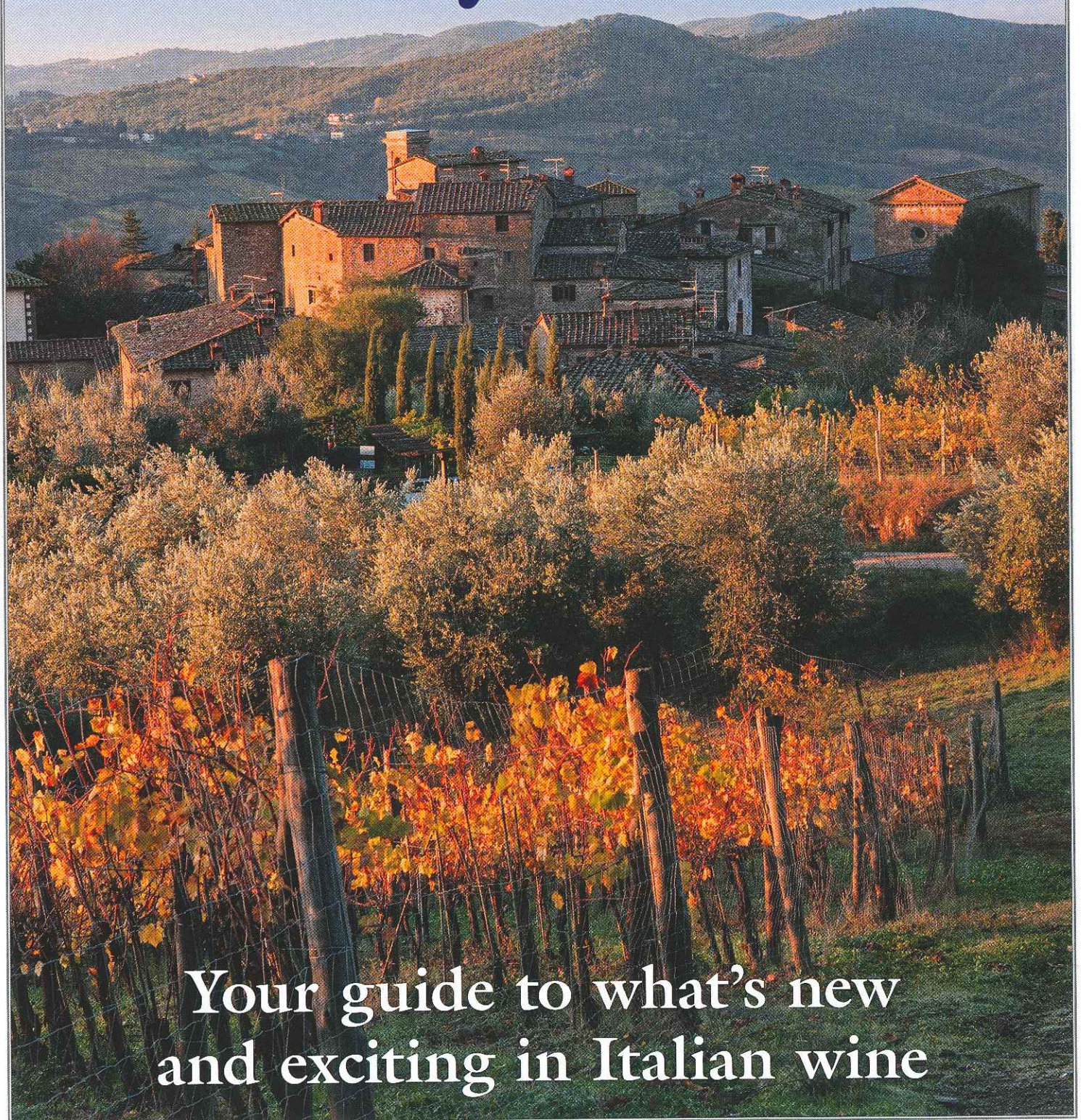


The world's best wine magazine

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Italy 2017



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

Amarone della Valpolicella: igniting passions

The powerful, characterful reds that emerge from a small corner of the Veneto region in north Italy have been much admired for at least two thousand years. But there is some disquiet in the ancient house of Amarone, as Robin Lee reports



HOW SHALL I praise the Rhaetian grape divine? Virgil pondered in *The Georgics*. Valpolicella's remarkable wines have been admired since ancient times. 'We order you to visit the cultivators of Verona, and offer them a sufficient price for this product of theirs,' wrote Cassiodorus, prime minister to Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, in a letter to the Canonarius of the Venetiae, the collector of the local tribute. 'It is purple, as becomes the wine of kings. Sweet and strong, it grows more dense in tasting it, so that you might doubt whether it was liquid food or edible drink.'

The Valpolicella wines are exceptional, even for Italy – not only for being so ancient, but also for their unique identity, thanks to a blend of indigenous grape varieties for all its wines, as well as the appassimento system that requires the grapes be dried for a minimum of 100 days before they are made into wine.

Unlike Barolo, which until the late 19th century was a sweet and probably fizzy rosé of little note, the celebrated wines of Valpolicella have evolved *sui generis*, and far from any influence from France.

'Amarone is our flagship – it is an incredible patrimony,' explains Sandro Boscaini, the charismatic president of Masi, who has earned himself the nickname 'Mr Amarone' for his lifelong mission to promote the merits of Amarone and open new markets for it. Thanks largely to his efforts, the Masi Group sells 12 million bottles a year, from the entry-level to Amarone single-vineyard cru. 'The originality of our wine is something that can only come from the interaction between terroir and grape varieties and winemaking technique,' Boscaini explains. 'There is nothing in the world like what we have.'

Disputed territory

Boscaini believes, however, that wines designated Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG (see box) should only come from the Classico zone of this region – Valpolicella's original five communes, Sant'Ambrogio, Fumane, Marano, Negrar and San Pietro in Cariano. The larger area, known as the *allargata* (enlarged) zone, encompassed by the current Amarone DOCG, he believes should be designated differently. 'It's a crime against geography!' he exclaims.

Boscaini also believes there is a political bias in Italy which favours large, industrial-scale producers of poor quality wines. In response to this, Boscaini has been instrumental in establishing the Amarone Families association (see box, p31). The official Valpolicella consorzio, responsible for enforcing the appellation rules as well as for

promoting the region's wines, is now taking legal action against the Amarone Families for using the protected name 'Amarone'. A legal judgement is expected later this year.

As critics are quick to observe, although the Amarone Families claim to represent the small-scale artisan against big business, its members in fact include some of the biggest producers in the region, and indeed Italy.

The group's response to this is that the threat to quality does not come from family brands, no matter how large their businesses may be, because the historic winemaking families of the region have a vested interest in preserving the region's reputation for the long term. The problem, as its members see it, comes from producers outside the Classico region undermining Amarone's reputation by supplying own-label brands for supermarkets with scant concern for quality or authenticity.

Paradoxically, some of the most traditional producers are not part of Amarone Families, and do not even necessarily fit its criteria. Bertani, one of the oldest producers, but which is no longer owned by the Bertani family, is not part of Amarone Families, yet is among the most stalwart of the traditionalists, and proves its long-term commitment to quality by continuous and substantial investment in the preservation of its historic vineyards and ➤



'There is nothing in the world like what we have'

Sandro Boscaini, Masi

Left: appassimento grapes are laid out on bamboo racks in the drying loft at Masi

Valpolicella's range of styles

Valpolicella DOC A light, fresh style of red made from a maximum 95% Corvina blended with Corvinone and sometimes a small part of Rondinella or Molinara

Valpolicella Classico DOC The same style as Valpolicella and made from the same blend of varieties, but the grapes must be sourced from within the original Classico region

Valpolicella Superiore DOC The same blend of varieties, but must be aged for a minimum of one year before release and there is a higher minimum alcohol level (12%) required than for Valpolicella

Valpolicella Ripasso DOC Richer style with some raisined character, stylistically somewhere between

Valpolicella and Amarone, and made by putting Valpolicella (usually Superiore) through a second fermentation on the grape skins and lees previously used to make Amarone or Recioto

Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG

A rich style with a minimum 14% alcohol from the same blend of varieties as Valpolicella and made by the appassimento method (in which the grapes are selected and dried on bamboo racks or in drying warehouses for 100-120 days, losing at least half their weight by evaporation). Amarone must be aged for a minimum of two years

Recioto della Valpolicella DOCG

A sweet, unfortified wine made with dried grapes and from the same blend of varieties

Photograph: xxxxxxxx



'I do not want our Amarone to be made "better". It stays the way it is'

Emilio Pedron, Bertani



winery. 'Our Amarone is made exactly as it has always been,' insists Emilio Pedron, managing director of Bertani Domains. 'I always say the same thing to the winemaker: I do not want the Amarone to be made "better". It stays the way it is.'

Airing differences

Quintarelli, now owned and run by the late Giuseppe Quintarelli's daughter and grandsons, would never consider joining Amarone Families, despite observing the strictest adherence to tradition and the highest quality standards. 'We are somewhat isolated,' admits Francesco Quintarelli. 'We do not play the game. It was never the philosophy of my grandfather to be part of a group.'

Second only to Quintarelli in terms of international reputation, Romano Dal Forno, whose three sons are now working with him on his estate, is also not part of Amarone Families. Since Dal Forno is in the Val d'Illasi, well outside the Classico zone, according to Boscaini and the Amarone Families, Dal Forno

wines should not even be called Amarone.

Geography is not the only subject up for discussion: methods of production are another topic of heated debate and on this there is not even consensus among the Amarone Families. For example, Boscaini passionately believes that *muffa nobile* (noble rot) is the essence of Amarone ('Amarone must have noble rot!'), while Marilisa Allegrini, former president of Amarone Families, takes the opposite view. Allegrini has developed a system for air-drying grapes that eliminates noble rot (botrytis).

Other leading producers, such as Corte Sant'Alda and Monte dei Ragni, neither of whom is part of Amarone Families, believe that to make genuine Amarone the grapes must be dried naturally, without the aid of fans – a view that is shared by Bertani. The natural system of drying not only encourages noble rot, but also denatures acids, tannins and phenolics by causing a structural transformation that is characteristic of the appassimento system.

'This is the first I have ever heard that fans and air are somehow not natural,' Allegrini says with impatience. 'Botrytis is responsible for oxidation, and we reduce humidity to 60% to remove botrytis and oxidation.' Dal Forno agrees with her: 'We have to combat the negative effects that come from drying the grapes, which can cause the wines to be over-evolved. Botrytis must be eliminated.'

Highest expression

There is disagreement too on the key point of whether wines made using appassimento are Valpolicella's highest expression. 'The answer is self-evident,' says Dal Forno. 'It is ➤'

Top right: Amarone vineyards at Bertani, one of the region's 'most stalwart of traditionalists'

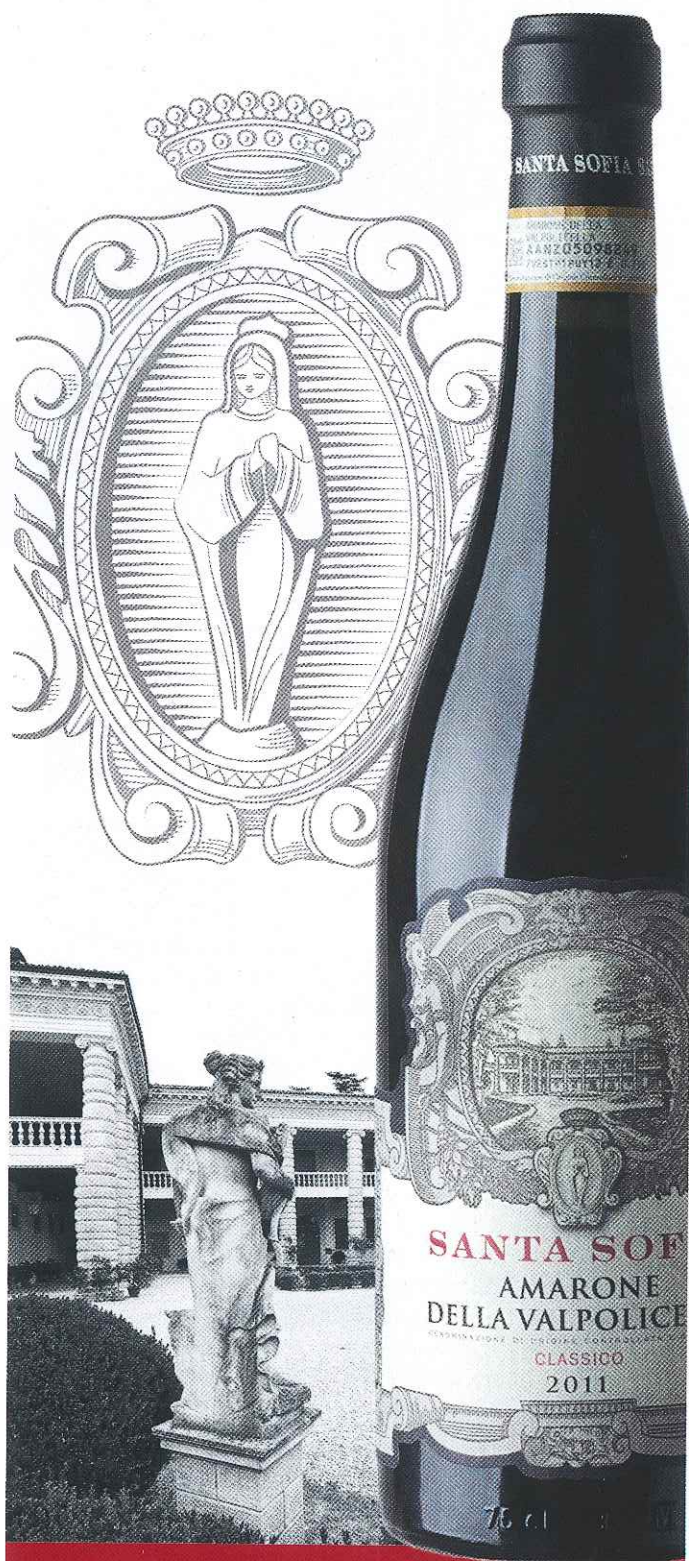
The Amarone Families association

Launched in 2009 to defend the reputation (and prices) of Amarone della Valpolicella wines, the Amarone Families association consists of the 12 family companies listed below. In its manifesto, the group describes itself as 'the guardians of tradition for this great wine, exploiting invaluable experience reaped over years of producing Amarone' with a 'rigid voluntary production code, guaranteeing high levels of quality'.

Allegrini, Begali, Brigaldara, Guerrieri Rizzardi, Masi, Musella, Speri, Tedeschi, Tenuta Sant'Antonio, Tommasi, Venturini, Zenato

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Amarone, not Valpolicella, that inspires the greatest emotions.' At Allegrini, by contrast, the best vineyards, La Grola and La Poja, are not dedicated to Amarone production, but instead to designated single-cru wines made from fresh grapes, which are sold not as DOCG but under the IGT classification.

Giuseppe Guerrieri Rizzardi, another producer, says: 'Amarone has levels of concentration that are second to none and is capable of exceptionally long ageing. We have wines in our cellar from the 1950s that are still in great condition. These old wines speak of the soil and the place – an old wine does not speak of marketing.'

Lee recommends: 10 top-drawer Amarones



Monte dei Ragni, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2010 98

£54 (ib) Berry Bros & Rudd, DBG Italia
Only 1,500 bottles produced a year from pergola-trained vines on

high, steep hillsides, and in accordance with this producer's anthroposophic farming philosophy. Five years in cask and two more in bottle before release. Earthy tones, charcoal, frankincense and rich, sweaty, dark cherry fruit. A collector's item. **Drink** 2020-2045 **Alcohol** 16%

Corte Sant'Alda, Valmezzane, Amarone della Valpolicella, Veneto 2011 97

£65-£77 Bowland Forest Vintners, Connolly's, De Burgh, Fortnum & Mason, Uncorked, Vini Italiani, Winetraders

From a trailblazing biodynamic producer, this has a paradoxical lightness of touch combined with profound depth. Orange peel, persimmon and pomegranate, with a core of morello cherry and a hint of pine cone. Layers of flavour continue unfolding until,

mysteriously, the glass (and then the bottle) is finished. **Drink** 2017-2036 **Alc** 15.5%

Dal Forno, Amarone della Valpolicella, Veneto 2011 96

£200 Armit, Raeburn
A monster, maybe, but a gorgeous one once you allow yourself to sink into its smothering embrace. Wild, dark, opaque. Seared prunes, rosemary, Mexican chocolate, black truffle, wild boar. **Drink** 2021-2045 **Alc** 17%

Quintarelli, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2007 95

£206 (ib) Fine & Rare, Justerini & Brooks
Wild cherry, blood orange. Poised, elegant, sacramental. This is the standard-bearer for the traditional style. Aged for six years in monumental hand-carved casks, though it has absolutely no new oak or any other shenanigans. This is a true icon wine. **Drink** 2017-2040 **Alc** 16.5%

Bertani, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2007 94

£75 Enotria & Coe, Great Western Wines
A benchmark classic that defines the region and has an

Boscaini agrees: 'The appassimento technique concentrates the terroir expression. It concentrates minerality. It is not a leveller.'

Amarone della Valpolicella has been described as 'meditation wine'. Despite its great quality, great history and worldwide success there are many wine lovers who find it intimidating and unapproachable.

This is a pity. Whatever opinion one might have about Amarone, and there are many to choose from, there is certainly plenty in the glass well worth contemplating. **D**

Robin Lee is an American writer and journalist currently living in London

impressive track record for long ageing. It's dry, with beguiling autumnal aromas of thyme, laurel and raked-up piles of garden leaves.

Drink 2017-2045 Alc 15%

Zyme, La Mattonara, Amarone della Valpolicella, Veneto 2004 93

£231 (ib) Fine & Rare

Exquisitely crafted, muscular and opulent. Dense, sweet fruit, lots of dark chocolate with a hint of cigar smoke and tobacco leaf. Aged nine years in old casks, but beats the modernists at their own game.

Drink 2017-2040 Alc 16%

Novaia, Corte Vaona, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2012 93

£33 (ib) DBG Italia

Very dry, almost austere, with herbal overtones of bay leaf and oregano, dried cherries and potpourri. A restrained, savoury edge makes it the perfect food wine: venison stew perhaps, or partidge.

Drink 2017-2026 Alc 15%

Cantina Valpolicella Negrar, Domini Veneti, Vigneti di Jago, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2010 92

£38-£44.58 (2008) Alivini,

Averys, GP brands

A beautiful wine from the Negrar co-op's historic vineyard and old vines. Made

in a modern style: rich, dark cherry fruit is complemented by a hint of oak that adds depth to the smoky balsamic vinegar flavours. Balanced, delicious and fresh.

Drink 2017-2026 Alc 16.5%

Guerrieri Rizzardi, Calcarole, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2008 92

£65-£70 Dulwich Vintners,

Food & Fine Wine Sheffield,

The Vineyard Wine Merchant

A full-bodied, dense, rich expression of Amarone. Layers of black liquorice, cloves, walnut juice, marron glacé, Valrhona chocolate and ripe black cherry fruit.

Drink 2017-2022 Alc 16.5%

Monte dall'Orla, Stropa, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, Veneto 2008 89

£83.99 Eurovines, Les Caves de

Pyrene, Ten Green Bottles,

Wolf Wine

From old vines trained in the ancient garlanded system supported by trees. Foot-troddengrapes. Spends four years in tonneaux and four in bottle before release. Light, with red cherry, cinnamon spice, and there's a touch of funk that may not be to all tastes. A producer to watch.

Drink 2020-2040 Alc 15.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p104

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