



The International Wine Review

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Report #41: The Amarones of Valpolicella

Introduction



Amarone della Valpolicella is one of Italy's iconic wines. Made from dried grapes, it has few peers in the world of table wines. It is also laborious and costly to produce, yielding only half as much as non-dried grape wines, yet requiring multiple passes through the vineyard at harvest time, constant attention during the drying process (*appassimento*), and extended barrel aging. The resulting high price of good quality Amarone combined with most consumer's unfamiliarity with the wine make it a difficult wine to market. This report aims to explain Amarone, identify the best producers, review the current vintages on the market, and recommend how to purchase and consume one of the world's most exotic wines.

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The grapes for Amarone are produced in the valleys that run south from the Monti Lessini foothills to the plains that range from Lake Garda in the west to Soave in the east. As we found in last year's Report # 35 *The Wines of Soave*, the best grapes come from the terraced vineyards of the valley peaks and walls, but growers have responded to high grape prices by planting outside the traditional (Classico) growing area in the flat plains of the valleys. Increased plantings, higher volumes of Amarone, and some observers' perceptions of reduced quality have created unresolved tensions between the elite producers and those, especially the large cooperatives, making lower priced Amarones for the mass market. Our in depth evaluation of the Amarones being produced today helps shed light on the question of whether today's Amarone is worthy of its iconic status.

Our visit to Valpolicella coincided with the Anteprema Amarone event (January 2014) that showcased the just released



In this Issue

Introduction	1
Amarone's Terroir: Soils and Climate	3
A Brief History of Amarone	4
The Grapes of Amarone	6
The Vineyard	7
Winemaking	8
Styles of Amarone.....	9
Amarone and Food	10
The Market for Amarone.....	11
Tasting Notes and Ratings.....	13
Annexes	
1. Vintages 2000-2013.....	26
2. Cooperatives in Valpolicella	27

2010 vintage, the first to carry the prestigious DOCG qualification. The vintage date is important in the Valpolicella region, which experiences significant variations in climate from year to year. Our tastings of vintages ranging from 1967 to 2010 provide guidance to the consumer, be it one looking for early drinking wines or wishing to cellar them for a decade or more. Vintage reports and evaluations from the last decade are given in Annex 1.

In addition to vintage variations, the quality and style of Amarone also vary by where the grapes are grown, how they're dried and vinified, and the nature of the oak regime. These are all topics examined in this report. We pay special attention to *appassimento*, the drying process unique to Amarone. We also explore the differences between Amarones that are traditional in style and those that are more modern or international in style.

Introduction

Continued from page 1

As noted, the production of Amarone has been growing—a 48% increase over just the past decade—and wines are now being sold at a wide range of price points, from under \$30 to over \$350 a bottle. While a wide range of prices is a marketing challenge, we find good value Amarones at all price points. Good value, high overall quality, and the unique complexity, balance and rich dried fruit of Amarone argue for its continued commercial success. We make several recommendations concerning the marketing of Amarone in this report.

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Mike Potashnik and Don Winkler with Geralyn Brostrom,
Contributing Editor

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