

Amarone, an inimitable *vin de terroir*

A few kilometres from the city of Verona, the home of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the winegrowing region of Valpolicella spreads over an area of 30,000 hectares and offers lovers of big, strapping reds the long-lasting nectar that is Amarone. Of course, there are other, simpler red wines such as Bardolino and Valpolicella, but even when produced with the *ripasso* technique (double fermentation in contact with the lees of Amarone), these are but a pale reflection of the majestic Amarone.

BY DELPHINE VEISSIÈRE



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A visit to the Bertani or Masi wine cellars is like reading a history book dedicated to a wine region whose traditions date back to at least 1672, from the evidence of a Venetian-shaped bottle found there. Like certain fine wines such as Champagne, for example, Amarone first emerged from the complete fermentation of a sweet wine called Recioto traditionally made by the region's farmers from the main native grape varieties, Corvina, Molinara and Rondinella - that's to say, it came about by mistake. Originally called Recioto Amaro, the first wine labelled

under the name Amarone was sold in 1939 by the Cantina Sociale della Valpolicella, which today offers wines under the brand Domini Veneti.



**EMILIO PEDRON,
PRESIDENT
OF THE
VALPOLICELLA
CONSORTIUM**

A PROMISING FUTURE

For over a century, the viticulture and oenological traditions of Burgundy have had a major influence on Amarone production. In the 1850s, the Bertani brothers spent four years in Burgundy to learn about and try to reproduce the interpretations of *terroir* provided by its grand cru wines. Even today, producers such as Sandro Gini started out by criss-crossing Burgundy to evaluate the possibility of producing fine Amarone wines in a geographical area traditionally dedicated to Soave white wines made from Garganega grapes. Yet Amarone found success only belatedly, when it was discovered by an American market fond of fruit-forward, full-bodied wines like Amarone often is, thanks to a production technique called *appassimento*, in which the grapes are dried before they are pressed and fermented. Often criticised for their high level of alcohol, generally

around 15-16%, Amarone wines are exported mainly to northern European countries (Denmark, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Germany) and are the darling of airlines interested in wines with a minimum of 14% alcohol, given the reduced olfactory acuity of passengers on long-haul flights.

According to Emilio Pedron, President of the Valpolicella Consortium, Amarone has a promising future, with a continuing increase in sales (if one excludes the catastrophic year of 2008) estimated at 10% for 2011 - and this despite higher taxation on wines with over 15% alcohol, particularly in the United States and Switzerland. In addition, the average return per hectare is also steadily progressing, currently at 20,000 euros, which is four times higher than the national average. Apart from Soave producers such as the Gini or Pra wineries, which



**BOLLA WAS FORMERLY OWNED BY THE
AMERICAN DISTRIBUTOR BROWN-FORMAN**



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AMARONE IS PRODUCED BY A TECHNIQUE CALLED *APPASSIMENTO*, IN WHICH THE GRAPES ARE DRIED BEFORE THEY ARE PRESSED AND FERMENTED

have recently switched to Amarone production, new producers such as Tenuta Sant'Antonio, created in the 1990s, are already making their mark with excellent wines.

Strategic business negotiations are also taking place, with the Riunite de l'Emilie-Romagne wine cooperative taking a majority share in Gruppo Italiano Vini (G.I.V.), today the largest firm in the Italian wine sector. The resulting internal restructuring is mirrored in other major wineries such as Bolla (known abroad mainly for its Pinot Grigio and its Chianti), which was formerly owned by the American distributor Brown-Forman (until 2006), and is now part of G.I.V. In return, according to some sources, the historic Bertani estate was apparently sold to the Angelini family, better known for its investments in the pharmaceutical industry and the Tuscan wine sector - a transaction worth around 100 million euros.

However, Sandro Boscaini, President of the Masi Group, the largest producer of Amarone in Valpolicella, remains cautious regarding the development of new Asian markets such as China, believing that these consumers consider wine simply the end result of the fermentation of fruit, and see Old World wines as a symbol of European culture rather than as linked to a particular *terroir* or local tradition.

AN INIMITABLE STYLE

It would be an oversimplification to consider Amarone a wine that owes its style uniquely to *appassimento*, a factor that



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SANDRO BOSCAINI, PRESIDENT OF THE MASI GROUP, THE LARGEST PRODUCER OF AMARONE IN VALPOLICELLA

supposedly reduces a wine's characteristics of *terroir*. If we take, for example, the wines produced by Masi in Argentina, the style remains Venetian, but the personality of the wine is very different from the best Amarones from Valpolicella, which open with fruit and notes of assorted spices overlaid with intensely balsamic and floral hints. Tannic, round, structured and concentrated, Bolla's "Le origini" (especially 2005 and 2007) are closest to the Argentinian Amarones (for example, Masi Tupungato's 2009 "Corbec", a blend of Malbec and Corvina grapes) and take the *terroir's* characteristics to an extreme, characteristics intensified with another range of Bolla Amarone, Santi's "Proemio" (especially 2005 and 2007).

A good Amarone starts life in the vineyards in the hills around Lake Garda and acquires its personality during *appassimento*; that is, the period during which the grapes are dried in ventilated trays and lose 30-35% of their weight, sometimes aided by the development of *Botrytis cinerea*, which leads to a high level of



THE WINEGROWING REGION OF VALPOLICELLA SPREADS OVER AN AREA OF 30,000 HECTARES

glycerine in the must. This process results in a period of pre-maceration inside the grapes, which undergo a micro-enzymatic transformation that promotes the development of the wine's secondary aromas. The wet climatic conditions that can occur in October can prove problematic given that the grapes should ideally be pressed in the January following the harvest. For example, although 1982 was an excellent year for Bordeaux wines, it was difficult for Amarones as the month of October was very wet and the grapes were exposed to mildew during *appassimento*. As a result, some estates invested in modern drying trays and installed systems for reducing dampness to guarantee better quality grapes, as well as systems that allow the reduction of the level of sulphur dioxide and the option of either endogenous or exogenous fermentation as appropriate to prioritise the use of native yeast. Masi is the sole winery with a fully automated ventilation system. For its part, the Tenuta Sant'Antonio winery opts for slow fermentation at low temperatures (around 21-22 °C), conserving the fruit and the freshness of the wine, unlike classic Amarones, which are almost too oxidised and round, such as those traditionally made at the Bertani estate. The 2007 Campo dei Gigli and the 2007 Amarone Riserva represent the best expressions of Tenuta Sant'Antonio Amarone.

TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE

The helping hand of technology and the utilisation of drying trays equipped with controlled ventilation systems allow the use of sulfites to be limited during the grape-drying phase. This has permitted large wineries such as Bolla to join organisations of natural winemakers such as Freewine. Created in Valpolicella by the oenologist Marco Tebaldi, this organisation encourages the production of sulfite-free wine (www.freewine.eu). The freshness, elegance and finesse of the 2010 Bolla Amarone is a pleasant surprise. It will be on the market in 2013.

The outsider of Soave, Sandro Gini, now also a producer of fine Amarone wines, has been producing white wines without added sulfites since 1985. His first Amarones (probably beginning with the 2008 vintage) were made according to the same philosophy and will be available for sale in 2012. In the geographical area of Soave, the Dal Forno and Pra wineries have been making Amarone for several years from vineyards planted at an average altitude of 500 metres, on remote previously virgin land with characteristics similar to the argilo-calcareous subsoil of Burgundy. Some might argue that more and more winemakers in Valpolicella are producing Amarone to benefit from its reputation and its better profit margins at the expense of the well-known appellations sold in large volumes on the international markets, such as Soave white wines and Valpolicella Superiore reds. The regulations for Valpolicella DOCG stipulate that the ratio of Amarone compared to Valpolicella, which is simpler and cheaper to produce, should be one to two. According to Emilio Pedron, between 2004 and 2011, Amarone production has gone from 380,000 to 420,000 hectolitres, more than 12 million bottles, at a price of 200 euros per 100 kilograms of grapes.

A DISTILLATION OF *terroir*

It is important to keep in mind that the Amarone produced



SANDRO GINI, NOW ALSO A PRODUCER OF FINE AMARONE WINES



SANDRO GINI'S AMARONE WINES ARE A TRUE REVELATION. THEY ARE PRODUCED FROM VINEYARDS PLANTED IN 2000 ON WELL-VENTILATED VIRGIN LAND AT AN ALTITUDE OF 500 METRES

today is more than a highly alcoholic, muscular, super-concentrated wine. This modern wine with ancient origins can be defined as a quality dry red wine with a big personality. It is aged in barrels and has high glycerol content similar to a fine Bordeaux (between 11 and 12 grams per litre). The wine is matured in casks or barrels of different capacities during a minimum period of two years. The Valpolicella appellation (which recently became DOCG) is made up of micro-terroirs that lend its wines very different personalities. Amarone from the hills of Negrar is naturally endowed with invigorating freshness and opens with interesting flavours of stone fruit like cherry, while that from Mazzano is spicier and more similar to the Amarone produced at Illasi, in which the aromas and flavours of black pepper and clove are paired with a hint of concentrated stewed fruit. The big player of top-range Amarone is the Masi winery, which has three crus: 2005 "Vaio Armaron" Amarone (extracts of cherry, dried grass, anise and eucalyptus and a fresh, structured, mouth-filling palate somewhere between the flavours of liquorice and violet candy); 2004 "Campolongo di Torbe" Amarone (elegant and deep, characterised by notes of fruit, spice and menthol); and 2004 "Mazzano" Amarone, the winery's flagship, which is structured and can be cellar-aged for 20 years without any problem.

THE POETRY OF AMARONE

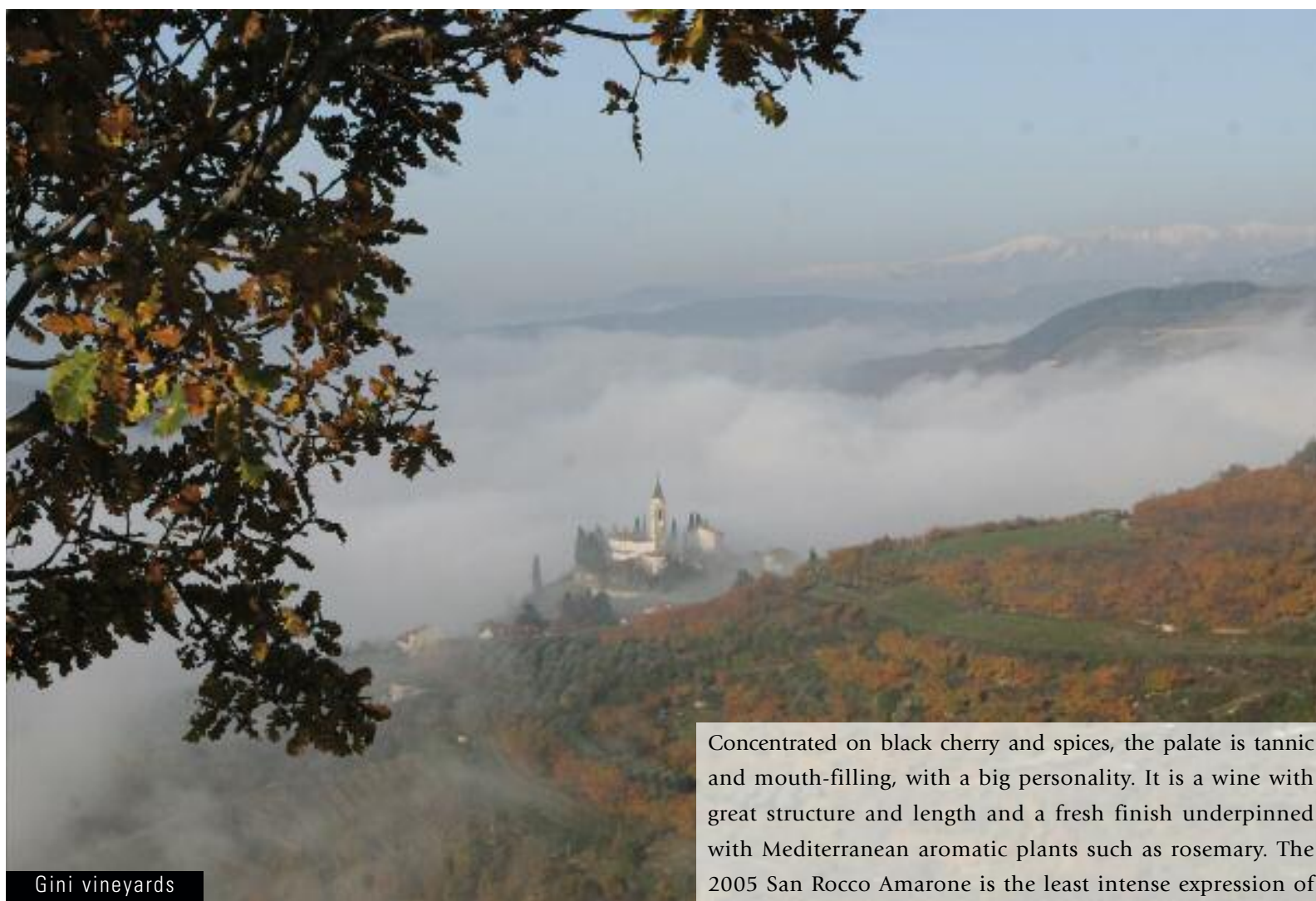
Nothing can match the poetry of Amarone matured in barrels, most often in Allier French oak, or in the case of the Pra winery, blended with wines matured in Hungarian oak, which gives its 2009 vintage an intensity and roundness centred on super-concentrated flavours of liquorice, black tobacco and violet. Pra's 2007 vintage, concentrated on black fruit such as blackberry and blueberry coated with a pleasant creamy note of milk caramel is currently available in shops. The 2010 Pra already demonstrates elegance and ageing potential superior to the 2009 vintage.

Sandro Gini's Amarone wines are a true revelation. They are produced from vineyards planted in 2000 on well-ventilated virgin land at an altitude of 500 metres. The grapes ripen slowly and do not suffer the over-ripening problems that can be caused by too much exposure to the sun, despite still employing the Trentino pergola vine-training system common in the lower areas of Valpolicella. Gini's 2010 vintage features an Amarone with good concentration around the aromas of red fruits and clove and a structured and elegant palate that compares favourably to the 2009 vintage, which is more rustic and oaky and already shows restrained freshness, incorporated tannins and a less defined structure. The 2007 vintage is a

testament to Gini's style, balanced between intensity and strength, while the 2008, which is rounder and more concentrated, recalls more commercial Amarone wines, such as those produced in recent years by the Allegrini winery.

Currently, Domini Veneti offers the fullest panorama of the diversity of Valpolicella's terroirs with its five crus (Villa, San

this as an excellent vintage. It rained during the harvest, and the beginning of the *appassimento* grape-drying process was problematic. Only the wineries with the most advanced ventilation and drying technology were able to pull through. The Villa, Castelrotto and Mazzurega Amarones have a palate of assorted fruits with spicy and balsamic notes, with the Mazzurega being the antithesis of the usual qualifiers for an Amarone.



Gini vineyards

Rocco, Mazzurega, Castelrotto and Monte) all from the same year - 2005. Under the impetus of Daniele Accordini, the fermentation is carried out with exogenous yeast and the blends are composed of Corvina, Corvinone and Rondinella. The Molinara grape, commonly used to make Amarone, has recently been omitted by the majority of the wineries because it adds little to the wine's longevity, whereas the Oseleta grape, which contributes colour and tannins, has been reintroduced (as it has at Masi). Domini Veneti's decision to offer this range of 2005 Amarone is daring, considering it was a low-production year (as were 1954 and 1997), so it would be risky to describe

Concentrated on black cherry and spices, the palate is tannic and mouth-filling, with a big personality. It is a wine with great structure and length and a fresh finish underpinned with Mediterranean aromatic plants such as rosemary. The 2005 San Rocco Amarone is the least intense expression of the *terroir* of the five wines, with an oaky palate that hides the fruit and a finish that lacks length. Lastly we should note the atypical roundness of the 2005 Monte compared with the harmony and depth of the 2005 Castelrotto Amarone.

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that the region's main traditional Amarone producers remain living representatives of the excellence produced in Valpolicella. Bertani's Amarone wines from 1981, 1967 and 1964 are true works of art that still embody the essence of an impressive *terroir*.