

Towards the light: Terroir hunting in Valpolicella

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Ca' La Bionda is among my favorite producers of Amarone. In blind and sighted tasting, their Amarones stand out for their elegant style. They have little or no residual sugar and discreet appassimento character. The fresh profile and tension is a signature of this single-vineyard terroir. The Ravazzol hillside has a significant presence of limestone and a cool exposure. It loses the sun behind the hill between 5pm and 6pm allowing the vineyard to cool down and retain nice acidity.

Ca' La Bionda also makes a single vineyard Valpolicella called CasalVegri from a defined parcel on the lower part of the Ravazzol hillside. This lies just below the monopole and is the balance of Pietro Castellani's original 3ha.. Here the vines are younger and trellised on guyot. The soil is thinner than the main slope used for the Amarone and with just 45cm of rocky top soil the youngish vines are well rooted into the limestone.

This CasalVegri vineyard was the primary reason for my visit and a mini-vertical of Valpolicella from this parcel awaited me. But first we visited the vineyard where, grazing among the vines, were a local breed of sheep keeping the weeds in check while fertilizing the soil. This is part of Ca' La Bionda's biodiversity project. Nicola, Alessandro's younger brother, is responsible for the vineyards which have been certified organic since 2016.

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So to return to Ca' La Bionda, there are two Valpolicella wines. The Valpolicella Classico is a blend from across the estate including younger vines from Ravazzol, a second pass through the older vines used for Amarone, and a new parcel (Fasanara) on the same side of the valley, which Castellani astutely purchased when land prices plummeted during Covid. This wine is fresh, bright, and salty and reflects the cooler expression of the west side of the Murano valley. Murano is one of the five valleys in the Classico region, which as a group are nearest to Lake Garda's mitigating effect on climate.

Within the Classico region, the softer, rounder, and ripely fruity wines come from Sant'Ambrogio and San Pietro in Cariano. Nearest the lake and possibly the sunniest of the valleys, most of the vineyards in Sant'Ambrogio are planted on lower-lying vineyards just north of Verona. In San Pietro in Cariano, the vines are also cultivated on lower-lying terrain in a mixture of alluvial and clay.

Wine from the valleys of the Fumane, Marano, and Negrar valleys are generally bright and energetic, benefiting from the fresh wind coming down from the mountains and this character is most pronounced on the cooler east facing slopes. Limestone is a significant influence in the snappy, crunchy tannins, while those on clay soils are predictably more structured. Unlike the other valleys of the Classico region, Marano has some volcanic soil, particularly in the northern reaches.

<https://worldoffinewine.com/news-features/valpolicella-fine-red-italian-wines>

Ca' La Bionda's CasalVegri vineyard is dedicated to making Valpolicella DOC. We tasted through several vintages from 2010, Alessandro's first vintage, which is ageing gracefully. "You don't need appassimento to make a wine with the quality to age." Quite right. I particularly like the chalky and floral 2019, which seems to capture the character of this site.

It's clear to see an evolution in the quality, refinement, intensity, and finish in more recent vintages. Not only are the youngish vines maturing, but the winemaking has become more restrained. The 2020, 2019, and even the warm 2017 are floral, finely textured, and salty.

Castellani de-stems most of the bunches, although in 2019 he used 30 per cent whole bunch and a cold soak slows down and lengthened the cuvaison. These are fermented in stainless steel at a maximum of 25°C, quite cool for red wine. His modified approach includes fewer pump overs; malolactic in stainless steel and a cleaner settling, especially for the Corvina variety. The wine is matured in larger older oak foudres of 3,000-10,000 litres and is racked three times. "Covina is very sensitive to Brett, so I clean the oak with ozone now."

Castellani also produces a single-varietal, single-vineyard wine from 70-year-old Corvina vines in Ravazzol. Here the topsoil is deeper than in CasalVegri. The clay mixed with volcanic rocks produces a more powerful wine than CasalVegri. Corvina is Castellani's favourite grape. "It is the most noble of our varieties, like a Pinot Noir."

As Valpolicella DOC cannot be made of a single varietal, this is labelled IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica).

Corvina Veronese IGT is only made when the summer is temperate and autumn sufficiently dry to allow a long hang time. In 2016 the grapes reached 14% alcohol naturally. "With this wine I want to show what fresh grapes can give you. You do not need appassimento to make a wine with body," remarks Castellani.

It seems that many producers depend on partially drying grapes for a more concentrated style of Valpolicella. It's unnecessary, for Valpol doesn't have to be full bodied. In specific seasons the Ravazzol vineyard produces this style, but equally the light-bodied profile of wine from CasalVegri is a delight and together they illustrate the diversity of terroir on this slope.

Ca' La Bionda is a founding member of the Federazione Italiana Vignaioli Indipendenti, a group of like-minded vigneroni who manage everything from growing their own grapes to marketing their wine. However it is possible for a much larger concern, even without owning vines, to produce a delicious Valpolicella DOC. I visited Albino Armani further up the Marano Valley.

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Tasting Valpolicella

2019 is an elegant fresh vintage, while 2020 is more challenging, but there are a couple of good examples below. 2021 is an excellent year, well balanced with good concentration and freshness.

Ca' La Bionda Valpolicella Classico DOC 2021

70% Corvina, 20% Corvinone, 10% Rondinella and Molinara. 12.5% Vol. Lively red currant aroma with a delicate, crunchy and floral palate showing a hint of morello cherry. It pirouettes. Pure and light with a slightly salty finish. So refreshing.

Ca' La Bionda Valpolicella Classico Superiore Casalvegri DOC 2020

70% Corvina, 20% Corvinone, 10% Rondinella and Molinara. 13% Vol. Lightly herbal aroma with a hint of white flower. A silky and aromatic wine with morello cherry fruit in the middle. Slim and fluid, it ripples across the palate, which is gently enfolded in cherry blossom aroma. It has an ethereal wafting feel and finishes on slightly salty bitterness.

Ca' La Bionda, Corvina Veronese IGT 2016

100% Corvina. 14% Vol. Immediately apparent richness and concentration. Spicy with dark chocolate, a hint of mint and fresh tobacco leaf. Medium-to-full body with concentration and lithe muscularity. Vigorous, fresh, and lightly bitter to finish. So much personality and impressive depth. "The tobacco is the aroma of this vineyard," comments Alessandro Castellani.