

Amarone della Valpolicella

By Franco Ziliani

Amarone della Valpolicella has experienced an authentic renaissance in the last seven to eight years. By far the most prestigious of the wines of the Veneto, it is fêted as one of the super stars of contemporary Italian wine, and considered along with Barolo and Brunello di Montalcino as one of the country's three greatest reds. Not all that long ago, in the mid 1980s and early 1990s, Amarone was looked upon as a kind of oenological anachronism, an expression of the local traditions of the Veneto of mainly academic interest, but today it is a buzz wine, a market leader which gets extensive coverage in the international wine press and features in high profile tastings. The key to this remarkable turn around was the 1995 vintage, which as the British wine writer **Richard Baudains** wrote in the magazine *Decanter*, "...represented a turning point in the renaissance of Amarone. It was a small vintage but although the harvest was down 30 percent, the quality of the fruit was so good and the demand such that production leapt to an all time record of over 2 million bottles." It subsequently went on to hit 3.2 million bottles with the 1997 vintage.

With prices of Barolo and Brunello soaring out of control and with growing demand for alternative flavours to those offered by a world of wine increasingly under the sway of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, Amarone represented a breath of fresh air, an escape from the monotony of standardised taste. Thus, half a century after its first commercial appearance in the 1950s and thirty-three years after the DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*) status granted in 1968, Amarone appeared to be going from strength to strength. The spectrum of production was continually widening and every year saw the arrival of new players on the scene, above all small scale growers who had previously sold grapes to the major bottling houses or the (very reliable) co-operatives of the area and now began turning out their own estate wines.

Paradoxically however, Amarone and the Valpolicella area as a whole currently risk becoming the victims of their own success. The indiscriminate increase in the quantities of grape destined to the drying process for Amarone (with more than 100,000 quintals from the 2000 vintage the landmark of 6 million bottles is approaching rapidly) reveals a complete lack of strategic planning. There is a serious danger that by naively cashing in on current successes producers will undermine the foundations on which the long-term future should be built.

The most serious problems are related to the situation of stylistic anarchy created by the typical Italian individualism which induces producers to abandon a stable, well-defined and clearly recognisable model and launch into free interpretation based on personal inspiration and/or misconceptions, fashion and the whim of the moment. In May this year the **Consorzio Tutela Vini di Valpolicella** organised what turned out to be a lively and at times heated conference moderated by the author of this article on the theme "Amarone: stile di vino o vino di stile" ('Amarone: wine style or lifestyle wine?'). Despite an evident awareness of the risks associated with the current trend of "creativity," the conference ended without agreeing any practical measures or even taking a stand which might suggest we can expect an early rationalisation of the ill assorted hodge podge of styles apparent today. It is currently possible to find Amarone ranging from dry Bordeaux type to dessert wine sweetness, fruit-driven New World styles and wines with excessive oak flavours, be they from old barrels, new barrels or high toast barriques. The traditionalists tend to nail their colours to the mast of alcoholic, full-bodied wines with a touch of oxidation while the modern school goes for suppler styles with less alcohol, less oxidation and lower levels of volatile acidity. Modern winemaking methods have succeeded in eliminating many of the potential defects of traditional Amarone, but at the cost of sacrificing elements of the character of the wine that made it unquestionably and unmistakably unique.

It seems self-apparent that it would be in the interests of all concerned to produce wines with a personality derived from the terroir of the Valpolicella and its traditional varieties. And yet it appears

that the majority of the people involved in the production of Amarone are intent on eliminating every trace of its original terroir character, on repudiating its historical identity and the features which set it apart from any other wine made in Italy--or the rest of the world for that matter--in favour of muddled efforts to embrace a so-called "international style."

Unfortunately the problems here are not limited, as they are for example in the case of Barolo, to the use of barriques. It is obvious, at least in the view of this author, that Amarone has no need for added oak flavours. I would go further; there is so much oak influence in the wines of the world at the moment that eliminating it from Amarone would be a significant way of making it stand out in the crowd. There are cases where the use of oak makes theoretical sense, for instance in the wines of producers like **Tedeschi** (Amarone La Fabriseria) **Bussola, Dal Forno, Accordini** (Fornetto) and **Brunelli** (Campo del Titari) but most of the time the barrique assaults both the nose and the palate with singed oak flavours and dry wood tannins.

Other problems are related to technical aspects of vinification. The character of Amarone is determined more than any other Italian red wine today by the winemaking process. The use of partially dried grapes gives the wine its essential profile: the mouth filling concentration of flavour, alcohol and extract, and the touch of sweetness you sometimes find in the finish. Making wines with such high levels of concentration, in which the potential alcohol content often exceeds 15 percent alcohol (by volume), can present major headaches. The fermentation takes place not in autumn but in the depths of winter when low ambient temperatures can give the yeasts a hard time. Wines often fail to ferment completely in the first year and start again in the following summer. This factor in itself however is insufficient to justify the excessive volatile acidity, side aromas and premature oxidation which can be found in regularly commercialised wines.

On top of the overzealous use of oak, the technical problems of vinifying super concentrated grapes and the making of overblown styles in search of ratings from the specialised press and the annual guides, there is another issue and this is the increasing tendency towards excessive residual sugar.

In stylistic terms it is an aberration and from the legislative point of view a clear violation of the DOC norms. If a producer is really intent on pumping up the sugar, the resulting wine has to come out as a *Recioto* (a much more difficult style to promote, especially abroad where there is considerable diffidence towards sweet red wines) or as the even rarer Ammandorlato, but not as Amarone. Producers today have at their disposal the technical means to obtain high alcohol wines which are completely dry, or at least do not exceed residual sugar levels of 2-4 grams per litre. There is no case for believing that the musts of Amarone are so concentrated that more or less complete fermentation is impossible. Yeasts have the ability to produce up to 17-18 percent alcohol --and where fermentation is inhibited by high sugar levels, producers always have the option of topping up a vat with less concentrated must. The current DOC regulations for Amarone allow up to 8 grams per litre of residual sugar. For an attentive taster the threshold of perception in wines of this kind of weight is around 6 grams per litre. Once you get up to 8 grams per litre, even a less experienced taster begins to notice a distinct note of sweetness.

There are producers in favour of modifying the DOC to raise the permitted sugar levels from 8 to 10 grams per litre. It is a move which might make sense if the market for Amarone were limited to the local area of Verona where traditionally semi-sweet wines have a certain popularity, but the idea is ridiculous when you consider that the principle sales of Amarone are not in the Veneto but in the rest of the world and that the Amarone fan is also an aficionado of Barolo, Brunello and the Super Tuscans. At 10 grams per litre--and this is a fact which is absurd as it may seem, many producers overlook--it is impossible to drink Amarone with a meat dish. The only option for wines with this amount of sugar is the cheese course or the relegation of Amarone to the role of an after dinner drink, to taste (if you can use the word) like a liqueur alongside a cigar!

And then there is the question of varieties. The DOC stipulates a blend based on Corvina (40-70 percent) Rondinella (20-40 percent) and Molinara (5-25 percent) but which also permits the use of, amongst others, small amounts of Cabernet and Merlot. A proposal currently on the table seeks to increase the amount of Corvina Veronese, introduce up to 50 percent Corvinone, and relegate Molinara to the category of "other non-aromatic varieties recognised for the province of Verona" which makes up an optional maximum of 15 percent of the *cèpage*.

What emerged from the tastings of this year's session of the Concorso dei Vini della Valpolicella were

aromatic profiles with an evident, and in the view of this author intolerable, influence of varieties which have no connection whatsoever with the ampelographical traditions of Valpolicella--not only the ubiquitous Cabernet and Merlot, but also Syrah with which a number of producers have begun to "personalize" their wines. The other impression that came out of the extensive tasting of the 1997 and 1998 vintages was of the (strictly illicit) presence of varieties with very southern flavours. One's thoughts inevitably turn to what is sometimes referred to as the "motorway school" of oenology, winemaking sustained by tanker trucks that arrive on the trunk roads from the south, unload and disappear whence they came. It is unthinkable that the producers of the Valpolicella should decide, now of all times when their wines have reached the peak of celebrity and are in a position to command retail prices which begin at 40,000-50,000 lira (\$18.20-\$22.75) at top out at 80,000-100,000 (\$36.40-\$45.50), to compromise their credibility in this way. The magnificent hills of the Valpolicella are too beautiful and their importance to the renaissance of winemaking in the Veneto too great to engage in suicidal practices like that of doping their wines. **wbm**

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