Amarone: A Unique Wine

Charles Scicolone (February 26, 2009)



This Great Wine from the Veneto has Gained a New Popularity

It was a cold morning in February as I headed to Felidia restaurant for the Wine Media Guild's Amarone tasting and lunch. What better wines to taste and drink on a cold day and who better to speak about then Sandro Boscaini of the Masi winery? There were 30 wines to taste arranged by producer, so that we could better understand the different styles.

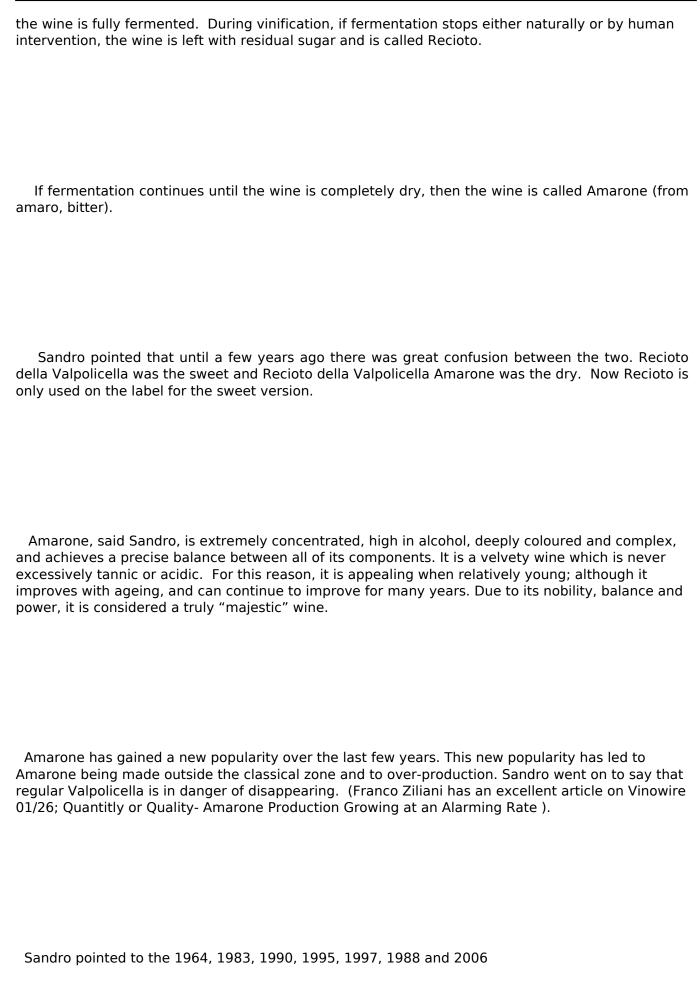
Amarone, began Sandro, is made from three Veronese grape varieties: Corvina is the most important because during appassimento it is subject to Botrytis (Noble Rot), which produces high levels of glycerin and glycolic acid. This, however, limits its ability to provide color and tannin. Rondinella is the second most important grape variety and a perfect compliment to Corvina. Its thick dark skin is very resistant to botrytis during the appassimento period and it adds color, tannins and aromas. Molinara, a light red grape, provides the acidity and drinkability that is unusual for a wine of this structure.

Appassimento: The drying of the grapes. The grapes are laid on straw racks for 80-to-100 days to dry, according to the vintage.

The drying is now done in temperature controlled warehouses. During the appassimento the grapes lose 30-40% of their weight due to evaporation and become semi-dried. They have sugar levels of between 25 and 28 Brix. Sandro Boscaini wants botrytis to attack his grapes. He feels it gives his wine a little added character. Other winemakers feel that drying the grapes is enough and the sweetness should be saved for the Recioto.

Recioto della Valpolicella is the sweet version of amarone made from semi-dried (appassito) grapes. Recioto comes from the local dialect "recie", ears. Grape bunches have two small clusters branching out near the top. These "ears" are the choice part of the bunch because they stick out and get the most sun.

Amarone della Valpolicella is the dry wine version made from semi-dried (appassito) grapes when



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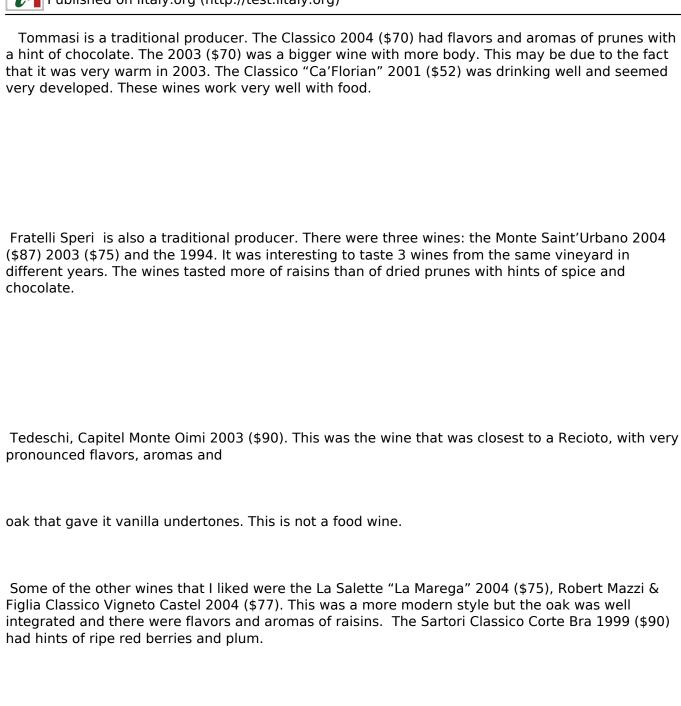
The wines

The first producer we tasted was Masi. There were eight of Sandro's wines at the tasting. All of them showed very well and all were similar in character. He has moved to a more modern style and likes to keep a hint of Recioto in his Amarone. Figs, chocolate, cherries and dried prunes ran trough his wines. The Costasera Classico 2005 (\$65) was the most modern in style and according to Sandro ready to drink. I found it to have a lot of flavor but it was tannic and needed more time.

The Serego Alighieri Viao Classico 2001 (\$83) is his most traditional Amarone. This estate was bought by the son of Dante Alighieri in 1353. (The famous poet from Florence--his full name was Durante degli Alighieri.) There was fruit, hints of spice and a backbone of chocolate. The 1997 had the same flavors but was more developed.

The Mazzano 1997 (\$240) had a lot of character but more subtle flavors. The Campolongo di Torbe Classico 1997 had that underlining chocolate aroma and flavor, with hints of bitter cherries and spice.

Bertani is a very traditional producer of Amarone. They still dry the grapes in the traditional manner and use large Slavonian oak casks for the wine. Their current release is the Classico 2001 (\$140). This wine needs more time to develop. It was closed, tannic with underlining fruit flavors. I took an open bottle home with me and drank it two nights later. It was just starting to open up. The Classico 1980 (\$250), was full and dry with aromas of red berries, spices and chocolate. The Classico 1972 (\$365) was showing its age. I have had this vintage before and it was showing better. The wines from this producer in a good year will last for 40 years or more.



Michele Castellani Amarone Classico was a producer that I had never tasted before. I was impressed by the Ca del Pipa, Colle Cristi 2004 (\$65), I Castel-Campo Casalin 2003 (\$75) and the Ca del Pipa, Monte Cristi 1998. These wines were somewhere between modern and traditional, with hints of raisins, chocolate and spice but very well balanced.