

Magazine Archives: December 15, 2016



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Amarone's Great Divide

As this historic Veneto red gains new popularity, debate rages over styles and regulations

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Amarone, a potent Italian red made from partially dried grapes, has experienced growing demand in the past 15 to 20 years, met by production that nearly tripled at points between 2000 and 2015. But with this success has also come division: The region is now riding a tumultuous wave of shifting styles and internal conflicts.

Ambitious producers are in the process of shedding an anachronistic identity, which was marked by an oxidative style out of favor with many of today's consumers. Instead, they're embracing fresher, more balanced versions. But while these offer greater accessibility in their youth, they are at odds with the bottlings of 20 or 30 years ago that laid the groundwork for the region's present success.

New producers are proliferating, many offering Amarones in a range of styles that threaten to blur the wine's identity even further. Perhaps most unsettling, the large-volume commercial bottlings that are riding the coattails of Amarone's popularity may undermine its long-standing reputation for quality.

These changes are playing out not only in the wineries, but also in the offices of bureaucrats and regulators, where the legal definition of the Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG is essentially up for grabs.

"The DOCG has been manipulated in the past 15 years," says Franco Allegrini, winemaker at his family estate in Fumane, Valpolicella, which he owns with his sister, Marilisa. "The first change was allowing residual sugar levels to increase. Then, another modification-changing the traditional grape blend and allowing international grapes in the blend.

"Two years later, it was modified again. They're changing the boundaries from which Amarone can be produced. They want to be able to include the [lesser] valley floor, the humid areas. To arrive at 35,000 tons of grapes, they have planted everywhere."

At the turn of the century, Allegrini says, only about 8,000 tons of grapes were produced for Amarone. "I will fight this."

Allegrini's fighting attitude is representative of the broader turmoil in the Valpolicella area today. Tensions in the region have been running high for many years, and Amarone producers have forged their path with an unusual amount of drama.

In 2003, after a sweltering summer and an early harvest of atypically ripe fruit, producers were given permission to begin pressing their dried Amarone grapes earlier than usual; in order to preserve a fresher fruit character in the finished wine, pressing could commence on Dec. 15. Soon after, certain producers successfully lobbied to have the earliest possible press date permanently set at Dec. 1—roughly 40 to 70 days before the historic legal time frame to begin crushing.

The Dec. 1 date throws years of tradition to the wind, angering historic producers seeking bold, structured reds capable of aging for decades. It highlights the political power of a number of high-volume, commercially oriented producers at the other end of the spectrum, who see the earlier date as an opportunity to rapidly produce softer, easy-drinking reds that they can still label as Amarone. In between, many wineries, quality names among them, welcome the flexibility to adjust the production process as they see fit, according to the grapes they harvest and the situation at hand.

The growing demand for Amarone has also prompted approval for the inclusion of additional fruit from acreage within the boundaries of the Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG (promoted from DOC status with the 2010 harvest) that was not previously allowed. Tweaks to the wording of the wine laws specific to the DOCG's boundaries now permit producers to include additional fruit from vineyards located on the valley floor, which is generally considered inferior.

Technically, the first expansion of the region took place in 1968, when Valpolicella (and its Amarone wine) was officially recognized as a DOC, including large swaths of land outside the historic zone of production. Amarone wines from this traditional zone, less than half of the larger Valpolicella area, are today labeled as Amarone della Valpolicella Classico.

In response to what they saw as an increasing departure from Amarone's historic production zones and techniques, a dozen family-owned estates, including Allegrini, banded together in 2009 to form Amarone Families (Famiglie dell'Amarone d'Arte), distinguishing themselves from the nearly 2,200 growers, bottlers and producers associated with the Valpolicella Consortium. Members of the consortium felt the wineries of Amarone Families were holding themselves up as the best from the region and not crediting the quality available from the broader range of the appellation's producers. In June 2015, the consortium filed suit against Amarone Families' use of the trademarked Amarone name; a decision in the case is expected late this year. Meanwhile, the underlying issues have remained unresolved, and many believe the battle has brought negative attention to the region.

"My feeling is that the Valpolicella area is in a very bad moment," says Mariano Buglioni, owner of his namesake estate. "Right now, everyone does exactly what they want-and what they want only. We're advertising what we do wrong, not what we do right." Buglioni, a relative newcomer to the area, who only began making his own wine from family vineyards in 2000, recognizes the need to better define the identity of the Valpolicella area's signature wines, including Amarone.

Giuseppe Nicolis, who works with his brother Giancarlo running their family estate, founded in 1951, agrees that clarity is vital to ensuring Amarone's future. "Some larger producers have decided to produce younger, more commercial Amarones. I hope in the future this situation will change," says Nicolis, who is unhappy with the lack of transparency helping consumers choose between Amarone bottlings of varying quality. "I hope producers will be obligated to help consumers understand historical producers versus those who buy and bottle."

Many of the region's wineries are tired of butting heads. Others, like the members of Amarone Families and those considering joining them, attempt to walk the tenuous path of disassociating from the region's main political forum while still promoting the area's wines. But Nicolis, a founding member of the Amarone Families group who later left to rejoin the consortium, now believes the only way forward is to work within the current framework in order to effect the necessary changes.

"At Nicolis we decided to stay with the consortium in order to change the rules," he explains. "Our choice was to be coherent."

Although almost every producer in the area has an opinion on the feud, the discussion is largely driven by a limited number of vocal advocates at opposite poles. The lack of engagement in the conversation by some who might steer compromise could result in damage to Amarone's image if brasher voices win key arguments. But many producers keep their heads down, quietly focusing on the quality of their own wines and hoping their output will say more about the region in the long run.

"We have the same philosophy today as from the beginning," says Paolo Bussola, who works with his brother Giuseppe at the estate their father, Tommaso, founded in 1977. "We always want to improve the quality; we want the perfect wine. It's impossible, yet we keep trying." Bussola cites new and improved technology as the biggest catalyst of change, granting the estate far greater scope in its winemaking capabilities. "The technology changed completely from the '90s to today. So we have another capacity for all the work in the cellar."

New technology has undoubtedly altered the overall style of Amarone, and some fear the loss of the wine's historic style. But many producers, including the esteemed Romano Dal Forno winery, aren't worried, seeing only benefits.

Dal Forno is one of the most technologically advanced wineries in the region. Michele Dal Forno now runs the family estate with brothers Marco and Luca. Their father, Romano, invented many of the systems used at the winery today, including vacuum seals on each tank to prevent the introduction of oxidative qualities during winemaking; computer-controlled fermentation tanks with a punch-down system designed to work best with Amarone's dried grapes; and a grape-drying room that uses computers to monitor and rotate fans 24 hours a day in order to create consistent drying conditions in all parts of the room.

"It's a lot of technology to make something that I still define as a natural process," says Michele. "We're not using technology to try to manipulate the process; it's to use together with tradition. We're confident the vacuum-seal system and other [technologies] will give us more ability in terms of aging."

Yet Dal Forno recognizes that today we're seeing only the short-term results. When it comes to the wine's ageability, he says, "This will take time to prove."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Giuseppe Quintarelli estate is one of Valpolicella's staunchest traditionalists. Yet even this bastion of the historical style has embraced modernity and technological improvements in limited ways. The winery's original tasting room is maintained for its historical significance, and this shadowy nook with its old barrels and limited lamplight is a drastic contrast to the sleek lines of the recently renovated cellar and the ongoing construction in other parts of the winery.

Francesco Grigoli Quintarelli, who manages the Giuseppe Quintarelli estate with his brother Lorenzo and their parents, Giampaolo Grigoli and Fiorenza (daughter of the late Giuseppe Quintarelli), thinks that they too find the balance between modernity and tradition in the wines. "I have to say, with technology, with machines, the oxygenation in our wines decreased some; it used to be more evident," says Grigoli Quintarelli. "With more recent bottlings, with more measures in the cellar, we preserve the integrity and freshness a bit more. But otherwise, we keep a traditional path."

My recent retrospective tasting of three vintages of Amarone provided insight into the region's history and the changes it has undergone. The tasting included two vintages considered to be outstanding, 1990 and 1997, as well as a more average vintage, 2006, which showcased Amarone with short-term aging and in its more modern format. (For my notes on this tasting, see "Aging Amarone," page 74.)

If the growing market interest in Amarone is any indication, it seems clear that producers in Valpolicella are largely adapting to their changing circumstances with success, whatever the ongoing strife in the region. In part this is due to increased consumer awareness of the category, says Nadia Zenato, co-owner of her family's Zenato winery, as well as the nearby Sansonina estate. "In the past when I traveled, most people didn't know Amarone—what it was, exactly. But now, they know more about our Valpolicella area and the production process for Amarone as well."

Nonetheless, Amarone producers still have a difficult path ahead as they balance their history, success, changing market demands and more. But most are enthusiastic for the challenge and welcome the opportunity to showcase their region's traditions.

"My grandfather's generation and before, they were learning from vintage to vintage," explains Raffaele Boscaini, whose family owns the historic Masi estate, referring to the progress of Amarone. "My father was lucky to learn from him and to know what to do. My generation is lucky to know 'the why,' and knowing this, you can more easily see the next steps. This is the beauty of Amarone."

Senior editor Alison Napjus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on wines from the Northeast and various other regions of Italy.

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