

VALPOLICELLA

Though this Veneto region is steeped in ancient history, its wines are evolving to suit modern tastes – all while maintaining their distinctive, varied characters. **Andrea Briccarello** picks his favourites



One of the most historic and important wine regions in northern Italy, since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, Valpolicella has been blessed with stunning terroir and an array of native varieties perfect for producing world-class wines.

The region is divided into three sub-zones: Classico, Orientale and Valpantena. Classico, to the northwest of Verona, includes the communes of Fumane, Marano, Negrar, Sant' Ambrogio and San Pietro in Cariano. To the

east is the Valpolicella Orientale with the communes of Illasi, Mezzane di Sotto and Marcellise, and sandwiched in between is the Valpantena, north of Verona.

As the name suggests, the Classico area is traditionally seen as the most 'classic' expression of Valpolicella. Here, the wines are usually very elegant, with plenty of juicy red hedgerow fruits and a remarkable acidity and freshness, driven by the white soil that surrounds the vineyards.

The Orientale sub-zone produces muscular, intense, voluptuous expressions of Valpolicella, as well as

powerful amarone, the region's speciality made from 'passito' grapes, dried after harvest for a period of up to three months. The Valpantena is a beautiful valley in Valpolicella that produces some great wines from its rich limestone vineyards. It benefits from cool breezes, which give the wines finesse and crunchy, wild red-berry fruits.

Like a diamond with multiple facets, Valpolicella has many styles and characters. 'Basic' Valpolicella is usually an easy, early-drinking wine to be enjoyed with cold cuts and light cheeses. Valpolicella superiore is aged in oak for one year minimum, for a more complex, structured character. Valpolicella ripasso is produced by leaving fresh Valpolicella wine in contact with the skins left over from the amarone process for 15-20 days, making it richer, more seductive and higher in sugar and alcohol.

The biggest trend of the last few years has been the steady reduction of oak, resulting today in a much lighter and fresher Valpolicella. Better vineyard management

and temperature control seems to be the key when it comes to this fresher, juicier style, which often has classic cherry-stone flavours and velvety tannins, and is typically made from the fruit of higher, cooler vineyards.

Even amarone, known for its luscious, intense character, is being crafted in a more elegant way. One of the most fascinating and individual wines in the world, amarone is one to contemplate: it needs time to age and to be appreciated. It carries a lot of history and tradition, but in the last few years, it has gone through a change in style, making it more approachable and easier to pair with modern cuisines. Key here is a longer drying period for the grapes of four to five months.

In my hospitality career, Valpolicella wines have always been sought-after and appreciated by guests due to their open character and generosity of fruit; from vibrant and juicy to ethereal and majestic, these wines are a must on any wine list and in every cellar.

Andrea Briccarello is an on-trade consultant. He was formerly with specialist wine merchant Jascots, and prior to that was head sommelier and wine buyer for Galvin restaurants group



Romano Dal Forno, Monte Lodoletta, Valpolicella Superiore 2013 97

£55-£70 (ib) Armit, Berry Bros Exchange, Cru, Farr Vintners, Fine & Rare, Wineye
From one of the most iconic wineries in the Orientale, this is aged for two years in oak and a further three in bottle. A proper meditation wine, great with game, strong cheeses or a cigar. It has a huge nose of stewed red fruits, ethereal bramble forest fruits and blackberry jam. Generous, with spicy, bitter cherry-stone freshness. Full-bodied with a rich, intense, spicy undertone. **Drink 2022-2032 Alc 14.5%**



Buglioni, Teste Dure Riserva, Amarone della Valpolicella 2010 96

N/A UK www.buglioini.it
It started in 1993, with 3ha of vineyards; now Buglioni has 54ha. This riserva is made only in the best vintages, with the best hand-picked grapes. Aged for 30 months in tonneaux, it has tertiary notes of balsam, dry leaves, sweet tobacco and jam. Bramble fruits and summer-fruit pudding surround the taste buds. Intense, elegant and poised, with great length and huge structure. Try it with bitter chocolate or enjoy it on its own. **Drink 2022-2030 Alc 16.7%**



Ca' La Bionda, Casal Vegri, Valpolicella Classico Superiore 2017 96

£27.49 **Top Selection**
The fourth generation of the Castellani family has been practising organic viticulture across its 29ha of vines in the Classico zone since 2000, and has been certified since 2012. **Superiore calls for a longer ageing process: in the case of Casal Vegri, 18 months in large oak casks and a further six months in bottle. The single-vineyard Casal Vegri doesn't undergo any appassimento, for a true expression of Corvina. Drink 2022-2028 Alc 13.5%**



Rubinelli Vajol, Valpolicella Classico 2019 95

£16.97 **Independent Wine**
Rubinelli Vajol is situated on the border with Fumane and Marano. The vineyards here are planted on white hills rich in calcareous and limestone soils. For this wine, the grapes are hand harvested, then fermented in stainless steel tanks, retaining a lot of freshness and giving a stunning crunchy texture. It shows juicy and generous blueberries with a whiff of roses. Elegant and very well balanced, this is a stunning wine to enjoy with light game such as quail. **Drink 2021-2024 Alc 12.5%**



Le Ragose, Marta Galli, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2009 94

£50.77 **Drinks & Co**
From the highest hills in Negrar, 28ha on a mix of clay and magnesium soils, dry farmed and all work on the steep slopes done by hand. The Marta Galli Amarone comes from the best selection of grapes and is aged in oak barrels (Allier, Tronçais, Vosges), 30% new and 70% used, for 48-60 months. The wine is charming and warm with notes of dry forest fruits and blueberry jam. Rich yet vibrant and juicy on the mid-palate with plenty of mocha and a bitter cherry finish. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 16%**



Tenuta Santa Maria di Gaetano Bertani, Valpolicella Classico Superiore 2017 94

N/A UK www.tenutasantamaria.wine
The Bertani family can trace its roots in Negrar, the heart of the Classico zone, back to the 15th century. Grapes are hand harvested; the wine spends 12 months in large oak casks so that classic red forest fruits and silky tannins can develop. On the nose, it has soft, ripe red fruits, while the well-balanced palate displays ripe plum and pomegranate and a hint of spice. Stunning juicy core, round tannins and an elegant finish. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 13.5%**



Aldegheri, Santambrogio, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2015 95

£24.90 **Available via Di Marco Direct**
Aldegheri is a family-run winery founded in 1956. This wine has all the great qualities and stunning features of 2015: only the best grapes from sun-kissed vineyards in Valpolicella are used. Complex aromas of dried cherries and blackberries are accompanied by a touch of liquorice and mocha after a few swirls in the glass. On the palate, the wine opens up to reveal layers of ripe and juicy wild berries and a soft, velvety core. Elegant and well poised. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 15.5%**



La Giuva, Il Rientro, Valpolicella Superiore 2017 95

£22.95-£27.16 **Christopher Keiller, Liberty Wines, The Fine Wine Co, Wineye**
The young, dynamic duo of Giulia and Valentina Malesani (hence the name 'Giuva') are situated north of Verona in the Val Squaranto. Planted at about 300m, the vines surprisingly face north and west, giving the wines incredible freshness and crunchy red fruits. This has flamboyant jammy notes on the nose, then great structure on the palate with expressive, juicy berries and ripe cherries. It's meaty and earthy, with spicy and jammy undertones. **Drink 2021-2027 Alc 14%**



Monte del Frà, Scarnocchio Riserva, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2015 95

£49.99 **Bancroft, R&H Fine Wines**
Monte del Frà has a history dating back to 1492, and produces this wine in the Classico area next to Fumane and Marano. Vineyards are located at between 300m-400m on clay and tufa soils, and trained on the traditional pergola system. Grapes are dried naturally for four months, giving the wine plum, spice and intense summer-fruit pudding scents. Flavours of Morello cherries are followed by hints of mocha and balsam. Great texture and round, tannic structure. **Drink 2021-2033 Alc 15.5%**



Villa San Carlo, Campo Bianco, Valpolicella Superiore 2015 94

N/A UK www.villasancarlo.wine
Villa San Carlo's unspoiled 70ha have been in the hands of the Pavesi family since 1958. Near Montorio in the Val Squaranto, the area has an array of microclimates and soil types. This wine is made from the best selections from the calcareous Campo Bianco vineyard, and shows intense, luscious, deep red-forest-fruit aromas in the glass. Balsamic undertones are followed by hints of jam and spice. On the palate, the wine is silky and well balanced, with rich, complex notes of dark cherries and a spicy, velvety finish. **Drink 2022-2028 Alc 14.5%**



Ca' Botta, Torcinato, Valpolicella Superiore 2015 93

N/A UK www.cabottavini.com
Ca' Botta is a new and dynamic winery that has been making wines since 2009. The grapes come from vineyards situated at between 300m-500m, and the wines are aged mainly in French barriques. Torcinato shows the typical approachable character of the 2015 vintage. On the nose, we find complex layers of dry forest fruits and hints of sweet tobacco and dark chocolate. This has round, juicy and velvety tannins, and elegant Morello cherry freshness, leading to a long mocha finish. **Drink 2022-2027 Alc 15%**



Ca' Rugate, Punta 470, Amarone della Valpolicella 2015 93

£42.50-£49 **Corking Wines, Exel, Great Wines Direct, Hallgarten Wines**
The Tessari family, owner of Ca' Rugate, has more than 90ha of vineyards throughout Soave and Valpolicella, and fourth-generation Michele now runs the show. The grapes for this amarone are a selection of the best from the hills of Montecchia. Aged in 500hl Slavonian casks, the wine has rich, moreish blackberry and raspberry-jam notes. It's restrained and poised on the nose; on the palate, it's juicy and well balanced, with soft, ripe red fruits. Fresh and vibrant. **Drink 2022-2033 Alc 15.5%**



Marion, Amarone della Valpolicella 2015 93

£68 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

The Campedelli family owns Marion, a fairly small producer with a clear vision. Its rich limestone vineyards planted to Corvina and Corvinone are situated in the valley of Marcellise, just outside the Classico zone. This is a meaty and savoury style showcasing intense fruits and spicy notes, along with plenty of dried cherries and plums on the palate, accompanied by a smoky note with hints of dry mint and wild herbs. Stunning vibrant fruits and round tannins. **Drink** 2022-2030 **Alc** 16%



Cesari, Bosan, Valpolicella Ripasso Superiore 2016 92

£33.80 **Hedonism**

Cesari has been a well-known name in Valpolicella since since the early 1990s. The Bosan vineyard is situated in Corrubbio di Negarine, where the soil is rich in clay and silt, producing the best, most charming amarone. And it's here that the best dried grapes are used to make this stunning ripasso. In the glass, the wine exhibits all the aromatic charm of the 2016 vintage. On the palate, it opens up to sweet tobacco, dry raisins and sweet vanilla, hinting at Christmas pudding. Velvety and long. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 14%



Fraccaroli Domenico, Grotta del Ninfeo, Amarone della Valpolicella 2014 92

N/A UK www.domenicofraccaroli.com

Originally from Friuli, the Fraccaroli family started producing wines in Valpolicella in 2002. This amarone is made from the fruit of old vines in Lavagno, grown on rich limestone soils for stunning freshness and great ageing potential. Aged for about 30 months in oak, and enjoyable with venison, wild boar or aged Parmigiano. Deep, intense blackberries and cherries on the nose; on the palate, there's freshness and soft tannins, plus wild-berry coulis on the finish. **Drink** 2022-2025 **Alc** 15.5%



Massimago, Marchesa MariaBella, Valpolicella Ripasso 2017 92

£24.71 **Independent Wine**

Based in Mezzane with 28ha of vineyards, Massimago (derived from the Latin for 'extreme well-being') dates back to 1883. It is now led by a new generation, namely Camilla Rossi Chauvenet. With vineyards up to 350m, the producer makes wines with a fresh, vibrant core. This example is complex and savoury, with a nose of cherry jam, raspberry and plum coulis intertwined with wild summer fruit. Velvety and soft on the palate, long and moreish. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 14%



Cantina Valpantena, Torre del Falasco, Amarone della Valpolicella Valpantena 2017 91

POA **Liberty Wines**

This cooperative in the Valpantena boasts more than 200 growers spread across about 750ha. Mainly produced from Corvina and Rondinella, this amarone surprised me with its elegant and approachable character. It's a wine that can be easily enjoyed with a Sunday roast. Fragrant and elegant aromas of dark cherries and ripe plums lead to a palate tamed by juicy and crunchy red forest fruits, great acidity and a spicy, mellow finish. **Drink** 2021-2023 **Alc** 15.5%



Damoli, Checo, Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2013 91

£42.12 **Jascots**

Checo Amarone (named after the Damoli family's grandfather, Francesco, known as Checo) comes from Negrar, in the middle of the Classico area, with vineyards higher than 400m. 2013 was a challenging vintage, but this was made with the best grapes. After a long appassimento, the dried grapes are pressed and aged for five years in oak. The wine has ripe dark cherries with a mint-chocolate hint, plus plenty of savoury and meaty notes, very good structure and a long finish. Pure and elegant. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 15.5%



Fattori, Col de la Bastia, Valpolicella Superiore 2018 91

£12.50-£14.99 **Noble Grape, The Wine Box**

Fattori purchased the 12ha Col de la Bastia property in Montecchia in 2009. There, limestone and yellow sandstone create the ideal place for Corvina. Made with fruit from vineyards more than 30 years old, this wine is fermented in stainless steel and aged in oak. The nose has redcurrants, blackberry coulis, bramble undertones, spice and raspberry jam. The palate has a great core of fruit and round tannins. The 2018 vintage gives freshness and balance. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 13%



Monteci, Valpolicella Classico 2019 91

£7.99 **Available via UK importer LWC**

The Monteci family has been making wine since 1925. Produced in the Classico area, this Valpolicella is fermented in stainless steel and aged for six to eight months, resulting in one of the most classic wines of the appellation. Crunchy red berries come straight from the glass. It has a fresh, vibrant and juicy core, expressive with blackberries and raspberries, and an uplifting freshness. Easy drinking; excellent with a selection of mixed antipasti or light cheeses. **Drink** 2021-2022 **Alc** 12.5%



Pieropan, Ruberpan, Valpolicella Superiore 2016 91

£23.99 **Carruthers & Kent, Grape to Grain,**

Hay Wines, Liberty Wines, Valvona & Crolla Pieropan is synonymous with Soave, yet the same quality and care has been dedicated to this organic Valpolicella superiore. From high-altitude vineyards on chalky clay soils, the wine is aged in large oak barrels for 30 months. Shows textbook Valpolicella notes of bright cherry stone and plum, with crunchy red berries, a young and vivacious core and a very elegant, soft and juicy finish. Well balanced and easy drinking. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 13.5% **D**