

**RECIOTO... AMARCORD:  
a wine to re-launch or re-invent?**

Masi Seminar– Vinitaly 2000

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## Introduction

### Dr. Sandro Boscaini

In his film *Amarcord*, Federico Fellini not only created a great masterpiece of cinematographic art, but also enriched human communication – and the Italian language in particular – with a new, and highly evocative, term.

*Amarcord*, in the dialect of Romagna, the director's region of origin, means, "I remember". The word, which contains the terms "amaro" (bitter) and "core" (heart), carries with it a sense of nostalgic memory, as well as great affection and emotion.

Because it encompasses these many unspecified yet implicit connotations, *Amarcord* is also a term that is perfectly appropriate for Recioto: a wine of fond memories, and of a rural, nostalgia-laden past; a wine that is much loved but rarely actually opened and drunk.

On closer observation, however, the connection between Recioto and *Amarcord* is rather deeper: both the wine and the film can be appreciated on different levels and both incorporate several layers of meaning, from the most simple to the most complex, which are able to satisfy the technical interests, the sensibility, the mood and the desire to dream or philosophise of the wine-lover or spectator.

This ill-defined wine, with its similarly nebulous image, prompts me to ask an infinite number of questions which then give rise to further queries, because there exists an equally varied range of possible answers. These are often contrasting, but they are nevertheless all pertinent. For example, is Recioto a masculine or a feminine wine? If it is masculine, as the name would suggest, it brings to mind the "grandfather" of the film: an old, indeed almost ancient man, nostalgically lost in the heavy fog of the plain, dressed in his cloak and totally unaware of where he is, what he is doing and, indeed, what may befall him. If Recioto is feminine, it is a promise of pleasure, a healthy girl with abundant charms, but also a certain provincialism which cuts her ambitions down to size, just like Gradisca in the film. Or yet again, it can be a wine so exaggeratedly rich and opulent that it becomes vulgar, with touches of self-satisfied coarseness, like the incomparable tobacconist in *Amarcord*.

At any rate, it is a fascinating and complex wine, a historical relic which is searching for a modern identity, a unique wine which is rustic and aristocratic at the same time: a wine to love, to be rediscovered, perhaps even recreated and certainly to be relaunched.

Over the last few years, the Masi Technical Group has been considering these technical and sentimental themes, and later on the Group's coordinator, Lanfranco Paronetto, will present the many questions that have been raised as well as attempt to answer some of them.

For this particular occasion, the Group has been joined by the internationally famous cartoonist Milo Manara. He hails from Verona and was also, for many years, a very close collaborator of Fellini: who better then, with the aid of his drawings, to help elucidate this Felliniesque character which bears the ancient name of “Recioto”?

This Seminar, dedicated to a Veronese wine, which has been almost totally overlooked during the present golden moment of Amarone, is intended as proof of the affection and vocational interest which Masi displays for the peculiarities and unique winemaking methods of the wines of its region. It may be seen as pursuing the themes embraced in the previous Seminars which for over ten years now, have contributed to enriching the culture and furthering the evolution of grape growing and wine production in the Verona area.

## RECIOTO... AMARCORD AND TECHNOLOGY

**Dr. Lanfranco Paronetto**

The production method for Recioto is a decidedly old one: as is well known, the first documented evidence of it is to be found in the 6th century A.D. writings of Cassiodorus, minister of King Theodoric, who had made Verona the capital of the territories conquered by the Goths.

This product obtained by the vinification of semi-dried grapes was – and continues to be – a red wine with great structure, but which is characterized by its high level of unfermented sugars. During the chronic lack of food in the Middle Ages (a situation which lasted until a period not long before the lifetimes of people still alive today), the only sweet foods available for consumption were fruits and honey. This scarcity made any sweet-tasting foodstuff into a rare and luxurious treat, quite apart from its extremely high value as a source of energy.

One can therefore say that it was, above all, the shortage of sweet foods which made Recioto a precious, sought-after and highly esteemed product. If we add Recioto's very particular and original taste characteristics to the equation, then we have a product which is really unique.

Moreover, it is quite amazing that, given the extreme ignorance which existed in former times about the biological phenomena that take place during the fermentation, as well as the basic structure of the winemaking equipment on hand, a number of coincidences led to the production of a sweet wine which could remain sweet for a long period of time.

Indeed, semi-drying of the grapes enables one to obtain a must which is very rich in sugars, and whose fermentation is therefore difficult to start and conduct using "manual" techniques. Besides, the prevailing temperatures during winter did very little to favour the progress of the fermentation, which therefore remains slow and also relatively easy to control. Also, it is quite likely that certain substances of an antibiotic nature, however slight this may be, are produced by the moulds which develop during the drying period and these contribute even further towards slowing down the fermentation until it stops altogether, even though a fairly high level of sugars is still present in the wine. So that is how we get Recioto! And one can well imagine how upset and disappointed producers were when, as a result of some rather inexplicable phenomena and because the winter in question was particularly mild, fermentation proceeded in its natural course, yielding a wine which, since it was not sweet, was defined as "bitter" ("amaro"). Indeed, in view of its great body, richness and structure, it was referred to as "Amarone". It was certainly good, inebriating and satisfyingly full-bodied....but "unfortunately" it was not sweet!

Then tastes began to change. Nowadays, sugar is extremely easy to find and, in the enological contest, we are witnessing a much-increased appreciation of Amarone, which represents a really seductive, indeed voluptuous combination of original, appealing and fleshy aromas and flavours that is enjoying enormous success all around the world...whilst Recioto remains a souvenir of the past which is regarded with a certain reverence but which few really think of as a truly fine wine.

## 1. THE CHARACTERISTICS AND DEFECTS OF RECIOTO

Given the brief and very general historical background of Recioto outlined above, it is probably of interest to examine in slightly greater detail the causes of Recioto's most noticeable (and noteworthy) peculiarity, that of being a wine that is smooth, red and sweet. The fact that its characteristics derive from the vinification of semi-dried grapes make it, to all intents and purposes, a fully-fledged dessert wine. It is similarly evident that, as a style, sweet red dessert wines are not particularly common within the world's wine-making spectrum. The only wine which most people are likely to compare it to is Port, but if we in fact examine the characteristics of the two wines in question a little more closely, one soon realises that the differences between them are greater than the similarities. We are left, therefore, with the enigma of Recioto's rather ill-defined and indeed underdeveloped image among consumers. Let us attempt, then, to list certain factors which might help to explain this situation, which is the same on both sides of the Italian and international markets.

### ***Association with fortified wines***

Very often Recioto is thought of as a fortified wine; that is to say, a wine whose sugar content derives from arresting the fermentation by means of adding alcohol to the wine. Nothing could be further from the truth: Recioto remains sweet thanks to absolutely natural processes which form part of its singular method of production. Nevertheless, there often remains a measure of doubt in the consumer's mind that producers have resorted to a technique that is alien to the tradition of the area (even though it is entirely permissible).

### ***Association with high-alcohol, low-quality sweet wines***

In the international wine market in general, sweet wines – and red wines in particular – are looked upon with suspicion because they very often belong to a category in which it is easy, with the excuse that it is sweet, to pass off almost any product even if it is of highly dubious quality.

### ***Difficulty of combining and rendering compatible sweetness with the tannin of a red wine***

As regards the balance of the components of a sweet red wine one must take into account the inevitable presence of tannin. On the one hand this contributes to the wine's structure, but on the other it gives rise to an astringency which is at odds with the characteristics of fragrance and softness that are typical of dessert and after-dinner wines in general.

### ***Variations in style between the various products – lack of a model from a qualitative and technical point of view***

This is a problem which is common to all of Verona's various wines, but which is particularly evident in the case of Recioto. This wine's scarce distribution and its limited production do not make it any easier to impose a particular style with precise qualitative parameters. We are certainly not trying to suggest that there is any need for a uniformity of production, but rather that we should avoid bewildering the consumer with wines that are very different from one another both in quality and style (sparkling Recioto is a case in point).

These characteristics and problems result in limited sales and localized distribution, but also and especially, in an ill-defined image which makes it difficult to put a clear and coherent wine-making and marketing plan into operation.

**Table 1 – Production statistics for Amarone and Recioto wines**  
( made from semi-dried grapes, expressed in hectolitres )

Vintages	Grapes declared	Wine Produced	Amarone *	Recioto *
1990	46.533	18.600	14.000	4.600
1991	35.371	14.100	11.000	3.100
1992	26.747	10.500	8.500	2.000
1993	25.437	10.100	8.000	2.000
1994	39.754	15.800	12.000	3.800
1995	48.850	19.500	15.500	4.020
1996	54.693	21.900	17.000	4.900
1997	78.217	31.300	25.000	6.300
1998	88.132	35.300		

\*approximate estimates

## 2. THE PRODUCTION METHOD FOR RECIOTO

The methods for producing Recioto and Amarone are virtually the same. The only substantial difference comes towards the end of fermentation. If one wishes to arrest the fermentation and so obtain a sweet wine (Recioto), one refrigerates the wine and carries out a series of rackings; if necessary the wine may also be filtered. On the other hand, one allows the fermentation to finish and indeed encourages it to do so in order to obtain a dry wine (Amarone) within a sufficiently short space of time so as to be able to exercise some control over the wine's successive maturation.

The production techniques are summarised in Figure 1 below.

We have already examined the technical and biological aspects of production at the Masi technical Seminars that have taken place at the last few Vinitaly's. These seminars highlighted the following points:

- Selection of the best grapes at a homogenous level of ripeness.
- The importance of correct drying techniques in order to prevent the formation of a grey mould.
- The unusual character of a red wine vinification in which both maceration and fermentation takes place at decidedly low temperatures (in winter), compared to standard enological practice.

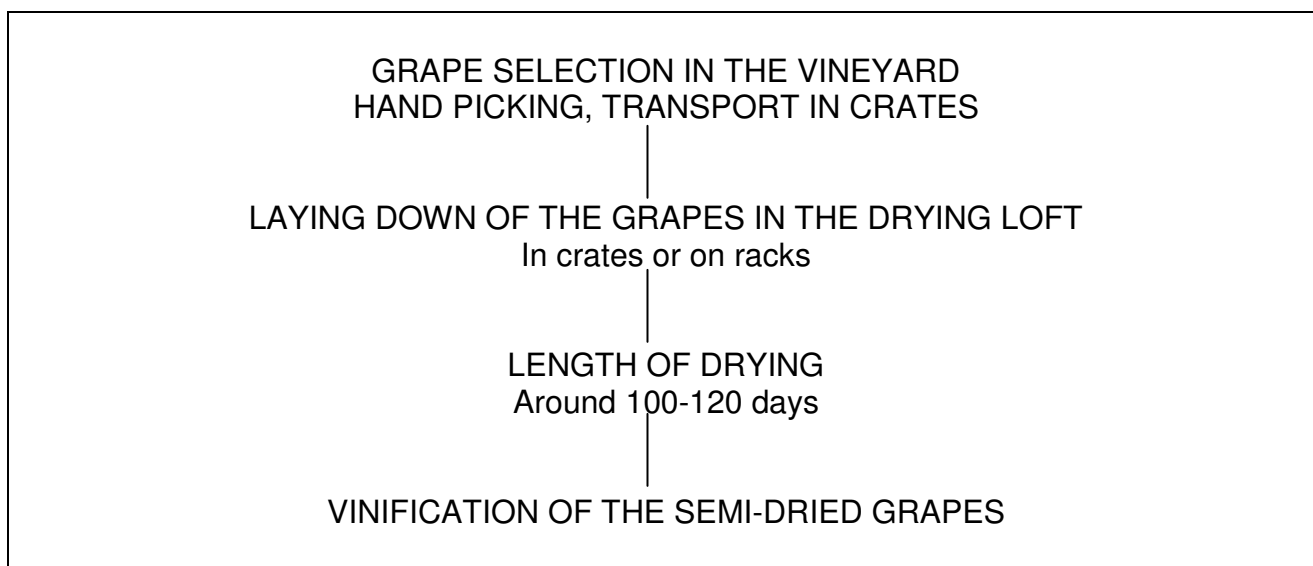
We have also discussed certain problematic factors which, although various possibilities are available, no common technical solution has yet been agreed upon. These concern especially:

- New drying techniques
- A more determined approach towards introducing biological technology into vinification

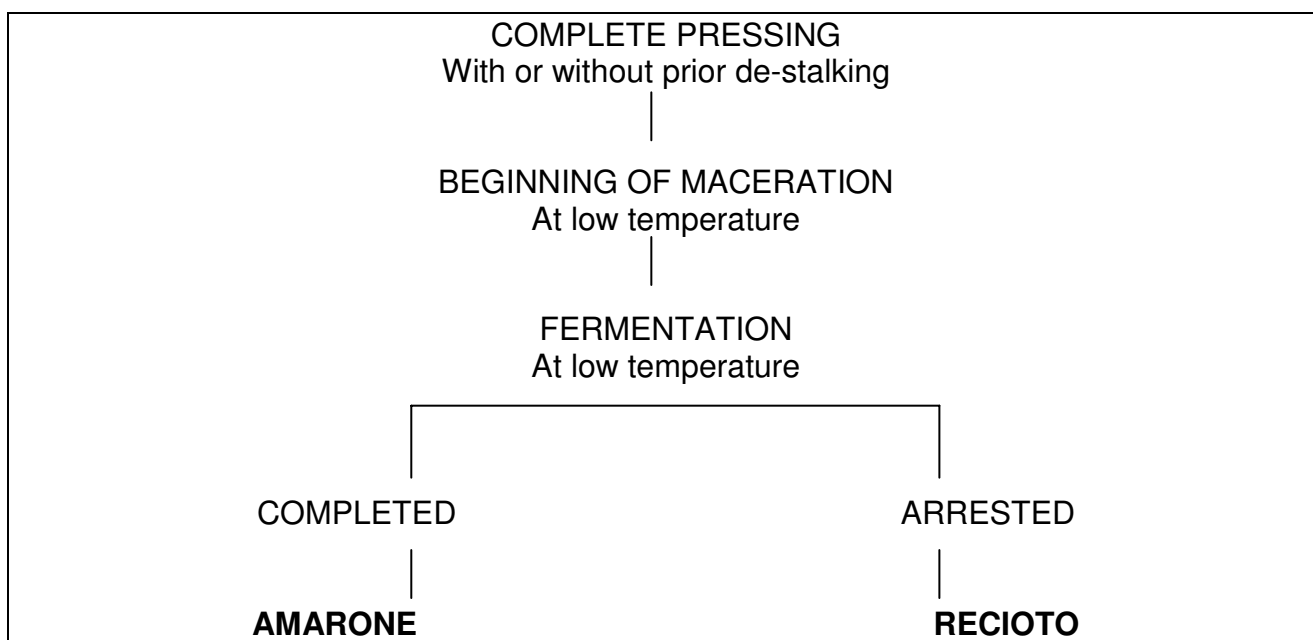
If, however, the commercial success of Amarone encourages greater research into the possibilities of introducing technical modifications within the framework of a tradition which is sometimes obsolete, the tiny quantity of *Recioto* produced does not give rise to similar creativity and experimentation. The traditional, rather rustic, approach to vinifying this wine yields a product which is certainly singular and has great potential for quality, but whose characteristics and styles are not very well defined, either from the point of view of production methods, or as regards the wine's general image among consumers. Let us examine certain possible courses of action which may be followed.

Figure 1. Production techniques for Recioto and Amarone

**a) DRYING**



**b) VINIFICATION**



### 3. PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL FOR RECIOTO

#### ***Tannins and sweetness***

One of the problems of Recioto is, as we have seen, the difficulty of striking a balance between the wine's sweetness and its astringency, between residual sugars and its limited tannin content. This is not always easy to do because both the colour and the typical aromas of the various grape varieties are to be found in the grape skins, which are also the source of the tannins. During maceration all of these substances pass *very* easily (thanks to the drying process), and without any distinction between them, from the skins into the juice, thereby considerably enriching the must which fermentation is in the process of turning into wine. One has, however, to limit the extraction of the tannins in order to make a mellow, sweet wine without any trace of harsh acidity or tannic astringency. This can be done in various ways:

- careful control of the fermentation in order to determine when it should be stopped, thereby leaving a considerable quantity of sugars in the wine: sugars which can mask or at least tone down the harshness of the wine's astringency
- removal by hand of the stalks in order to limit the material from which tannins may be extracted. The cost of such an operation would certainly not be small, so we would have to judge its influence on the final cost of the wine and then decide whether the operation was really worthwhile.
- Rapid drawing-off of the juice as soon as it has been obtained from the pressing of the dried-grapes. This operation is rendered particularly difficult by the fact that semi-dried grapes do not produce much juice and also because it causes problems with the use of the crusher-destemmers. The dry stalks are also often left in the fermenting must, thus contributing further to an increased tannin content in the finished wine. Even if drawing-off were to be carried out rapidly, the must it would produce would be fairly pale rosé in colour, and therefore the wine would not have the traditional deep hue one has come to expect in a Recioto.

The first two cases above may be considered improvements on tradition, yet give wines which may, to all intended purposes, be considered "traditional". The third option would give us a "Recioto Rosato", which should be considered an entirely innovative style.

#### ***Fresh perfumes or development of more mature aromas with ageing***

Another characteristic of Recioto is that it offers an intense selection of aromas which, whilst they definitely remind one of cherries, display a rich and wonderful assortment of variations on that theme. The freshness of these perfumes is altered as the wine matures and ages: with time, their intensity diminishes and gradually gives way to broader and more distinct aromas with a whole range of fascinating nuances.

We therefore have the possibility of choosing to make a particular style of Recioto (youthful or aged) and of employing a whole range of technical approaches or adjustments in order to highlight their respective differences in style.

For example, with an aged Recioto, the use of barriques is a non-traditional technical variation which gives the wines a quite different bouquet to what we are used to, though certainly also one of considerable interest from a qualitative point of view. Barriques must, however, be used with great care in order to keep under control and, as far as possible,



limit any astringency of flavour. The latter sensation can, in fact, be accentuated by using new barriques, by choosing the wrong type of wood and by an excessive period of aging. But if things are done well, the results can be very exciting and reward both those who prize patience and those who like innovation.

### ***Still and sparkling***

Although tradition allows for either possibility, we cannot consider these styles as real alternatives; in the absence of modern winemaking technology Recioto has always been prone to re-ferment even after bottling. The result was that we often found ourselves with a “frizzante” (slightly fizzy) wine, in which, moreover, the intensity of the perfumes was heightened and the product became more fragrant.

Today both styles of product do in fact exist in the marketplace.

However, one may question whether, for a wine that has such particular character and which is produced in such limited quantities, there is really a need for the diversification which is typical of products consumed on a much larger scale and whether this does not in fact, along with other factors, merely cause difficulty and disorientation for the consumer.

### ***“Liquoroso” (fortified)***

This is a style for which provision was made in the early D.O.C. Regulations for Recioto della Valpolicella, and which was included in order to increase Recioto’s commercial potential. It does not, however, have any basis in real tradition. Adding alcohol during the fermentation in order to arrest it and thus obtain a wine with both a high sugar level and high alcohol ( around 16% - 18%) is a common practice in the production of many sweet wines, of which the most famous are Port, Sherry and the Muscat-based “vins doux naturels”. This still remains a viable option for a new non-traditional style of Recioto. In this case too, however, there is a major question mark as to whether copying Port can be of benefit to Recioto, or if it would not be better to underline the wine’s individual and original style.

## 4. Conclusions

Recioto, Verona's oldest and most prestigious wine, suffers from a dull, ill-defined image and from sales that are not exactly earth-shattering. Yet it is by no means lacking in character, quality and originality; it is a rare example of a sweet red wine and, indeed, it is one with an illustrious history and tradition.

The interest in Recioto, however, is merely a cultural one and, for the present at least, there are no signs to suggest that it might emulate the commercial success of its sibling "Amarone".

Is this the result of a deliberate choice by consumers who simply do not appreciate this style of wine? Then what about Port?

Is the problem to be found in unsuccessful marketing which has not succeeded in communicating an unequivocal message regarding a product which has, anyway, a rather ill-defined style?

Or is there a need to re-invent Recioto and, whilst still bearing tradition in mind, pursue new paths which may be suggested by recent technical innovations?

Does tradition just need to be brought up to date and developed or should a completely new style of Recioto be invented?

*Amacord* or brutal plagiarism?

Most likely winemaking technology will be able to provide us with some interesting answers, as long as we bear in mind certain criticisms that have been made about traditional Recioto and also the preferences of the informed modern consumer. It is a balance that is hard to find, but one that is by no means out of the question.

Anyway, it is certainly worth a try!

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## PRODUCTS FOR TASTING

### **RECIOTO CLASSICO 1999**

A high-quality young Recioto.

A fine example of tradition in its “purest” form, aimed at striking an optimum balance of tannins, sweetness and creaminess.

### **RECIOTO ROSE**

An innovative interpretation which also seeks to limit the quantities of tannins present.

### **RECIOTO in barrique**

Another innovative interpretation. Maturation in barrique makes the style of this wine different from a traditional one. Its perfumes are less intense but broader, and the wine appears to offer fine and complex aging potential. An aristocratic and authoritative style of Recioto.

### **RECIOTO MEZZANELLA AMANDORLATO 1995**

The term “amandorlato” is used to describe Recioto with a fairly limited sugar content (30 – 40 g/l) in which the softness of the tannins bring out certain organoleptic characteristics which are reminiscent of almonds and nuts in general. A combination of tradition and innovation.

### **RECIOTO CLASSICO CASAL DEI RONCHI SEREGO ALIGHIERI 1993**

A particular interpretation of tradition. It is not usual to find an aged Recioto and, anyway, it is a style that is technically difficult to make. However, when maturation is carried out with care, the results can be very satisfying, as in this case.

An interpretation well worth considering.