

Amarone

by Michael Tabone

AMONG my favourite wines is one called Amarone della Valpolicella and one of my favourite producers is Masi. Fortunately I have tasted a few vintages from this producer and am very proud of a case that I possess from the 1993 vintage. Recently a friend of mine celebrated his birthday so I invited him to taste a bottle with me.

Masi's Amarone is produced from grapes in the hills of the *Classico* zone and is vinified in the classical method reaching an alcohol content of 15%. I purposely did not open the bottle beforehand because I wanted to experience the evolution of aromas and flavours in the glass.

Predictably, to start off with, the aroma was very subtle with a hint of oxidation but after a few minutes the wine opened up beautifully to reveal a huge creamy wine of great concentration and complexity.

Flavours of ripe cherries and roast game dominated the evolution with a classical sweet and sour attack and finish. I think I will move the rest of the case to the "not to be touched for a long time" section of my cellar.

Amarone is without a doubt one of the greatest wines to come out of Italy. It is produced from dried grapes in the Veneto region in the north east, better known for the commercial wines of Soave and Valpolicella.

The same grapes used in commercial Valpolicella are used to produce the Amarone. These are Corvina, which is the dominant

grape, with a little Molinara and Rondinella.

After harvest, the best and ripest bunches of grapes are put in special air lofts to be dried. This treatment is called the *appassimento* and normally takes three months or so. During this period the grapes are attacked to a certain extent with the famous *Botrytis cinerea*, also known as noble rot, hence reducing the moisture content and concentrating the sugars in the grapes.

When the *appassimento* is finished

the grapes are slowly crushed and left to macerate in cold winter temperatures where the slow fermentation into alcohol starts. The whole maceration and fermentation period lasts about 45 days after which the wine is put into large barrels of Slovenian oak for aging. While aging, the wine continues to develop by turning the still high residual sugar into alcohol which usually ends up around 15% alcohol.

The method of vinification described here is the most commonly used but may vary from producer to producer. Generally it depends on the vintage and whether the

Amarone is from the *Classico* zone or from individual estates and vineyards. Some producers also extend the *appassimento* period to produce heavier, more raisined, older flavours in their wines. There are also different policies for releasing the wines. While, for example, Masi offers his wines for sale after four years of aging, Bertani sometimes extends this to ten years.

Because of the high alcohol content and the huge concentration of the wine Amarone may not be to everyone's liking but it is certainly a great wine and one that is gaining immense popularity across Europe. Production is very small, around two million bottles, and it is estimated that demand will outstrip supply, so prices are expected to go up.

If you decide to try a bottle, unlike most other wine regions of Italy, most producers of Amarone are quite reliable, although vintages, vineyards of origin and prices vary. Among the best I have tried are Bolla, Bertani, Tomasi, Cantina Sociale di Soave and of course Masi.

Although you might still find bottles called Recioto di Valpolicella Amarone, most bottles nowadays are simply called Amarone della Valpolicella and are not to be confused with normal Valpolicella, *ripassa* or *recioto*. Look out for the word Amarone.



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