Bouschet](#), [Barbera](#), [Borra Vineyards](#), [Carignane](#), [Grands Amis Winery](#), [Jonathan Wetmore](#), [Lodi](#), [Markus Niggli](#), [Mokelumne River AVA](#), [Petite Sirah](#), [Roger Nicholas](#), [St. Amant Winery](#), [Steve Borra Sr.](#), [Uvaggio Wines](#), [Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi](#)

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