



This article originally appeared in Issue 4 of *The World of Fine Wine* magazine. The article may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews and comprehensive international auction results. For further information, and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.finewinemag.com or call +44 (0)20 8950 9177.

AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA



Some believe that Amarone della Valpolicella, one of the world's most distinctive and dramatic red wines, was born by chance, when an absent-minded winemaker allowed his Recioto della Valpolicella to re-ferment, turning it from sweet to dry, or *amaro* (literally, 'bitter'). But, as sommelier **Giorgio Rinaldi** explains, more care needs to be taken when finding food that can stand up to this unique wine

Regardless of the truth behind the popular story of its origins, what is certain is that Amarone is an unusual wine, one of the very few reds that are *passiti* (from dried grapes) yet dry. It is a great wine, imparting marked impressions of alcoholic power, fruit richness and superb structure, woven together in carefully crafted harmony. These very qualities can make it a challenging wine to match with food. But get it right, and the results are spectacular.

Amarone is not merely the result of drying grapes, it is also the product of a particular terroir, the mild climate strongly influenced by Lake Garda. By both legislation and tradition, the region of Valpolicella that bears this wine is divided into the *zona classica*, the *zona allargata* (or 'enlarged' eastern Valpolicella) and the Valpantena. Most Amarone still comes from the first area, the historic heartland; lying northeast of Verona, it comprises the Negrar, Marano and Fumane valleys. And the origin heavily influences the style of the wine. The *zona classica* yields wines that tend to be both more fragrant and rugged but that gain significant softness with ageing. The *zona allargata* produces some top-notch Amarones, amply demonstrated by producers such as Corte Sant'Alda, Romano Dal Forno and Trabucchi. The wines from the Valpantena exhibit a crisper acidity and require more time to become harmonious.

In all three areas, the Corvina, Molinara and Rondinella grape varieties – along with smaller quantities of Corvinone, Oseletta and others – are harvested in October at precise ripeness levels. The clusters are



Grapes drying on rush mats for Amarone

The air dries the fruit, evaporating water from the berries until they lose some 40 per cent of their weight, **concentrating their acids, sugar and other components**

then placed on reed mats or in shallow boxes in a single layer. The air dries the fruit, evaporating water from the berries until they lose some 40 per cent of their weight, concentrating their acids, sugar and other components. In spacious lofts (*fruttai*) furnished with many open windows, or in humidity and temperature-controlled storehouses, the *appassimento* process takes place over the winter. The human role, always necessary, is to check daily to ensure that the grapes are drying in a healthy manner and to discard any rotten or substandard fruit. The drying period is even longer than the growing season – four months of constant inspection, so that only the best grapes will be pressed to produce Amarone.

In late January or early February, the grapes are pressed, and the little juice that they yield is fermented on the skins for as long as 30–50 days. From an initial 100kg of fruit, only 60kg remain after drying, and pressing and fermentation reduce that to some

25 litres of wine – about a third of the normal yield for other types of wine. Following the alcoholic fermentation, the wine goes into wooden vats (*botti*) of various sizes, depending on the desired style and the producer's philosophy. Particular personal preferences are crucial here, with some more traditional winemakers still using large *botti* containing thousands of litres, while other, more modern producers resort to barriques of 225 litres.

The doyen of Amarone producers is Giuseppe Quintarelli, a fairly staunch traditionalist. But his opposite immediately comes to mind, too – Romano Dal Forno, whose prices are equally stratospheric but whose age and approach are completely different. For Dal Forno, the guiding concept of Amarone is tremendous extraction, yielding wines so concentrated, creamy and dense that they could almost be eaten with a spoon. But there are literally dozens of other fine producers in between, all with their own interpretations – Da Accordini, Michele Castellani,

In whatever style, this great wine is currently enjoying a period of some success – not only for its **hedonistic qualities** or even for its role as a ‘meditation’ or ‘conversation’ wine. Rather, **its potential as a partner to rich, hearty dishes is increasingly recognised**. As long as a few fundamentals are firmly grasped, it need not be nearly so tricky as many still suppose

Corteforte and Corte Sant’Alda, Tommasi, Speri and Musella. Great results are expected from newer stars, too, such as David Sterza and the Saltari.

Consumers have a broad range of styles from which to choose, therefore. Those opting for a slow-maturing, traditional version will be rewarded with a wine displaying aromas and flavours of ripe red berries, dark cherry and dried plum, which, as the wine ages, will metamorphose into those of other dried fruits, nuts and tobacco, with hints of tea biscuit. Those who prefer a more modern style, ready on release, will be struck by aromas and flavours tending to toasty oak and pungent spice, vanilla, chocolate and dried herbs.

In whatever style, this great wine is currently enjoying a period of some success – not only for its hedonistic qualities or even for its role as a ‘meditation’ or ‘conversation’ wine. Rather, its potential as a partner to rich, hearty dishes is increasingly recognised. It is not – it must be admitted – the easiest wine to pair with food, especially in these days of ‘eating light’. But as long as a few fundamentals are firmly grasped, it need not be nearly so tricky as many still suppose.

Great Amarones have their own strong character, which normally survives the stylistic overlay of the producers. This is a wine that still bears the imprint of its terroir, its varieties and the *appassimento* process, and these are the crucial determining factors for successful food-and-wine matching.

Amarone’s ultra-plush texture makes it a good match for savoury dishes. And its elevated alcohol of 15–16% needs to be counterbalanced by a dish’s pronounced succulence, which can stand up to, and tame, the wine’s alcoholic charge. It can find a soul mate in dishes almost anywhere in the world, so long as they exhibit rich aromas and flavours and are fairly concentrated, moderately fat and, above all, juicy. The amount of bottle age affects the pairing with food, for as the wine matures, the acidity and tannins, so strident in its youth, soften. Hence the need to pair a mature wine with dishes featuring rich, spicy aromas, while the same wine at a more youthful stage would complement savoury dishes rich in oils.

Generally speaking, the most suitable dishes are meats cooked in liquids, including, most obviously, wine, and full-flavoured, mouth-watering cheeses, such as well-aged Bitto della Valtellina, Branzi or Montasio, Fourme d’Ambert, Banon à la Feuille or Cheshire. As well as providing the necessary succulence, these cheeses have the strength of flavour to match that of the Amarone. The adventurous might even try Amarone with certain types of fish, such as fresh, seared tuna with a red-wine sauce.

Amarone may also be served just before the sweet course, smoothing the transition from the savoury courses to the sweeter ones. After all, its opulent roundness and rich spiciness render it suitable for many occasions. Amarone suggests *amaro*, but only to differentiate it from its sweeter brother Recioto: it does not mean

that the wine really tastes bitter, and in some cases its supple, velvety texture lends it such an impression of sweetness that it could be described as slightly sweet.

Amarone can reveal the hidden qualities of so many dishes, and so many dishes can find their true partner in this wine. But few other wines can be enjoyed in so many ways – not only as a wine with food, but as a wine for thought and, at its ideal maturity and highest level, as a wondrously pleasurable stimulus to conversation.

Chefs and recipes

The challenges and possibilities presented by Amarone have stimulated the creativity of the great chefs of *la cucina all’italiana*.

Elia Rizzo of Il Desco di Verona, who unites the talents of a great chef with the insights of a professional sommelier, recommends Amarone with many dishes, such as ravioli stuffed



with Verona chicory *au gratin* made with Monte Veronese cheese and pepper, or grey partridge stuffed with chestnuts in a snail *ragù* with polenta. But the pairing of our wine with Amarone pumpkin risotto touches all points on the gastronomic map: the combination of the dish’s body and succulence, together with the sweetish pumpkin and its rich aromas, when married to Amarone, not only represents their common terroir but unites them in a compelling savoury harmony. The ideal partner here is Romano Dal Forno’s Amarone, a magisterially structured wine whose stay in barriques imparts a cushiony, silky weave.



Stefano Borghetti, of the Hotel Borghetti in Verona, loves to prepare *filetto all'Amarone*, proposing a traditional Amarone such as Tedeschi's Monte Olmi or Viviani's Amarone Ammandorlato. Stefano maintains that the traditional Amarones lack the initial overweening aggressiveness that he usually finds in more modern wines. The entry of the older-style wines is notably smooth, while the crisp, clean, dry, lingering finish goes well with the *filetto all'Amarone*.

Roberto Elli, sommelier at La Rimessa in Mariano Comense (Como), has discovered a delicious match in braised beef cheek and Speri's Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Vigneto Monte Sant'Urbano, a powerful wine that exudes generous aromas and flavours of black cherry and spice. The dish's rich succulence and the wine's exceptional length and pungency combine wonderfully well.

Risotto with pumpkin and Amarone

Serves six

400g violone nano rice
1½ litres vegetable broth
100g butter
60g Grana Padano cheese
40cl Amarone
700g pumpkin flesh
10cl milk
70g chopped onion
handful chopped parsley
extra virgin olive oil
salt and pepper

Cut the pumpkin flesh into large pieces. In a saucepan, brown the onion in some olive oil, then add the pumpkin and heat for 4–5 minutes. Add the milk and let cook for about 15 minutes, adding salt to taste. Beat everything together. Heat to a boil, separately, the broth and the wine. In a pan, brown the rice in 30g of butter, then add the heated wine; once the wine is absorbed, add the broth and continue cooking. When almost done, add the creamed pumpkin mixture and mix everything together, with the rest of the butter and the Grana Padano, adding the parsley and some pepper.

Fillet of beef with Amarone

Serves four

4 beef fillets
white flour
peanut oil
150g butter
1 cup beef broth
½ litre Amarone
salt and pepper to taste

Liberalily coat a pan with peanut oil and fry the floured fillets for 1 minute on each side. Remove the meat but keep hot; drain oil from pan, and add the butter, beef broth and Amarone. Put the fillets back in, cook to desired level, add salt and pepper, and serve.

Braised beef cheek

Serves six

4 beef cheeks
1 litre full-bodied red wine
2 carrots
2 stalks celery
1 white onion
1 leaf laurel
3 cloves garlic
1 piece cinnamon
extra virgin olive oil
salt to taste
1tbsp white flour

Marinate the cheeks for one day in a mixture of the wine, chopped vegetables, laurel leaf and spices. Remove the cheeks, dry and flour. Remove the vegetables from the marinade, drain. Put the cheeks and vegetables into a large pan coated with olive oil. Drain and strain wine from the marinade, heat. Brown the meat and then add the hot wine. Bring to the boil, simmer slowly for 4 hours; check the liquid level, adding hot water as necessary. When done, keep the cheeks hot, purée the vegetables, and reduce the liquid to pour over the cheeks. Serve sliced, with polenta if desired. ■

