



ZENATO®

EATER

There's a Valpolicella to Go With Every Dish

Valpolicella: From appetizer to dessert, one red wine in four styles.

by Susan H. Gordon, November 24, 2015

In Valpolicella, home of Italy's revered Amarone, references to the Nebbiolo-based wines of neighboring Piedmont and Lombardy crop up unexpectedly. Perhaps it's hard for winemakers here not to think of Barolo or Valtellina, those insistently tannic varieties just to the west. But this viticultural zone in Verona, Veneto, has its own gems to offer. Four more restrained and slightly less grippy blends—only one of which is the powerhouse Amarone—centered on the native Corvina Veronese grape are made into wines that run from fresh to bold to sweet using one of four winemaking methods.

Verona has been famous for its red wine since Roman times. The sweet wine with a brilliant ruby hue about which writers like Cassiodorus Senator, sixth-century advisor to Ostrogoth kings, and Andrea Bacci, sixteenth-century author of the epic seven-volume wine guide *De naturalibus vinorum historia*, rhapsodized glints just as brightly now as it did back then. And today imbibers have even more styles from which to choose.

In fact, for all its fame, Amarone is a relative newcomer, produced commercially for the first time in the 1950s and an accidental offshoot of the centuries-old sweet style that's now officially designated Recioto di Valpolicella DOCG.

Valpolicella Styles

"The history of wine is the history of sweet wine," offers Fabio Mencarelli and Pietro Tonutti, editors of the historical-scientific tome *Sweet, Reinforced and Fortified Wines: Grape Biochemistry, Technology and Vinification*. Per local legend, left to ferment too long, a neglected batch of Recioto traded its residual sugar for slate-y savouriness, tannin-driven complexity, and higher alcohol to become, technically, a recioto scappato and colloquially, an amarone, or bitter wine, which was then added to the Valpolicella lineup.

A traditional-style Amarone hovers near 14 percent alcohol, a truer interpretation of both grape and culture than the beefier 17-percenters that often incorporate non-indigenous grapes in order to satisfy international tastes: "It's impossible to use Valpolicella grapes to get that color and sweetness," says Tenute SalvaTerra's Paolo Fontana of those big, inky wines. "We want a product that is more drinkable, more typical. Our goal is to create an Amarone cru." To get there, SalvaTerra also turns to rarely used native grape varieties such as Oseleta, which was saved from extinction in the 1970s and allowed in top wines since 2002.

There's a crucial Valpolicellan touch at play in the adage "Drying is the Veronese signature," explains Marion Winery's Stefano Campedelli of the zone's famed dehydrated grapes. He also points to second-use Slovenian oak barrels as the kind of wood best suited to a genuine take on Valpolicella terroir. Appassimento, or partial drying, takes place under precise conditions in well-ventilated rooms known as fruttai, in which whole grape bunches are either arranged in single layers in stacked bins or hung in dazzling purple-blue sheets that tumble from ceiling to floor.

An appropriate environment is key. Even a hint of the botrytis, or noble rot, prized in French Sauternes and Hungarian Tokaji, will spoil the fresh, elegantly austere mix of sour cherry, pine, and sharper spices like clove and black pepper that is Valpolicella's fame. "Amarone wine, one of the most prized wines in the world, is the first wine in which the drying is a controlled process. [Dehydration] changes the grape at the biochemical level, and involves specialist vine management, postharvest technology and production processes, which are different from the typical wine-making procedure," explain Mencarelli and Tonutti.

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Cherry and olive trees, still a presence here, dominated the landscape until just a few decades ago: fruit from the former was once more profitable than wine. That changed with Amarone's rising fame. Today's Valpolicella zone—a fingerlike series of 11 valleys flowing south from the Lessini Prealps, calcareous ridges rising between them, that begins near the Adige river—stretches eastward to end only where white wine-producing Soave begins (winemakers near the border often have vineyards in both areas and produce examples of both appellations). In these soils that vary from limestone to basalt to red and brown clay, the native cherry-scented Corvina is queen, closely followed by darker-skinned, acidic Corvinone, then Rondinella and Molinara, in rough quality order, along with lesser-known grapes like the small-berried Oseleta and a handful of international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

A combination of those grapes, always with Corvina, is the base of all four styles. Valpolicella DOC, a peppery, minty, fresh cherry counterpart to Amarone and Recioto, is the appellation's most basic wine and the only one made with non-dried grapes, though it too may include a percentage of dried ones. In 2007, a way to add heft in both body and flavor to simple Valpolicella came into its own: by stirring in must from the year's Amarone or Recioto production then putting that mix through a second fermentation. Valpolicella Ripasso DOC, the final style, is heartier and more complex than the basic, yet daintier than Amarone (which is sometimes simply blended in at up to 15 percent in lieu of refermentation).

From the freshest Valpolicella, hinting at the flavors brought forth when those grapes are dried, to winemaking feats that yield hearty elegance and typicity, here are some of the zone's most representative wines, to be opened from appetizer to dessert and after.

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Producer: Zenato
Wine: Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, 2010
Retail: \$58

This second-generation-run winery is in Valpolicella Classico's Sant'Ambrogio zone, comprised of 35 hectares planted with Corvina, Rondinella, and Oseleta grapevines, which are picked by hand come harvest time. With magazine and book recognition like *Gambero Rosso's* Tre Bicchieri award and inclusion as a vinc dell'eccellenza in *Le Guide de L'Espresso's* Vini d'Italia 2016, Zenato's wines are rich, accessible expressions of traditional Valpolicella.

Falling just shy of a deep, opaque ruby color, this Amarone offers both fruit (prune, candied sour cherry) and heft (those tannins!) thanks to grapes (80 percent Corvina, 10 percent Rondinella, 10 percent Oseleta) that have been left to dry for up to four months. It's a simple, satisfying expression of this great wine style, and one in which the high percentage of Corvina and the addition of Oseleta can be tasted (and seen). Amarone from the Classico area is said to have a tannic quality similar to Barolo and Barbaresco: Zenato proves that true, while keeping to Valpolicella's fruitiness.

Valpolicella: The lightest of the four styles, basic Valpolicella is made with non-dried grapes for an elegant, refreshing wine with sour cherry and eucalyptus notes. Drink it as a session red, or pair with salumi and mild aged cheeses.

Valpolicella Ripasso: This bolder, more complex style is made with both fresh and dehydrated grapes: basic Valpolicella is refermented with dried grape skins left over from the year's Amarone production, adding flavors like baked fruit, cedar, and tobacco. Ripasso goes well with earthy dishes like with meat sauces, meatloaf, and eggplant dishes.

Amarone della Valpolicella: The heartiest of Valpolicella's four styles, Amarone is made with dehydrated grapes, for a full body and cherry, plum, and pine resin notes. This wine was born out of a mistake—when a Recioto, the area's famous sweet red, was left to ferment too long, resulting in a dry wine that became Valpolicella's star. Steak, pork-based stews, and game are its natural accompaniments.

Recioto della Valpolicella: This sweet style is the area's oldest, with production dating back to at least Roman times. It's made from dehydrated grapes, with fermentation stopped in time to preserve some of the grapes' sugar. Think blue cheeses and biscotti.