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## [Wine: Nuova Cappelletta wines are excellent – and good for you](#)

By JOE APPEL

Outwardly, the Piemontese wines of Nuova Cappelletta are humble. They stand in plain sight on a shelf or list, their pear-shaped bottles and somewhat lax label design a sort of unintentional homage to 1991: neither perfectly clear and modern nor alluringly enigmatic and postmodern. The grape names are listed front and center ("Barbera," "Chardonnay"), but really, these days what does that mean?

Another Barbera from Piemonte? This varietal has become too much the tabula rasa of northern Italy, a malleable sort of fruit that can be vinified cold and quick, in stainless, as a chillable quaffer, or oaked to low hell in an overworked attempt to quell its rambunctious acidity and make it ageable. Less scrupulous winegrowers who play it safe by picking Barbera too early reap what they sow: a green, unsatisfying wine that causes too many people to reach for a purple, unsatisfying Malbec in relief.

When Barbera is good, it makes terrific wine for everyday meals. But there's so much of the mediocre stuff around, and I've been burned plenty of times with restaurant glass pours, so at some point one stops risking it. (Barbera's naturally high acidity has especially good chances to cause quick deterioration in opened bottles improperly stored -- improper storage of by-the-glass wines being standard operating procedure at far too many restaurants.)

And Chardonnay? Come on. The last time anyone drank Chardonnay was 2002. Oh, it's Italian Chardonnay? Great. What Kendall Jackson drinker is going to make that leap? What Burgundy aspirant, in admission that his wallet can't align with his taste, will head southeast in search of a viable substitute?

And what bar manager, sommelier or retailer has enough respect for (or knowledge of) Chardonnay-not-from-Burgundy-or-Sonoma to promote its distinctiveness? Easier to throw a nondescript Argentine or Languedoc Chard on the list for \$16/bottle, \$7/glass and be done with it. Yet the Piemontese wines of Nuova Cappelletta are distinctive. They stand out in the sea of the generic, with vivid flavors, centrifugal tension, seamless integration, balance and length. I would choose the \$10 (retail) Nuova Cappelletta Chardonnay over 90 percent of \$15 Bourgogne Blancs on the market (not because it's "Burgundian," just because it's better).

What's especially exciting about the Chardonnay (besides the recently lowered price, a response by its distributor, Pine State, to the disregard it suffers) is that it is currently available in two vintages, 2010 and 2011. Exploring vintage variation is one of the great pleasures of wine, yet because so few people buy wine to hold it, the chance to experience the effects that weather and vine age have on a particular plot of land and its fruit is rare for the non-obsessed amateur.

When I first tasted the 2010 Chardonnay over a year ago, I was confused. I'd brought assumptions

(in sum: unoaked Chardonnay from a cool climate is going to be skinny and stony) that were upended. Rich and ripe, lusty and flush, viscous and boldly alcoholic, the wine was a bit much for me. I didn't rush to taste the 2011.

But I did. Much more tensile, saltier and lighter on its feet than the 2010 yet still with this amazing textural grip and overall loveliness, the wine changed my understanding of Chardonnay, and of Piemonte. And it brought me back to the 2010, a bottle of which I'd found in a discount bin (sigh), which remains quite fulsome and loaded but now wears more gracefully some of the bulky clothing it sported upon first release.

The point is, this is really fun. And can be yours for \$10 a bottle. (For now.) The Nuova Cappelletta Barbera del Monferrato 2011 costs a bit more (a still realistic \$13 or \$14 a bottle). The wine pulls off a trick that eludes so many Barbera producers: a rich, concentrated core of dark-cherry flavor, balanced by the buoyancy and expression of health that no Barbera should be without.

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