



“APPASSIMENTO - IN SEARCH OF ADVENTURE”
Non - Veronese grapes for Amarone?
The Effects of Drying on Veronese and other Italian Grape Varieties
Seminario Masi - Vinalty 1998

A report by the Masi Technical Group
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INTRODUCTION - Sandro Boscaini

This Seminar takes an even deeper look at the theme treated at last year's presentation, which was entitled “Amarone: The Influence of the Vineyard on Style”.

There are certain common factors which have given rise to the technical research dealt with at both the 1997 and 1998 Seminars:

- The growing interest in historic European wines produced from indigenous grape varieties
- The growing interest for wines which may be considered alternative, or indeed somewhat exotic: these are wines which are certainly original either because of their method of production, or because of the combination of the grape varieties used and the way the wine is made.
- The new appreciation for red wines in general and, in particular, for wines of structure and complexity which are also rounded, velvety and ready for drinking, even when relatively young.

The 1997 Seminar concluded that Amarone is an excellent example of a wine for the modern era, especially if it is made within the framework of “development within tradition”, that is to say, if it is produced without the extreme characteristics which in the past were considered to be an integral part of the wine's “typicity”. Indeed, in recent years, Amarone has become stylistically more precise thanks to the adoption of more rigorous techniques in the vineyard, during the drying process and in the winery. All this helps one to understand the vast and unexpected success obtained by this wine all around the world.

In the international wine world, one finds certain phenomena which are worthy of attention:

- the growing interest and curiosity on the part of producers the world over about the practice of drying grapes prior to fermentation which for many years was considered to be “provincial” and old-fashioned.
- a surge in the number of “passito” or similar wines being produced and marketed.

The wine inspires curiosity and wonder in both novice wine drinkers and connoisseurs: the first group is clearly attracted by the unusual product which they are discovering; the second group is enchanted by the inexhaustible font of new sensations which the wine hints at or reveals, and which depend on the site and vintage from which it comes as well as on the winemaking skill of its producer.

Interesting examples are to be found primarily from countries in the New World; though they are famous for the flesh, intense fruitiness of their wines, they now seem to be looking for more mature and complex fruit flavours. A prime example of this is the case of Australian wine producer, Joseph Grilli. After having had the opportunity (at the Masi winery itself) of considering the pros and cons of the drying process, he has, using this technique, developed a wine called “Moda Amarone”, which many critics consider to be one of the finest wines from the Southern Hemisphere.

Bearing this situation in mind, the Masi Technical Group considered it a logical and natural progression to go beyond the world of Veronese grape varieties and, with a mixture of curiosity and interest, asked themselves the question: “What may happen if the classic Veronese drying process is extended beyond its traditional *milieu*, its traditional grapes and the hard-and-fast rules which have governed its production and have for centuries linked it to a specific zone and style?”

The Masi Technical Group have, therefore, manifested their curiosity, but also their willingness to embark upon experimentation without prejudice, convinced that there is no limit to improvement.

IN SEARCH OF VERONESE AND OTHER ITALIAN GRAPE VARIETY SUITABLE TO MODERN AMARONE - Lanfranco Paronetto

As has been noted on many occasions in the past, including the Masi seminars at recent editions of Vinitaly, Amarone della Valpolicella is a red wine with characteristics which are unique in the sphere of international winemaking.

Its centuries-old tradition - referred to in historical documents which date from the 5th century (Cassiodorus) - and the practice of semi-drying the grapes prior to vinification are the cardinal points in the profile of this original wine, which is so fascinating and at the same time so very different from other wines.

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The originality of Amarone

Let us recap the principal factors of Amarone's originality:

- The Grape Varieties:

Amarone is made exclusively from Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara grapes.

These are strictly indigenous varieties and are not found in any other winemaking zone in the world.

- The Production Zone:

Only the hills of the Province of Verona offer the above-mentioned grapes an ideal "terroir" in which to express their varietal characteristics to the full.

- The Production Process, which includes:

- the rigorous selection of grapes during the harvest
- the placing of these grapes on traditional racks
- drying period lasting 80 - 100 days
- vinification during the cold winter months

Each of these factors has been examined in greater depth at past Masi Seminars conducted during Vinitaly (1995 - 1997): we refer you to the relative reports for more detailed information.

The drying process - a delicate period

One of the most delicate moments in the production of Amarone is undoubtedly the drying period. We should therefore like to stress some aspects of this procedure which are of particular technical interest.

One of the characteristics of the drying process regards the grapes' vulnerability to attack by Botrytis, a mould which - depending on the temperature and humidity - can either assume a positive form known as "noble rot", or can evolve into harmful "grey rot". The positive form of Botrytis creates extremely interesting reactions in the grapes, the most evident of which are the production of glycerine and the formation of gluconic acid along with a series of other substances which notably affect the bouquet and the taste of the wine.

It is interesting to note the different behaviour of Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara with regard to botrytis infection.

Corvina is easily infected while Rondinella is more resistant; Molinara lies half way between the two.

The extent to which the grapes are affected by botrytis and the consequential effect on the glycerine content of the wine have to be considered in relation to the "style" of Amarone which one wishes to make: a higher level of botrytis and a higher level of glycerine produces wine which is extremely rounded, soft and fleshy, with strong scents of overripe fruit and fruit macerated in alcohol. Less botrytis produces more austere and less "showy" wines, which generally are drier and show greater tannic structure. Obviously, the potential for ageing and the maturation curves are different in the two types of wine. The inherent differences in the three grape varieties themselves also have a significant bearing on the style of wine produced. Indeed, each, provides distinct yet complementary typical characteristics, all of which contribute to the final quality of the Amarone:

- Corvina provides structure;
- Rondinella, colour;
- Molinara, perfume and Recioto - like hints

Although the drying of grapes is a practice common to both Vin Santos and to other dessert wines, the drying of red grapes with the intention of producing a fine dry red wine - one with a high alcohol level, great body, powerful structure and floral perfumes with characteristic notes of cherries macerated in alcohol - is unique, and has no "imitators" in any other part of the world.

The problems in making Amarone

Despite Amarone's great personality and the wine's present high level of commercial success, it seems to us that one should not fail to mention certain problems which have been raised on a number of occasions and which inhibit the wine from gaining wider recognition and appreciation.

These problems are of technical and organoleptic nature.

- the dangers inherent in the drying process (grey rot) which can adversely affect a significant proportion of the grapes
- the long fermentation period which gives the wine characteristics more suitable or a Recioto (dessert wine) than for Amarone (a wine to be drunk with food).

These problems combined with market expectations increasingly stimulate debate on the advisability, or indeed possibility, of adopting measures which would allow for the style of Amarone to develop without breaking away too violently from tradition.

The paths one might follow without too much danger regard:

- The “modus operandi” and the consequences of new drying techniques
- More strictly-controlled and rationalized vinification methods.

Is there another possible route for the evolution of Amarone?

There exists, however, another possibility which we decided to examine with a completely open mind: this regards the introduction on non-indigenous (but highly respected) Italian grape varieties into the drying process.

Starting from the premise that Amarone is - and should be - produced from the three indigenous grapes Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara, one is then justified in asking certain questions, which may seem strange or even absurd, but which serve to shed light on whether there may be interesting routes to be followed as regards the production of Amarone which have not yet been considered:

Some questions are asked purely to satisfy our curiosity:

Why is Amarone only made in the area around Verona?

Why is it only made from the Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara varieties?

Why are these grapes only found in the Province of Verona?

Other questions are more technical: these concern, for example, the possibility of drying grapes other than the traditional ones, and ascertaining, on the one hand, their behaviour (primarily with respect to botrytis) and, on the other hand, the consequences of these “new” characteristics with regard to quality and the likely appeal of an Amarone which may be more suited to the expectations of modern international wine consumers.

Here, then, are the findings of the Masi Technical Group. We certainly do not wish to make any radical changes in the existing situation, nor to propose anachronistic modifications to the way in which Amarone, by law, has to be made; we merely hope to obtain some information which may be of general interest.

The effects of drying on, and the results obtained from, other grape varieties which are among the most common yet most valid in Italy should, however, give an indication of the possibilities of:

- Interesting alternatives to Amarone
- A general improvement in quality from the point of view of the international consumer
- A modernisation of the present style of Amarone
- These grapes’ unsuitability for being used in Amarone, and therefore their total exclusion

The grape varieties we examined were:

- Sangiovese
- Croatina
- Barbera
- Cabernet
- Ancellotta
- Raboso
- Montepulciano

These varieties underwent exactly the same drying process that is used for Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara. They were vinified separately, with a proportion of their must being set aside prior to fermentation. Today's tasting will, therefore, include both the must and the (inevitably young) wine obtained from the above-mentioned grapes. This unusual tasting will, we think, offer some surprises. For the moment, we will

refrain from comment, but we are very interested in hearing the impressions of the "consumers" present.

April 1998

Masi Technical Group

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