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Amarone, the Mistake That Turned a Region on Its Head

It's rich, it's expensive, and it's made the fortunes of Italy's Valpolicella region



By Elisabetta Tosi | March 16, 2022



The Carlo Boscarini winery, an Amarone producer, in Valpolicella, Italy. Photo by Photofra/Shutterstock.

Valpolicella is a region near Verona that's renowned for its historic villas, its vine-clad hills, and the quarries that have produced marble and granite since prehistoric times.

It's also the home of **Amarone della Valpolicella**, a red wine made from dried grapes. Amarone's considered the king of a court of four wines: Valpolicella, Valpolicella Superiore, Ripasso and Recioto, all of which are made from the Corvina, Corvinone and Rondinella grapes.

Those are the things everybody can agree on. It's history, however, things are not so clear. Some think it's a very old wine that dates back to Roman times, while others are convinced it's a recent product.

A bit of history

The parent of Amarone – Recioto della Valpolicella – does, indeed, date back to pre-Roman times. It's a sweet red wine made using three indigenous grapes: Corvina, Rondinella, and Molinara, though this last one is no longer used as much as it once was. After three months of drying in ventilated lofts, a process known as *appassimento*, the grapes are crushed and fermented, and the fermentation is then interrupted to preserve some sweetness.

This is usually done by the winemaker pouring the wine from one vessel to another, or by lowering the temperature. If it's not done correctly, the yeast converts all the sugar to alcohol and the wine becomes dry. The production of this drier wine was considered an unfortunate accident. Wealthier families gave the wine to their servants, and farmers would drink it at the end of a meal as a digestive. Over time, tastes changed, and the drier taste was embraced.

In 1936, a "dry Recioto" made by accident in Cantina Valpolicella Negrar made a big impact on the general manager of the time. However, production remained limited, because there was little demand for the style. Moreover, winemakers weren't aware of all the complex phenomena that occur in the process of appassimento, nor could they control the gray rot that sometimes infected the grapes.

The French, however, had found a way to make a sweet white wine – the highly-prized **Sauternes** – from partially dried grapes infected with so-called noble rot, the beneficial form of *Botrytis cinerea*. Giorgio Bolla of the eponymous winery, who studied the process for years, eventually applied the French technique to the red grapes of Valpolicella, with great success. His father Alberto Bolla loved the wine, and a special bottle was produced in 1953 to celebrate his 80th birthday. This Recioto Amarone Riserva del Nonno 1950, or Recioto Amarone Grandfather's Reserve 1950, is regarded as the first bottle of Amarone officially sold on the market.

A new era began for the Valpolicella wine region.

What's happening now

Many things have changed since then.

"The most important change I notice is the climate," says Daniele Accordini, winemaker and general manager of Cantina Valpolicella Negrar, explaining that as it gets warmer, the grapes ripen earlier and have a higher sugar level. "The drying process has also changed. In the past it was natural, with no control at all, and the attacks of the worst form of *Botrytis* were frequent. Now, most of

the fruit drying sheds have a computer to control temperature and humidity, so nasty surprises are rare.”

And now it's Amarone that's the flagship wine of the region, not its sweeter ancestor. The styles have changed as well. “Nowadays Amarone wines aren't as heavy and difficult to drink as sometimes they could be in the past,” explains Cristian Ridolfi, winemaker of Cantina Santi. “Because of **climate change** and better viticulture, even the aging times are getting shorter. The outcome is an Amarone that you can drink earlier and easier to pair with foods of international cuisine.”

Amarone began to be popular by the 1990s and shows no signs of slowing down. In 2010, there were less than 13 million bottles of Amarone and Recioto della Valpolicella produced, most of which was Amarone. By 2020, that number had risen to over 15 million, according to the Valpolicella consortium.

But there's a challenge ahead.

Today, there's another Valpolicella wine on the rise: Valpolicella Ripasso.

A late 20th-century style, it involves taking the leftover Amarone pomace – skins and seeds – to add to the still red Valpolicella wine, giving it higher alcohol. To ensure a steady supply, there must be sufficient Amarone being made. But Amarone is far more expensive than Valpolicella Ripasso. Will consumers agree to buy more Amarone, while still paying the same price for it?

Then there's Valpolicella itself, a fresh and lively wine that's the only one made in the region that fulfills the growing demand for more drinkable, **lower alcohol wines**. As it's mostly used to produce Ripasso, it risks disappearing from the shelves of wine shops.

Satisfying the world's thirst for Ripasso, preserving the profitability of Amarone, and maintaining the supply of fresh Valpolicella are challenges for the region.

As for Recioto della Valpolicella, the ancestral style, it continues its slow demise. But as the Amarone story shows, the Valpolicella region itself is still dynamic and evolving.

3 Amarone to try:



Secondo Marco Amarone della Valpolicella Classico DOCG 2011

The most historic part of the denomination is called "Classico Valpolicella," and is comprised of five valleys, one of which is Fumane. Made with grapes grown in that valley, this wine has a plentiful nose of red fruits, tobacco, plums, cocoa, garden herbs, and spice. The sip is savory and pleasant, refreshing despite the powerful structure. Long and smooth, it surprises with its silky tannins.

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Armani Cuslanus Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Riserva 2015

Produced only in the best vintages with grapes from the small Marano valley, the nose shows a basket of ripe cherries with balsamic and resinous hints; in the mouth is slightly spicy, round, velvety, with a slender yet balanced structure, juicy acidity, and long and clean finish.

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Santi Santico Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG 2016

In this wine only Corvina and Rondinella have been used, no Corvinone, so the result is a more fruity and approachable Amarone. At the nose it expresses flavors of dark plums, cherries, and berries, while the taste is savory and intense. Well balanced, it has a long and enjoyable persistence.

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