

WINES OF ITALY

# AMARONE

## AN ITALIAN WINE TREASURE

One of Italy's top wines, Amarone is made in a unique style but it is sometimes misunderstood and under-rated.

Stephen Quinn sets the record straight

**A**marone is an intense wine from the Valpolicella region of northern Italy made in a style unique to the region. It can be cellared for several decades, and is regarded as one of northern Italy's greatest red wines. Grapes are air-dried for up to 120 days after harvest, before being pressed to concentrate flavours. Traditionally, grapes were collected in wooden trays called *appassimento* and dried on cane tables. The process is still called "appassimento" even though the modern approach is to dry bunches in plastic trays in special rooms with huge fans. These controlled conditions stop grapes from spoiling.

Each tray contains about five kilogrammes of grapes, spread in one layer so the weight of grapes does not start fermentation. As the grapes shrivel they lose about 40% of their bulk but develop profound flavours through

the concentration of sugars, flavonoids and pigments. Ultimately 100kg of grapes will produce only about 50 bottles of Amarone, compared with double the number of bottles winemakers get from the same volume of grapes elsewhere in the country.

Amarone is a blend. The main grape variety is corvina whose thick skin makes it well suited for the drying process. The other main components are corvinone and rondinella. Corvinone translates as "big corvina" because people thought it was a relative of corvina but recent DNA shows the grapes are completely distinct. It contributes more tannins than corvina. Rondinella is related to corvina and its name comes from the round shape of the berries. Its resistance to fungal diseases makes it ideal for the drying process.

Several other grapes are sometimes added to the blend. Molina contributes acidity and gets its name from the Italian word "mulino"

(mill) because the white bloom on the grape resembles a dusting of flour. Small amounts of Oseleta and Raboso Piave add colour and tannic structure.

**T**he origins of the region's name are vague, with the most common theory suggesting the word is a blend of Latin and Greek: "Vallis-polis-cellae" meaning the valley of many cellars.

Grapes are harvested in late September or early October. Most winemakers dry their grapes for about three months, though some choose the maximum 120 days permitted under local regulations. Frozen winter temperatures help stop grapes from rotting. The drying process softens tannins in the skins.

Near the end of January or start of February whole bunches are crushed and undergo a low-temperature fermentation. Alcohol levels can be as high as 18%; the legal minimum is 14%. Wines rest in barrels for at least two years and are then cellared before being released four years from the time they were made. This explains why the 2013 wines only became available in January this year at Antepima Amarone. Riserva versions of the wine are cellared much longer, and some winemakers prefer to hold their wines back for up to a decade.

The amount of time wines are cellared explains why Amarone is expensive, along with high production costs and the occasional poor vintage when harvests are small or wet, such as in 2014. Rain during harvest can cause grapes to rot before they dry, so winemakers need to be diligent in removing low-grade grapes that can cause mouldy flavours in the wine.

Global sales totalled €330 million last year, a 5% rise on the previous year. The region produced almost 14.5 million bottles in 2016. About 80% of Amarone sales are

**Amarone is a blend. The main grape variety is corvina whose thick skin makes it well suited for the drying process**



Top: Air-dried grapes lose 40% of their bulk to produce a concentration of flavour. Below: Grapes are dried in wooden trays for up to 120 days after harvest

outside Italy. Major export markets include Germany, the US, Switzerland, the UK and Canada, though sales to Asia are rising and China is starting to pay close attention.

The region has old soils with lots of limestone and calcareous clay. "Limestone is synonymous with elegance in winemaking, just like in Burgundy," observed Diego Tomasi, director of the CREA-VIT Centre for Viticultural Research.

If fermentation is stopped early the resulting wine contains residual sugar (more than four grams per litre) and is known as Recioto. In fact Amarone is Recioto that has been fermented longer. The clue to this is the



The Amarone landscape in February with blue skies and dry land

fact the Italian word “amaro” means bitter and the name Amarone means the “great bitter”, to distinguish it from sweet Recioto.

Put another way, Amarone is the child of Recioto because both wines are made from the same dried grapes. Some locals say Amarone started as a mistake but that is probably an urban myth. The story offered involves a winemaker who lost track of a barrel of Recioto. Natural yeasts started fermentation again and the remaining sugar was converted to alcohol. The resulting wine had a bitter taste and higher alcohol, which explains the name.

According to Giancarlo Begnoni, who has been the winemaker at Santa Sofia for more than 50 years and is still making wine at the age of 81, the Bertani family made the first Amarone in 1958. Marcello Vaona, assistant winemaker to his father Giampaolo at the Novaia estate, noted that Recioto was the more prestigious wine in

the region until 30 years ago. “But Amarone has overtaken it and now enjoys a global reputation while Recioto is fading,” he said.

Besides Amarone and Recioto, the Valpolicella region produces other fine wines like Valpolicella, Valpolicella Superiore and Valpolicella Ripasso. Valpolicella is a fresh wine made from the same grapes as Amarone but released young; 2015 is the current vintage. Valpolicella Superiore must contain a minimum of 12% alcohol and spend at least a year in barrel. The current vintage is 2014.

Valpolicella Ripasso is made by adding young Valpolicella to the Amarone pomace for about 15 to 20 days. Pomace is the technical term for the pulpy residue remaining after grapes have been crushed. The result is a wine with lower acidity but higher alcohol than basic Valpolicella. Ripasso describes both the winemaking technique and the resulting wine.

Quintarelli is easily the most well-known

estate in Valpolicella. Its wines are so famous that demand outstrips supply. A group of South Korean sommeliers who visited last year were so impressed, they tried to order 10,000 bottles. The family sold them 15! Beauty shows in everything they do. Labels on the bottles are distinctive, handwritten by Quintarelli and his daughters.

Giuseppe Quintarelli founded the estate in 1924. When he died, aged 84, in January 2012 after six decades as a winemaker, *The New York Times* described his wines as “inspired passions ... like few others in Italy.

“In an era that emphasised mass production over attention to detail, Mr Quintarelli sought to make wines without compromise.”

A sense of serenity pervades the 11 hectare estate, as if untouched by the effects of modernity. The estate does not sell via a website; nor do they bother with Twitter and other social media. Giuseppe’s gentle grandson, Francesco Grigoli exuded calm during a tasting in the barrel room. Interestingly, a spittoon was not provided, and it seemed churlish even to consider spitting out these marvellous wines.

The estate still uses cane baskets instead of modern plastic trays during the drying process because, Francesco said, they are “kinder to the grapes”. The cane also absorbs humidity which helps stop grapes from rotting. Some of the keys to the quality of their wine include this respect for tradition and organic viticulture practices, plus the use of Slovakian oak for maturing the wine. Quintarelli employs a range of barrels from 10,000 to 550 litres. Barrels are custom made and expensive. The largest costs €20,000. Many display carvings depicting local customs and practices.

Rosso del Bepi, often called the “little Amarone”, was first made in 1924 and is one of the company’s signature wines. Giuseppe was known by the nickname “Bepi”. The current vintage is 2005, cellared for eight years after two years in Slavonian oak. This

soft and serene wine with low acidity is delicious. Flavours of liquorice and a range of spices linger for an eternity; a magical wine that extends the possibility of Valpolicella.

The current vintage for both the regular and riserva Amarone is 2007. Both spend eight years in the cellar. The riserva smelled like walking in a rose garden while basking in the warmth of the sun on a winter’s day. It is the only wine I’ve tasted that caused me to cry: sweet nostalgia for a time before the rush of modernity plus memories of a love that has faded like the roses.

Giancarlo Begnoni made his first riserva Amarone in 1964 and only 17 versions have appeared since. The riserva is named Gioe (“joy” in English). Begnoni believes in giving wines time and said he had 80,000 bottles “resting” in his cellar. The riserva stays for 24 months in Slavonian oak and another 18 months in French oak, while the regular Amarone gets 36 months in Slavonian oak, before both spend another year in the cellar.

Santa Sofia produces 550,000 bottles a year compared with Quintarelli’s 60,000. They export to 50 countries including China and Hong Kong. The estate is organic and plans to become biodynamic in future years. It was founded in 1811 and is housed in a villa built in 1560, once owned by the parents of the great Italian poet, Dante Alighieri.

Other producers may not have the reputation of Quintarelli but many passionate and talented people are making beautiful wine in the region. These include Carlo Boscaini, whose 2013 Zane Valpolicella Classico Ripasso is a fine wine, artisanal yet precise with soft acids and a tannic backbone of fine chalkiness. Mirko Sella, winemaker and owner at San Cassiano, makes about 60,000 bottles a year. His sophisticated 2012 Le Alene Valpolicella Superiore from a dedicated vineyard near the estate’s farmhouse cascades into several layers of flavour, with aromas of liquorice, coffee, spice and chalk; another beautiful “baby” Amarone.♦

**The amount of time wines are cellared explains why Amarone is expensive, along with high production costs and the occasional poor vintage when harvests are small or wet**