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**Your essential guide to
what's new and exciting
in Italian wine**

- **Fantastic Italian wine buys**
- **What's new in the regions**
- **The people behind the labels**
- **Great wines to lay down**

Wine

Running for the hills

With no laws to differentiate between vineyards used for Valpolicella and those used for Amarone, producers in this young DOCG worry that standards are slipping as unworthy wines cash in on the lucrative Amarone boom. Michael Garner reports from the region



Ullmann

'WE MUST DECIDE whether we want to make great Amarone or do great business,' declares Sandro Boscaini, president of Masi and articulate ambassador for Veronese wines. 'In my view, the decision to produce Amarone should never be taken for purely commercial reasons.'

The rise of Amarone over the past few decades has been unstoppable: with roughly 13 million bottles produced a year, more Amarone is being made than Barolo.

This stellar growth has prompted the Valpolicella producers' consortium to limit the amount of fruit that producers can set aside for *appassimento* (the grape drying process which forms the basis of Amarone production) to 50% of

'Where will Amarone be in 20 years' time? Back where it belongs, in the hills' Franco Allegrini

their total harvest. To put that into perspective, in the 1970s when Amarone was taking its first uncertain steps on the path towards widespread recognition, the figure barely exceeded 5%.

Leading wineries are worried that standards are slipping: current legislation makes no real distinction between whether vineyards are being used to grow grapes for Valpolicella or Amarone, and the temptation to cash in on the boom is becoming a real problem. **Established growers** ➤

Below: Romano Dal Forno's small 8ha estate in Val d'Illasi actually lies outside the Valpolicella Classico zone, yet produces some of the Amarone DOCG's finest - if most modern - wines





such as Giampaolo Speri argue that the only solution is to set up a vineyard register for the production of Amarone grapes. This would identify suitable hillside sites in Valpolicella Classico, plus Valpantena and the larger, so-called 'extended zone' to the east which became part of the overall Valpolicella denomination with the arrival of the DOC in 1968.

Amarone, a DOCG from the 2010 vintage, comes in two forms depending on the area of production: Amarone Classico or 'straight' Amarone from the extended zone. Interest in this wine has been spurred on by a good spell of vintages, with 2006 to 2010 inclusive all having been rated as either four- or five-star quality, with 2006 and 2009 standing out for their extra ageing potential.

Location, location, location

The concern is over the potential dilution or compromise of those characteristics that make Amarone great in the first place. These derive from the vineyards – but only those sited on the right hillsides, says Speri (whose 50ha of vines lie within Classico), where gradual ripening thanks to marked diurnal temperature variations allows the fruit to develop the thick, resistant skins to withstand

Amarone's 10 names to know

Accordini

Tiziano Accordini's new cellars high up at Cavolo in the Fumane valley should finally allow him enough space to express himself without restrictions. An exemplary range of Valpolicella-based wines in which his Il Forno Amarone Classico, made solely from Corvina and Corvinone grapes, stands out.

Allegrini

Franco Allegrini is well known for a number of highly individual wines, but Amarone is arguably what he does best. His steadfast production of no more than 120,000 bottles a year of just one version of Amarone Classico (see box, p36) ensures that you'll always drink wine made from the very best fruit of the vintage.

Begali

This is a small-scale, artisanal Valpolicella specialist with 8ha of vineyard at Cengia near San Pietro in Cariano, whose wines display a beguilingly rustic, handcrafted charm. Begali's traditionally styled Amarone Classico is great value and among the most enjoyable and typical wines of the denomination (see box, p36).

Le Salette

A family-run operation based at Fumane with 20ha of vineyards. While the wines are



Above: Romano Dal Forno is noted for his modern, hedonistic style of Amarone
Right: Allegrini's renaissance-built Palazzo della Torre villa and vineyard in Fumane

not short on structure and concentration, they show a reassuringly approachable style and are often most impressive for their sheer drinkability. The more traditional Amarone Classico La Marega is a case in point (see box, p36).

Masi

A historic yet innovative producer, Masi has long been a leading house for Veronese wines and is one of the few producers who believe the presence of a small, controlled amount of noble rot favours adds complexity in Amarone. It's difficult to choose from the range of five different versions but the Mazzano cru from Negrar is a personal



favourite of mine, demonstrating perfectly how a degree of austerity adds an extra dimension to a fine wine.

Quintarelli

Bepi Quintarelli is widely recognised as the founding father of great Amarone. In the words of one of the many producers he inspired, 'Bepi's wines made time stand still.' Sadly the great man died in 2012, though his

'Giampaolo Speri argues that the only solution is to set up a vineyard register for the production of Amarone grapes'

appassimento and give rise to the singular aromas that define the wine.

Similarly, *appassimento* is best carried out at altitude, well above the warmer and damper conditions of the valley floor – unless giant fans are used to ward off mould and regulate humidity, as at the nearby Terre di Fumane's large drying plant.

'We can only dry grapes that are in absolutely perfect condition in the hillside drying loft; even then it's still a risky business,' Speri explains.

Few growers, whether in the Classico or extended zone, would argue with that assessment. 'Our concern must be the true nature of Amarone; this is not a debate about the relative merits of the two areas. There are great vineyard sites in the extended zone too, but only those [that are] on the hillsides.'

The emergence of a new wave of producers to the



Above: at Speri, the best grapes are left for about 120 days over winter to dry on traditional racks in a hillside drying loft

east of Classico in the 1980s opened a fresh chapter in Amarone's story. The mercurial Romano Dal Forno, whose cathedral-like cellars in the Val d'Illasi lie closer to Soave than Valpolicella Classico, turned prevailing wisdom on its head with the release of a new breed of Amarone. With brooding power and concentration, his wines were deliberately styled to match or even surpass the ageing potential previously seen in only the top selections from the Classico zone.

Since then, the arrival of Soave luminaries Pieropan and Ca' Rugate has lit up the growing reputation for the area that many producers – including Corte Sant'Alda, Roccolo Grassi, Tenuta Sant'Antonio and Trabucchi, along with emerging talents such as Marion, Monte Zovo and Mosconi – are working to consolidate.

Differing styles

While a new sense of collective responsibility among so-called 'serious' growers bodes well, various aspects of existing production regulations do not. A minimum requirement of 14% abv, the possible 12g/l residual sugar permitted and perhaps most contentiously of all, the optional inclusion of up to 25% of international grape varieties really do seem to fly in the face of Amarone's identity.

The top selections of Amarone can reach up to 17.5% abv. Amarone is – as the name implies – a dry wine whose sensations of sweetness derive as much from the high glycerol content promoted by *appassimento* as unfermented grape sugars, and there is no longstanding practice of using any other than local varieties in the blend.

Franco Allegrini, of the illustrious Fumane-based winery, also identifies a strengthening of the common cause, confirming a tendency away from the 'muscular yet jammy' style of wine that became almost a rite of passage for premium Italian reds, towards the sort of elegance and balance that fine Amarone – paradoxically, perhaps, given the wine's extraordinary dimensions – aims for and can attain. 'Where will Amarone be in 20 years' time? Back where it belongs, in the hills,' he says. 'But for the moment we have various issues to sort out, not least the fact that Amarone comes about from a >



Left: the legendary traditional style of Quintarelli Amarone is very long lived

Sant'Antonio

A 50ha estate run by four brothers in the hills between Mezzane and Illasi in the extended zone. Producing classic examples of a more modern style of Amarone, its Selezione Antonio Castagnedi is a beautifully balanced and elegant wine (see box, p36).

Speri

Based at Pedemonte and in the process of converting to organically grown fruit with promising results, Speri makes a small range of wines, all model versions of its respective denominations. Like Allegrini, it makes just one Amarone: Sant'Urbano from its steep vineyards at Fumane is consistently one of the finest examples available (see box, p36).

Viviani

High in the Negrar valley with 10ha of vines at Mazzano and Panego, Claudio Viviani makes a Valpolicella Classico to die for. He's no slouch with Amarone either and from mainly Guyot-trained vineyards, produces two versions. The Classico is beautifully balanced (see box, p36) and the Casa dei Bepi has amazing breadth of aroma and depth of flavour.

daughter Fiorenza and two grandsons seem determined to maintain inviolate the legend and his legacy. The traditionally styled Amarone spent up to eight years in barrel and remains one of the longest-lived wines of the denomination.

Romano Dal Forno

Though the modern, hedonistic style of for which Romano Dal Forno became famous may be less fashionable of late, the sheer quality of the raw materials he works with continues to perfume the aura that surrounds him. His Monte Lodelletta Amarone is one for any wine anorak's bucket list (see box, p36).

Garner's top 10 wines



Allegrini, Amarone Classico 2009 19/20pts (96/100pts)
 £50–£56 widely available via Liberty Wines
 Round, ripe and perfumed with hints of cherry, chocolate, herbs and woodsmoke. Glorious balance, depth of flavour and length. Finishes with a twist of smoky, dark chocolate-covered raisins. **Drink** 2014–2025
Alcohol 15.8%

Masi, Vaio Armaron, Amarone Classico 2006 19 (96)
 £34–£46 AG Wines, Winedirect
 Very forward and ripe – almost prune – with tobacco and spice notes. Immensely soft, round and approachable: lush fruit flavours with spicy perfumes. Long, full and voluptuous. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 15.5%



Speri, Vigneto Sant'Urbano, Amarone Classico 2009 19 (96)
 £47.50 (2008) Pipal
 Beautifully fresh and ripe damson fruit with floral and spicy notes. Delightfully soft and spreading texture with fine balance. Long, herbal-toned finish. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 13.5%

Viviani, Amarone Classico 2008 19 (96)
 £23.40 (in bond) Justerini & Brooks
 Fragrant mint and tobacco notes over deep, tight aromas of plum and cherry. Beautifully balanced: sensuous black cherry fruit with fresh underlying acid, juicy and mouthfilling. Finishes long and clean as a whistle. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 15.5%



Romano Dal Forno, Monte Lodoletta, Amarone 2006 18.75 (95+)
 £200–£300 widely available via Armit Wines
 Dense, sweet and floral: gargantuan. Super-concentrated, rich and sweet with notes of charred red pepper, oak and spice. Massive, muscular follow through. A time capsule. **Drink** 2020–2030 **Alc** 17%

Begali, Monte Ca' Bianca, Amarone Classico 2008 18.5 (95)
 N/A UK begaliwine.it
 Round, full and perfumed nose with notes of black cherry and plum. Intense, smoky, ripe, rich and densely textured with powerful black fruit flavours. Huge: needs time. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 16%



Le Salette, La Marega, Amarone Classico 2010 18.25 (94)
 £33–£39.99 (2009) AG Wines, Wined Up Here, Woodwinters
 Inviting nose of *appassiti* grapes. Sweet, floral and fresh with lurking power; soft and spreading with a tapering finish. Drinkable already and a medium-term keeper. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 15%



Marion, Amarone 2009 18.25 (94)
 £50 (in bond) Berry Bros & Rudd, Woodwinters
 Broad and ripe with blue and black fruit aromas, well-integrated oak and just a hint of molasses. Full, round, rich and ripe; surprisingly gentle with developed though subtle dried fruit flavours and a touch of camphor. Balances the alcohol well; great length. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 16%



Sant'Antonio, Selezione Antonio Castagnedi, Amarone 2010 18 (93)
 N/A UK tenutasantantonio.it
 Full and rich with oaky notes over black fruit aromas. Round, ripe and mouthfilling black fruit flavours; a polished wine with some fatness though good acidity. Will keep. **Drink** 2015–2025 **Alc** 15%

Scriani, Amarone Classico Riserva 2008 18 (93)
 N/A UK scriani.it
 Full, ripe, sweet and earthy: plums and tobacco. Round, rich and impressive structure. Long, with a perfumed finish. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alc** 16%

For full details of UK stockists, see p88



'The decision to produce Amarone should never be taken for purely commercial reasons'

Sandro Boscaini (above)

selection of grapes at harvest time, and not from dedicated vineyards.'

Like Boscaini, Allegrini is not afraid to go out on a limb. Amarone has traditionally been produced from a selection of the finest grapes from the finest vineyards, and many argue it should remain so: why not therefore use any remaining fruit to make Valpolicella instead?

Big is not always better when choosing the right bottle of Amarone. The vast majority of today's finer wines comes from either medium-sized producers like Allegrini or Masi, or smaller-scale specialist growers. Even then the inevitable *caveat emptor* applies – some of the boutique wineries can lack consistency, and problems with reduction, volatility and excess of new oak or alcohol have not entirely gone away.

Meanwhile, some of the larger bottlers make good Amarone (Bolla, for example, or the limited bottlings from the Cantina di Negrar co-operative such as Vigneti di Torbe and the Espressioni range).

While overall winemaking standards in the area are considerably higher than just 10 years ago, the name of the producer remains the single most important piece of information on the label. Moves to change the law may face a political minefield. Even so, a greater focus on appropriate legislation and identification of the best vineyards could resolve the problems of Amarone's darker side. **D**

Michael Garner has specialised in Italian wine for more than 25 years as an importer, author and educator