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VALPOLICELLA

Elegance, complexity and uniqueness

Michèle Shah gives us the lowdown on one of Italy's best-loved wine regions and its unique Valpolicella style of wines



Tedeschi Maternigo (meaning 'land of the mother') vineyards situated in the Valpolicella DOC or area of controlled denomination of origin

Valpolicella in Veneto, is a wine producing territory which sits at the foothills of the Dolomites in the northeast and is one of the most beautiful territories. It is also one of the most important and richest in terms of history, wine quality and exports.

There are many theories about the origin of the name Valpolicella. The one I like best is that it derives from the Latin *vallis-polis-cellae*, 'valley with many (wine) cellars'. Other interpretations mention that the name 'Valpolicella' appeared in charters of the mid-12th century, which mention in Latin *vallis pulicellae*, 'valley of river deposits'. Whichever it is, Valpolicella's history of winemaking goes back to the Romans or earlier and its economy today is heavily based on wine production.

Valpolicella is a fan-shaped hilly territory almost entirely planted to vineyards, with a series of valleys opening up to the north of Verona

The Valpolicella DOC and DOCG appellation encompasses 19 municipalities – 5 in the Classico area and 14 in the DOC one. Its territory borders Lake Garda to the west, while to the east and north it is protected by the Lessini Mountains. Think of the Valpolicella as a fan-shaped hilly territory almost entirely planted to vineyards, with a series of valleys opening up to the north of Verona. It is divided into three macro areas: the mountainous limestone areas formed by the Lessini Mountains; the hilly area where most of the vines are planted; the valley bed. Its diverse terroir is the basis of the uniqueness and typicity of these wines.

A great part of Valpolicella's success is linked to its history of production, strongly connected to its indigenous grapes, which include three main varieties **Corvina**, **Corvinone** and

Rondinella, while **Molinara** and **Oseleta** comprise a smaller percentage of local varieties, which give a unique profile to the wine styles – Valpolicella, Valpolicella Ripasso, Amarone della Valpolicella and Recioto della Valpolicella.

Valpolicella Classico DOC is a young and fresh wine with a fruity aroma and delicate bouquet. On the palate it is fresh, dry and smooth with lively acidity. It undergoes the classic red vinification process and is made from a blend of Valpolicella grapes, followed by a short ageing.

Valpolicella DOC Superiore is made from selected grapes grown in the best locations, usually from the hills. Sometimes it goes through a short drying phase which leads to a higher alcohol content and structure. Before being released on the market, it must undergo a year's ageing. The Valpolicella DOC and DOC Superiore are both very versatile wines and excellent with pasta dishes, risotto and lighter meats and cheeses.



A great part of Valpolicella's success is linked to its history of production, strongly connected to its indigenous grapes

The Tedeschi family pictured in the cellar of their winery. Tedeschi exports 85% of their wines



Considered the most prestigious wine of Valpolicella, **Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG's** excellence and uniqueness are acknowledged and appreciated on an international level. Amarone is obtained by drying the grapes, in a process known as *appassimento*. The grapes are dried in a loft with ventilation and humidity control to prevent the development of mould and ensure maximum integrity of the grapes during the drying process, while preserving a fresh, fruity profile.

Grapes suitable for drying must be perfectly healthy, on bunches that are not too tightly packed. After picking, they are laid out on bamboo racks in special drying rooms for an extended period during which they lose 30 to 40% of their weight. Some varieties will be affected by botrytis, the beneficial mould known as 'noble rot', that will give the wine a velvety softness, smoothness and distinctly spicy notes. Of the main varieties of grapes used in the traditional Amarone blend, Corvina is the most affected by botrytis in the *appassimento*



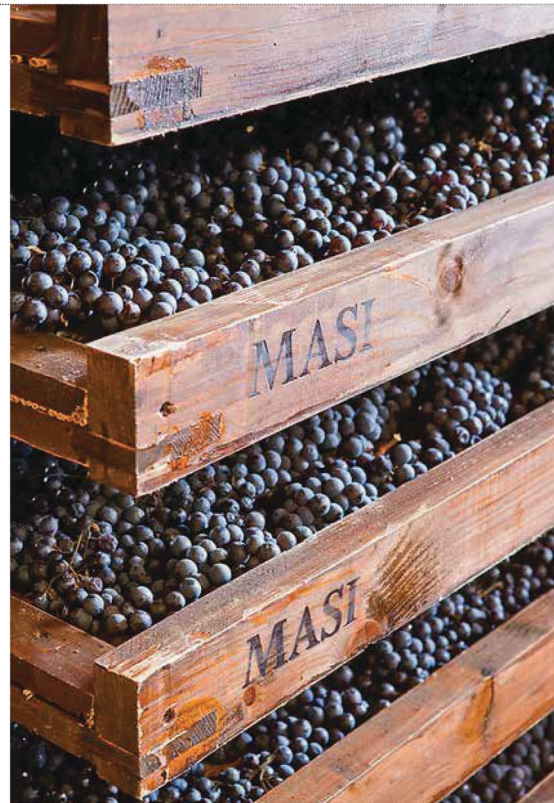
Dried grapes in a process known as appassimento forms the basis of Valpolicella's best wines

process. The dehydration of the grapes produces a greater concentration of colours, aromas and flavours in the wine. The dried grapes are usually pressed between the end of January and the beginning of February. In the case of Amarone, the maceration and fermentation processes continue for 45 to 50 days, and the wine produced is left to age for at least three years in oak before bottling. Long ageing refines its unique structure and personality, enabling it to evolve for decades.

Amarone is excellent as an after-dinner wine, or paired with red meat, game, quails and richly flavoured dishes. It is also very good with well-aged cheeses, such as parmesan, pecorino and gorgonzola.

A medium bodied wine, **Valpolicella Ripasso ADOC** is obtained by taking the partially fermented grape skins from Amarone shortly before fermentation finishes and adding them to macerate in a vat of fermented Valpolicella Classico to increase colour, flavour and tannins in the wine. As a result, the Ripasso has higher alcohol content and is fuller on the palate and is often referred to as a “baby Amarone”, because of its similarity with the fuller, heavier Amarone style. This robust, fruity and seductive wine is excellent with mushroom risotto, grilled meats, roasts and mature cheeses.

Recioto della Valpolicella DOCG is the ‘king’ of Amarone and the most ancient wine of the Valpolicella appellation. It is produced, like Amarone, through the *appassimento* process. Once the grapes have lost at least half their weight due to the evaporation of water and the desired concentration of sugars is achieved, vinification can take place. To preserve this wine’s typical structure and sweetness, the fermentation is stopped producing a richly textured, sweet wine, high in alcohol, but never cloying due to its good acidity. Recioto is particularly suited for desserts such as pastries, fruit tarts, panettone and cheese pairings, especially gorgonzola. Some prefer it as a ‘contemplative’ after-dinner wine.



Healthy grapes are dried on racks for an extended period during which they lose 30 to 40% of their weight

Recioto della Valpolicella is produced, like Amarone, through the appassimento process and is the most ancient wine of the Valpolicella appellation

To ensure more sustainable production, the Consorzio Valpolicella has assisted producers in adopting a more sustainable approach. Today the territory counts some 3,000 hectares of sustainable land in which 1,200 hectares are organically certified vines. Currently the Consorzio is seeking UNESCO nomination of Valpolicella’s *appassimento* drying technique as an intangible cultural heritage which will be a well-deserved recognition for this wonderful, historical wine region.

Valpolicella wines have made a breakthrough into the Indian wine market thanks to some of Valpolicella’s historic family estates such as Tedeschi, Masi, Allegrini and Zenato.

Sumit Sehgal, co-founder of Aristol, one of India’s leading importers and distributors of premium wines and spirits, says, “Amarone is loved in India amongst drinkers of premium wines which is very exciting. Still, a lot needs to be done to promote the story of the process. “Valpolicella is well-known and a style liked by many consumers as well as the hospitality industry especially in Delhi and Mumbai, where we are trying to focus on Ripasso by the glass,” explains Sehgal. “Ripasso is an underrated



Sandro Boscaini, owner of Masi Agricola



Marne 180 Amarone della Valpolicella – The grapes are harvested from several vineyards in the hills of Valpolicella. Right: Valpolicella wine from Allegrini

Valpolicella wines have made a breakthrough into the Indian wine market with some of Valpolicella’s historic family estates



jewel that people don’t know enough about. For customers to really appreciate these wines, it is important to understand how Amarone and Ripasso are produced, especially the *appassimento* process of drying grapes. Aristol – with Sabrina Tedeschi – is doing its best to promote the wines from Valpolicella.”

The Tedeschi estate is one of Amarone’s historic estates and has always believed in the heritage of its territory. The estate owns 48 hectares planted between the classic and the eastern zone, ranging in altitude from 160 to 500 metres. The climate in the hills is cool, and temperature swings in the summer favour the enhancement of the aroma and the colour of the grapes.

“The cornerstone of our family is enhancement of the territory and scientific research along with a focus on sustainability and innovation. This enables us to focus our production on typicity which reflects the territory of origin,” says Sabrina Tedeschi, export manager of the Tedeschi family estate, which currently exports about 85% of its production.

Sandro Boscaini, owner of Masi Agricola, notes, “We have been exporting to India for over 20 years and in that time we have seen a steady growth in interest. However, India is traditionally a spirits market, so the size of the market for us is still limited, but there is certainly a growing interest in wines.

“We believe that the future can be positive with more and more Venetian wines being exported, particularly those from Valpolicella. Amarone in particular, with its elegance, complexity and uniqueness, can become a true ambassador of the wines of Italy and of Veneto in particular.”

The Allegrini family estate covers 100 hectares of vineyard in the heart of the Valpolicella Classico area. One of the biggest in Valpolicella, Allegrini has been growing grapes here for six generations and is still a family-run winery. The wines of Allegrini have long been imported in India by Brindco Limited. ♦