



Amarone della Valpolicella: little ground for optimism

by Franco Ziliani

After very disappointing performances in the 2003 vintage (the result of near-tropical heat that dried and burned the grapes while they were still on the vines), expectations were high at the 2004 vintage preview of this legendary Italian wine. There were certainly good reasons to expect a stronger showing. We had in front of us “a fine year, in some cases outstanding,” according to the Consorzio professionals, “one without any weather or vineyard problems.” So it was reasonable to expect wines whose common thread would be “elegance, refinement, and freshness on both nose and palate, a judicious balance of alcohol and moderate residual sugar that makes the wine eminently approachable and a good partner with food.”

And yet, after tasting 70 wines, that optimistic hope evaporated, victim of too many wines that were unappealing, bizarre, technically unsound, devoid of those characteristics that make up what we recognize as balance, elegance, complexity, and expressive power, let alone the ability to partner well with food. I expected wines that would reflect the genius loci. Instead, I felt shocked and wrongfooted to be confronted by so many wines whose varietal characteristics—even after the *appassimento*, or drying process, which tends to mask such traits—betrayed a French pedigree. Worse still, there was the suspicion of varieties hailing from much farther south—rather than those that have contributed to the splendid history of this area of the Veneto. When an area—not just any area, but one such as Valpolicella, whose ampelography boasts such dazzling diversity—produces wines that, when tasted blind, one is unable to identify as Valpolicella, and when only after forcing one's way through a forest of French and American oak can one perhaps catch a hint of the traditional *appassimento* barely emerging from a sea of oaky jam, then one must conclude that most of these are not successful wines. Rather, they are a betrayal, a disaster, a brazen refusal to exhibit the hues, the nuances, the subtleties so prized in

Valpolicella, in order to pander to an international market that doesn't give a fig about area of origin and terroir. Many of these were still “wines in progress,” of course—barrel samples and wines still maturing (so why then are they previewed in January?). But even that fails to explain the excesses, the almost fairground freakishness of muscles on display, the relentless drive toward extreme concentration and extraction. Such wines of zero pleasure will never make the transition from “barrel sample X” to “I'm going to uncork this beauty tonight with my friends.” Unbalanced, graceless, overbearing, boasting achingly high alcohol and residual sugar (could it be that some producers mistakenly switched Recioto labels for Amarone?); one-dimensional, predictable, with no energy or nuance. Such creations cannot hope to appeal to those who demand from such a noble wine, with such an illustrious heritage, far more than this—particularly at current price levels. If the reigning aesthetic of Amarone requires that the sweetness from excessively dried grapes be transmuted into sickly sweet wines the color of eggplant, with a boring predictability and vulgarity that is about as sexy as Pamela Anderson's twin prides, with acidities cunningly plastered to exacerbate their cloying rotundity, then I for one fail to understand such Valpolicella.

Far from jettisoning the whole lot, however, I did find wines whose delights brought me back to Valpolicella instead of Bolgheri, Sicily, the New World, or God-knows-where—Amarones that did honor the name, character, and abiding fascination of this distinctive wine. I should also point out that producers such as Allegrini, Masi, Dal Forno, Le Ragose, Quintarelli, Fattoria Garbole, Villa Spinosa, Le Salette, Begali, Viviani, Marion, Brunelli, Villa Monteleone, and Bolla did not preview their wines here. Among those who did were Cà Rugate, Corte Rugoli, Guerrieri Rizzardi, Tenuta Sant'Antonio, Montesor, San Rustico, Tedeschi, Monte Zovo, Monteci, Santa Sofia, Tommaso Bussola, Musella, Carlo Boscaini, Antolini, Cà la Bionda, Massimo Venturini, Cecilia Beretta, Terre di Cariano, Croce del Gal, and Benedetti Corte Antica.

What raises equally worrying questions about Valpolicella's present and future is the statistical picture. Currently, the Valpolicella Vineyard Register shows 5,839ha (14,428 acres) planted, with 2,470 wineries producing Valpolicella and 1,226 growing grapes for Amarone, while 390 specialized lofts dry the clusters, for a total crop value of €90 million, Amarone stocks valued at €170 million, and overall sales of DOC Valpolicella at €220 million. These figures indicate an ever-decreasing production of standard Valpolicella and a production of grapes for drying that went from 8.2 million kg in 1997 to 25.7 million kg ten years later.

It is certainly true, as the outgoing president of the Consorzio points out, that “the Valpolicella production system functions well and helps to distribute the revenues more widely”—which at €20,000 per hectare is more than respectable. It is also true, generally speaking, that most Valpolicella wineries “are on much sounder foundations now,” and that some 20 expert Consorzio agronomists, after examining the vineyards and drying lofts over a period of five months, declassified as “unsuitable” 18,000 quintals of fruit in the drying process.

But serious questions remain, not least when we are told that bottle sales of Amarone/Recioto in 2007 soared above the estimated total of 8.35 million bottles to a staggering 12 million bottles. We must presume that this headlong rush for *appassimento* and Amarone is, for some producers, an attempt to get rich quick. But it is a dangerous strategy to equate Amarone with ultra-premium wine and to charge absurd prices for it. We have already seen elsewhere that such miscalculations can be ruinous.

Production of Valpolicella grapes for *appassimento* (Amarone and Recioto) in millions of kilos—1997: 8.2; 2001: 12.7; 2003: 16.2; 2004: 14.8; 2005: 15.9; 2006: 23.6; 2007: 25.7.

Estimated bottle sales of Amarone/Recioto della Valpolicella in millions of bottles—1997: 1.558; 2000: 3.302; 2001: 3.363; 2003: 4.982; 2004: 5.751; 2006: 8.218; 2007: 8.350.