

Amarone della Valpolicella

IT'S A WINE THAT CAN BEWITCH AND BEFUDDLE IN EQUAL MEASURE. BUT IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT, THESE ARE WINES OF BEGUILING CHARM. SARAH MARSH MW TASTES A SELECTION FROM STELLAR PRODUCERS, SPANNING VARYING VINTAGES AND STYLES

Even knowledgeable wine lovers sometimes approach Amarone della Valpolicella with a degree of uncertainty, daunted by preconceptions of considerable alcohol and formidable structure. This tasting is designed to allay these fears, let you know what to expect and encourage you to explore the different styles and vintages.

Amarone producers were invited to submit samples, and the response was impressive. But more remarkable was the high and consistent level of quality. Of the 90 samples, 40 scored 90 points or above. Amarone may be steeped in tradition, but the 11 valleys in the foothills of the Lessini mountains are alive with talented producers interpreting their traditions in a contemporary way. This modern-day Amarone should not taste spirity or sweet.

Amarone is produced using *appassimento*, an ancient technique developed when cold conditions made it impossible to ripen grapes sufficiently. Bunches are dried in specially designed lofts, so the berries shrivel by at least 30%, concentrating the sugar. This means

that the alcohol is high – usually around 16% – but it should feel integrated and balanced. (Around one in six of the samples tasted a bit hot on the finish.) The fermentation should be complete with just a soupçon of residual sugar. (Regulations allow 11g/l at 16%, but you are unlikely to encounter this level of sweetness. Many have less than 3g/l, which is undetectable.) The result is something rich and full-bodied, but essentially dry.

As the name suggests, Amarone should be slightly bitter – in a good way. Think sour cherries and quality black chocolate. This comes from the traditional grape varieties of Corvina and Corvinone, which are both low in tannin, yielding a soft, smooth and supple texture.

And then there are the aromatics, which are often misleadingly described as balsamic. During the *appassimento* process, chemical changes in the skin impart the signature aromatics of culinary herbs – from softly fragrant bay leaf and oregano, to more punchy aniseed/tarragon, to fresh notes of mint, basil

and lime leaf. Corvinone produces a green peppercorn note, while tabanones, which develop during ageing, deliver the distinctive tobacco aromas. Amarone is intriguing for these aromatics, which bring great complexity to both nose and palate.

It may come as a surprise to learn that you don't need to age Amarone. The producer has done this for you. Regulations stipulate two years in oak – four for riserva – but many are matured for considerably longer, and most producers then hold the wine for a further year in bottle. The 2011s, '12s and '13s currently on the market are drinking beautifully now (and you could decant the 2015 and '16).

Amarone is the ultimate slow wine. Enjoy the unhurried artisan craftsmanship. It is the perfect wine for contemplation and refection; just don't serve it too warm. And I encourage you to explore the different styles. The traditional style, matured in large Slavonian oak casks, made in a clean contemporary way (without volatility or oxidation), produces smooth, rounded and velvety wines, still fruity

and herbal but combining more mature notes of coffee, tobacco and spices. Or you may prefer the modern, barrique-aged style, which is youthfully oaky and more extracted. The post-modern style confronts any preconceptions of heaviness via a lighter and more delicate approach, translucent and precise. On that note, look for a growing number of single-vineyard Amarones, reflecting a growing interest in revealing the terroir.

Finally, please don't keep Amarone for Christmas or a midwinter casserole or hotpot.

Amarone is expensive (rightly so, given the low production and extensive ageing), but it doesn't demand haute cuisine, and the different styles offer surprising culinary versatility. Lighter styles are well suited to vegetarian dishes including risottos. A homemade spaghetti bolognese is fine, and the richer wines will Hoover up mild chilli, spices and curries. As Amarone matures, it slims down and becomes more refined. 2011 could pair with chicken, quiche lorraine and – why not? – pizza. (My preference would

be margherita or pepperoni.) It's perfect with hard cheeses, salty or tangy. I like it slightly chilled with bresaola. I think it's better with lean meat – game or beef – than fatty lamb. And if you are home alone, you can put it in the fridge and drink it over several days. It's also great with a venison burger.

In short, Amarone is the perfect lockdown wine and one wine that reflects our times – an example of resilience and innovation in the face of adversity. Amarone is not a wine to rush. And let's face it, we have the time.



DAL FORNO ROMANO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2013 **97**

Drink 2025–35+
This is a renowned modern-style Amarone. Dal Forno wines are matured in new oak barriques, and Romano Dal Forno's son Marco describes the approach as 'traditional but innovative ... maintaining the best of tradition and implementing it with technology'. This is a prowling panther – powerful, black and glossy. It is rich and concentrated, with svelte muscle. What grabs me is the freshness and contained energy that are channelled into a strong and intense finish, streamed with savoury graphite and bitter-chocolate freshness. Impressive. 16.5%
£310 Eden Croft

98

QUINTARELLI GIUSEPPE, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2012

Drink 2021–32
The quintessential Amarone: Quintarelli takes it to another level of focused intensity and precision. The 2012 is a sophisticated, exquisitely aromatic and quietly powerful wine that flows silkily and discreetly. Great poise, with a vibrant finish. Hard to choose between 2011 and 2012; the 2012 is more perfumed and poetic, while the 2011 is a touch more austere and vibrant, will age longer and will be more versatile with food. 16.5%
£240 Noble Grape



CA' LA BIONDA, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2015 **95**

Drink 2021–30
When I first encountered this estate, the wines immediately impressed me – they are delicate, precise in a post-modern style, and beautifully executed. This is floral for a 2015, glistening with a dew-drop freshness. A vivid palate, light and precise, with delicate notes of lime leaf and basil. Wonderfully vibrant and lingering finish – so very stylish. 16%
£44 Bat and Bottle



SPERI, VIGNETO MONTE SANT'URBANO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2016 **95**

Drink 2022–30
A light and refined style of Amarone from the warm slopes of Sant'Urbano. This perfumed and vivid wine has aromatic hints of the *garrigue*. It glides on silky tannins and graphite smoothness balanced with bitter-chocolate freshness and light snap. There is cocoa powder on the pure, persistent finish. Cool, refined and harmonious, and somewhat lower in alcohol. 15%
£70.01 Tannico (2015)



MUSELLA, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA RISERVA 2015 **94**

Drink 2025–30
This is an elegant style from the biodynamic producer with the most southerly of vineyards in Valpolicella, on warm west-facing slopes. Its wines combine velvety ripeness with finesse and tension. The raisiny aroma speaks of the 2015, but the tight, minty strike is fresh for the vintage. Rich, supple and rounded in the mid-palate, with notes of dried cranberry and liquorice. It is supported by plenty of energy and is almost brisk on the finish; persistent, fresh and lightly bitter. 16%
£50.75 Armit Wines



VIGNETI DI ETTORE, ETTORE RIGHETTI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2012 **94**

Drink 2023–26
There is notable depth and velvet intensity on the nose and palate here. Glossy tannin and dark, opulent bitter-chocolate richness, but super-contained and channelled. It has a feline, supple sensuality, with tension and vibrancy under the palate, then salinity and tarragon aromatics on the finish. 16%
N/A in UK

SECONDO MARCO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2013 **95**

Drink 2021–28
Marco is part of the Spери family, and he had a vision for a refined Amarone that carries the alcohol in a light and effortless way. A post-modern style, this is slim, trim and pure. It shows aromatic precision: rose petals and camomile on the nose. On the palate there is rosemary and basil and pronounced leafy vibrancy. Almost saline on the finish, this is an airy, herbal and delightful Amarone to challenge tradition. It's also, with the exception of the superb Dal Forno, the best 2013 I've tasted. 16%
£53.65 Tannico (2012)





93

BROLO DEI GIUSTI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2011

Drink 2021–25

A special project, blending fruit from three vineyards, by co-op Cantina Valpantena. Unusually, just one year in large Slavonian oak and two in concrete; the result is a very supple wine of fresh fig sweetness and deeper raisin notes. Rich, supple glide on to the palate via satin-soft tannins. Sumptuous and softly indulgent, this is full, yet quite airy and not too heavy. The fruity Medjool-date richness envelops the palate, while the long finish is scented with aromatics of fennel and aniseed. Lovely now. 16%

£51 The Fine Wine Company

ILATIUM MORINI, CAMPO LEÒN, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2015

93

Drink 2022–25

Made by seven brothers and cousins, this modern-style Amarone is aged in French and American barrels. It comes from a single clay-rich vineyard. The intense aromatic profile is vibrant, with mint, oregano and vanilla. It strikes the palate with intense and focused richness and oak. Layered, taut and very well balanced with notes of cocoa and cinnamon and a real burst of energy on the finish. Decant and drink – it is very forward, not for extensive ageing. 16%

£39.95 Cheers Wine Merchants

PIETRO CLEMENTI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2011

93

Drink 2021–27

This is a beautifully balanced wine, all too easy to finish the bottle – whatever your stylistic preferences. Aged for six years in large Slavonian *botti*, it has a youthful hue for 2011. Rich but elegantly wafting aroma of black pepper, anise and ground ginger, and a touch of wood smoke. Velvety smooth to start, it becomes lighter, more airy and energetic with herbs replacing the spices. It has silky intensity, vivacity and persistence. 16%

N/A in UK



ROCCOLO GRASSI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2015

93

Drink 2025–30+

Roccolo Grassi makes modern-style, muscular Amarone aged in French barriques, and the 50% new oak shows – in a good way. Big, bold aroma, with dried figs, nutmeg, walnuts and orange zest. Dense and compact, it punches on the palate and carries the high level of alcohol, with an abundance of tannin providing freshness and ballast. Thick, glossy and chunky texture. This will go on forever. Indestructible. 17%

£66.21 Corking Wines



MONTE DALL'ORA, STROPA, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2012

93

Drink 2021–26

A very artisan producer, and a full, rich and bitter Amarone. The inviting bouquet has mature notes of warm stable coupled with milk chocolate and shades of caramel. A seductive slide on to the palate shows richness, freshness and bitterness. Complex palate of buttery fennel; a bite of black chocolate, sour cherry and sharp green peppercorn layered in an intriguing mid-palate, which slips into a spicy and well-sustained finish. 15.5%

£90 Petersham Cellars



VALENTINA CUBI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO RISERVA 2006

92

Drink 2021–23

A full, rich, more traditional style from this 10ha estate. This was barrel-matured for seven years – and at 17%, it's no weakling. A wine for a winter's night. Alluring aroma of garden compost, cigar box and molten chocolate. It enters with attitude and swaggers across the palate, rich, full and bold. Sweet, supportive tannins. It has heft but knows how to carry it. 17%

£90 The Winery



LE GUAITE DI NOEMI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2010

Drink 2021–28

Noemi Pizzighella took over this tiny estate from her parents in 2016. Intriguing aroma, rich and intense with sweet garden compost, heather and ripe black cherries. A complex, layered and succulent palate of dried figs and honey is layered with delicate liquorice bitterness and freshness. Black satin texture – this is very alluring. The richness of the alcohol comes through, but with a long and fresh glide on the finish. 17%

N/A in UK

MARION, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2015

92

Drink 2023–30

2015 was a hot vintage that made concentrated, full-bodied and highly rated wines. I like this example for its vigorous, well-contained and channelled nature. Upright aroma of bay leaves, blackberries and sweet tobacco before a lively attack. Good, generous, even sumptuous substance, but with a burly tannic bite. Rich, dark tannins and a touch of liquorice lead to a fresh, assertive finish. Once decanted this slims and becomes more aromatic. 16%

£70 Bancroft Wines (2016)



BUGLIONI, IL LUSSURIOSO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2016 91

Drink 2025–28
 Showy and opulent, with contrasting richness and freshness. The intense aroma has green peppercorn, raisins and tobacco. Rich and vigorous strike. Compact, full-bodied but accessible. The thick tannins smooth out if you decant this and have rich, black-chocolate bitterness, while herbal aromatics of marjoram and cumin linger on the finish. 16%
 N/A in UK

DAMOLI, CHECO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2013 91

Drink 2021–24
 The 2013 is rated only a three-star vintage, (out of five) because of the rain at the end of August, but a good 2013 will be trim and fresh and easy to pair with poultry, vegetarian fare and lighter dishes. This has sweetly herbal notes on a fresh and vibrant aroma. Silky texture, slim, light and slightly nervous, with fine tannins offering a light crunch and herbal freshness. It is aromatic, with bay leaf on the finish, and just delicious now. 15.5%

£34.65 Vineyards Direct (2011)



CÀ DEI FRATI, PIETRO DAL CERVO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2013 91

Drink 2021–25
 Modern-style, barrique-aged. Almost opaque, this is sooty and dark. The punchy aroma offers chocolate, coffee and a herbal lift of sage. Thick and rich on the strike; full-bodied, with slightly robust but nicely supportive tannins. It has a dark and burly quality, with savoury and fresher herbal notes providing a nice contrast. Rich, with prunes and dates and an attractive dry tarragon finish. 16%

£78.85 Q Wines



GUERRIERI RIZZARDI, CALCAROLE, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2013 91

Drink 2021–25
 From a solar-powered winery, Calcarole is a single vineyard on limestone soil. This is rather an elegant 2013, drinking well now. Compost and mushrooms on the nose; quite tart, with dried cranberry fruit on the strike. It's bright and energetic, with light and supple tannins. Pomegranate and green peppercorns, before an aromatic and rather sappy finish. Very appetising and versatile for food matching. 16%

£68.49 Hay Wines (2011)



SARTORI, I SALTARI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA 2012 91

Drink 2022–29
 Slightly more traditional style. Woodland aromas with Earl Grey tea, nutmeg and cocoa. Nicely balanced on the palate, where the richness of sweet dried fig is offset by savoury liquorice and bay leaf. There is fresh earthiness, tannic grip and tension here, with green peppercorns on the rich and freshly vibrant finish. Decant. 15.5%

£37 Drambusters

FATTORI, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA RISERVA 2016 90

Drink 2021–24
 A lighter, accessible style, with a subtle but intense aroma of sage, mint and dried rose petal. Silky smooth and rather refined, it has a lightness and charming fluidity and is threaded with freshness to a perfumed finish. Decant. 16%

£44.99 Naked Wines



ZENATO, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2016 90

Drink 2021–26
 Zenato makes sound, forward Amarone, so this 2016 – a ripe but fresh and energetic vintage – is quite accessible. Alberto Zenato is the current president of Famiglie Storiche, a group of 13 family-owned estates. This boasts a vibrant, upright aroma with basil and lime, and plenty of vitality. The smooth grip and freshness of the tannins balance the rich fruit before a bitter touch of chicory and sappiness on the finish. Inviting and juicy. 16.5%

£46.75 Fareham Wine Cellars



TOMMASI, CA' FLORIAN, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO RISERVA 2012 90

Drink 2021–24
 This well-known estate has expanded over four generations to hold 205ha of vines. This is a traditional-style rendering: paling in colour, but youthfully luscious, with a fruity aroma of plums, white pepper and cinnamon. A juicy, energetic and bright palate, which is smoothly textured, direct and intense. Hints of cumin and fennel on the finish, which has an attractive dry and bitter touch. 15.5%

£76.67 Millésima

LE BIGNELE, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2014 90

Drink 2021–27
 The challenging 2014 is generally dismissed as a poor (one-star) vintage, but this shows there are some lovely examples to be found if you know where to look. It's cool and ever so fresh, reflecting the season. It springs on to a light-bodied and lean palate, which has basil and lime and crunchy tannins on ripe cassis fruit. Vibrant and bright, with a peppery tarragon bitterness to finish – what a delight. And no hurry here; it will hang on very nicely. 15.5%

N/A in UK



MASI, SEREGO ALIGHIERI, VAIO ARMARON, AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO 2012 90

Drink 2021–22
 Traditional style, with a mature aroma of sweet tobacco and cinnamon. Bright attack to a straight and slim textured palate, with light and integrated tannins. Nice light bite of coffee and aniseed flavours on a savoury and earthy finish. Drink now. 15.5%

£55 Millésima ①