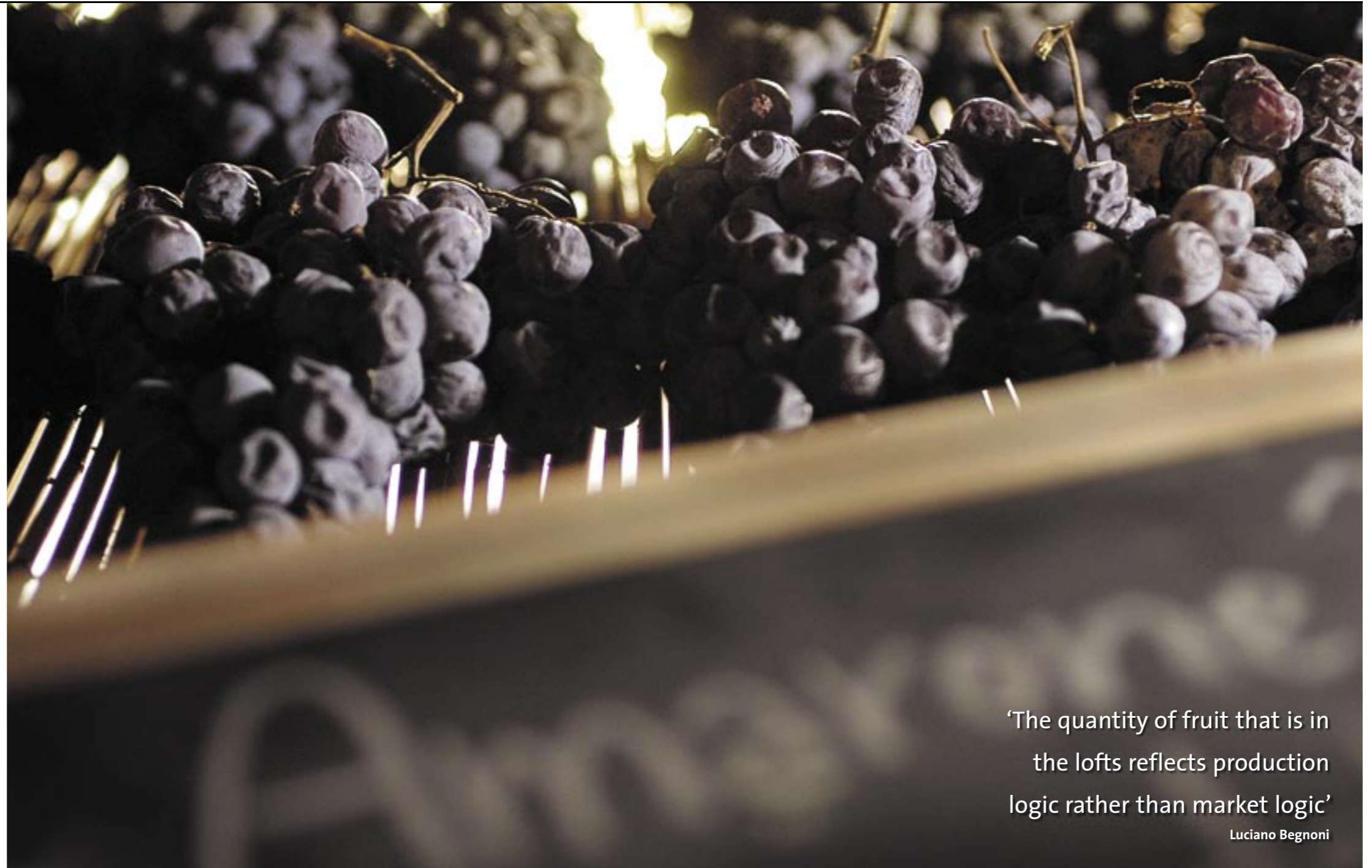




A change to the production code in Valpolicella means that up to 70% of the harvest can now be dried (right) and used to produce Amarone and Recioto. But where does that leave straight Valpolicella?



‘The quantity of fruit that is in the lofts reflects production logic rather than market logic’

Luciano Begnoni

QUANTITY OR QUALITY?

Recent increased production of Amarone has been accompanied by a marked change in style and quality, says **FRANCO ZILIANI**, and many producers are fearful that it is damaging the reputation of Valpolicella

Back in the mid-1980s, even the most diehard optimist could never have imagined that less than 25 years later, Amarone della Valpolicella would have emerged as one of the trendiest wines on the Italian wine scene. Or that the Valpolicella zone would have shaken itself free from its state of semi-crisis and emerged from its provincial viticultural doldrums.

Production of Amarone (and Recioto) rose from 1.5 million bottles in 1997 to almost 5 million in 2003 and 5.7 million in 2004. Estimates for the 2006 vintage are in the 8 million range, and for 2007 the estimated figure is in excess of 10 million bottles. Huge numbers of grapes

have been put onto drying mats: the 8.2 million kilograms dried in 1997 had risen to a whopping 25.7 million just 10 years later. Those semi-dried grapes are a very large chunk of the 70 million kilos of grapes produced overall in Valpolicella. Far too many, in the eyes of some.

This change in direction for the region, from Amarone as standard-bearer – its top niche wine – to Amarone as engine room, in terms of quantity as well, has brought a series of problems. With the start of the *appassimento* (drying process) gold rush and consequent strong market demand for Amarone and *ripasso*-style wines, producers strove to increase the quantity of grapes destined

for drying. The danger, as modern dehumidification makes it possible to use less-sound fruit, is the lowering of the quality requirements.

Then comes tales of grapes clandestinely brought in from outside the zone, contrary to provisions of the official production code. It was no coincidence that the 2007 harvest inspections by Consorzio staff were followed by the declassification of some 1.8 million kilos of ‘unsuitable’ grapes that were undergoing drying.

In conversations, the most responsible producers voice their concerns about the current situation and the future of Valpolicella. Considering that there are 1,226 growing concerns producing

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLAES LOFGREN(?)

grapes for Amarone, 390 drying facilities, 165 wineries inside the growing area boundaries and 148 bottlers outside the area, it is easy to understand that interests can pull in different directions and lead to systemic contradictions.

State of confusion

There is confusion too for many wine-lovers confronted by so many Amarone della Valpolicella, including the 2004 vintage currently on the market. Their varietal character and distinctive link to their terroir of origin – even after *appassimento*, which tends to level out these qualities – seems quite tenuous. Instead, we find many wines where one must force one's way through a forest of French and American oak. They lack the hues, the nuances and the elegance of Valpolicella, and have no sense of place of origin or terroir, instead pandering to the taste of the international market.

These are what you might call 'zero-pleasure' wines: unbalanced, overbearing, graceless; boasting unbelievable residual sugars and achingly high alcohols; one-dimensional, sadly predictable, with not

an ounce of energy in sight. Overextended drying of the grapes has made them sickly sweet, with hues of aubergine density – the opposite of what one expects from a wine as 'noble' as Amarone.

One can hardly gainsay winemakers Pierpaolo and Stefano Antolini when they note that 'when the market has a full head of steam, it is difficult to be thinking about terroir'. But Luciano Begnoni of Santa Sofia observes: 'The phenomenon that has taken over Valpolicella has reached criticality, in some aspects. The quantity of fruit that is in the lofts reflects production logic rather than market logic, since the latter would see increased offerings only in response to rising demand.' One can legitimately wonder whether there will be sufficient demand when 12 million bottles of the 2007 harvest enter the market.

In September 2007, the production code was changed to allow for selection of grapes for drying up to a maximum of 70% of the authorised grape crop (70% of 12,000kg/ha (kilos/hectare) is equal to 8,400kg, which, with a yield of 40%,

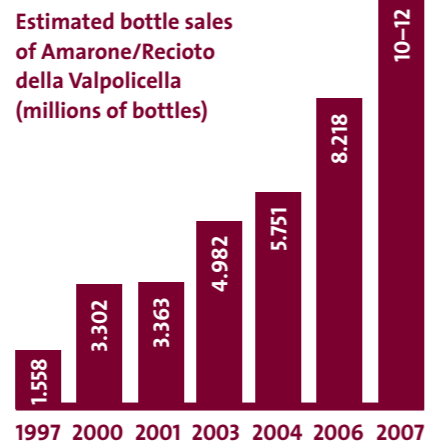
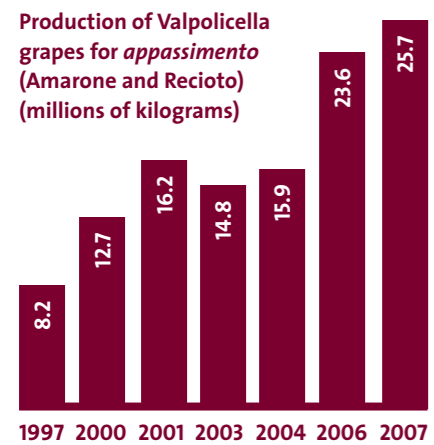
'We are losing our Valpolicella styles made from non-dried grapes'

Ettore Righetti

translates to 33.6 hectolitres (hl), less than Barolo (56hl/ha) and Brunello (54.4hl/ha)). But this is smoke and mirrors, since in Valpolicella there are twice as many vineyards on hillslopes as there are on the benchland and the bottomland of the plains, and thus 70% is still too high. And in any case, too many grapes are being dried. The result will inevitably compromise the production of the high-quality Valpolicella wines that should set the standard for the denomination.

Passover feast

As things stand now, it is decidedly odd that the production code permits the practice of passing double the quantity of standard Valpolicella over the Amarone pomace, thus obtaining two bottles of *ripasso* for every one of Amarone, when many producers requested a ratio of one to one. The quality of wine resulting from this high ratio is not what one expects, and Valpolicella Ripasso has replaced the standard Valpolicella in many producers' line-up. One winemaker, who preferred to remain anonymous, observes: 'When you compare us with the areas producing marble, footwear and clothing, or with tourism, the classic sources of wealth in the economies of the province of Verona, we are emerging the winners, and this sense of getting one over on the wealthy, who are becoming poorer, is turning our



heads a bit.' Producer Antonio Mazzi states: 'Why does no one ask those wineries, large and small, who just until yesterday were putting out only white wines and other things, why they are suddenly switching over to Amarone and *ripasso*? Why this late-found new vocation? Could it be – and obviously it is – just business?'

Such worries are not shared by Emilio Pedron, managing director of Gruppo Italiano Vini (GIV) and past president of the Consorzio Valpolicella, who states: 'The Verona area enjoys the highest revenues of any Italian region. It has new vineyards and better-quality vineyard management, with 5,000 vines trained to the Guyot system, which are better than 3,000 with the pergola system.' Even Pedron, however, is forced to admit that 'after the remarkable increase in *appassimento*-directed grapes between 2006 and 2007, it's now time to stop. The *ripasso* category has simply

The Valpolicella region, north of Verona, is Italy's most profitable region for grape growing, but at Masi (below), the company is worried that some producers treat Amarone as a commodity

AMARONE: WHEN TO INDULGE

Amarone may be becoming a victim of its own success. Some 25 years ago, when I first got to know Veneto, Amarone was something special, dependent on exacting selection and a tricky drying process. It was also costly, because of the small volumes made. It wasn't considered to be a table wine. When visiting Giuseppe Quintarelli, a master of the style, we drank his regular Valpolicella with lunch, not his Amarone.

It was common then to speak of Amarone as a *vino da meditazione* – a wine to sip on its own, to think about, to marvel, to discuss. With high alcohol and immense extract and flavour, it was considered too heady and concentrated to accompany food, and I never recall it being served at table. Instead, it would be served after the meal.

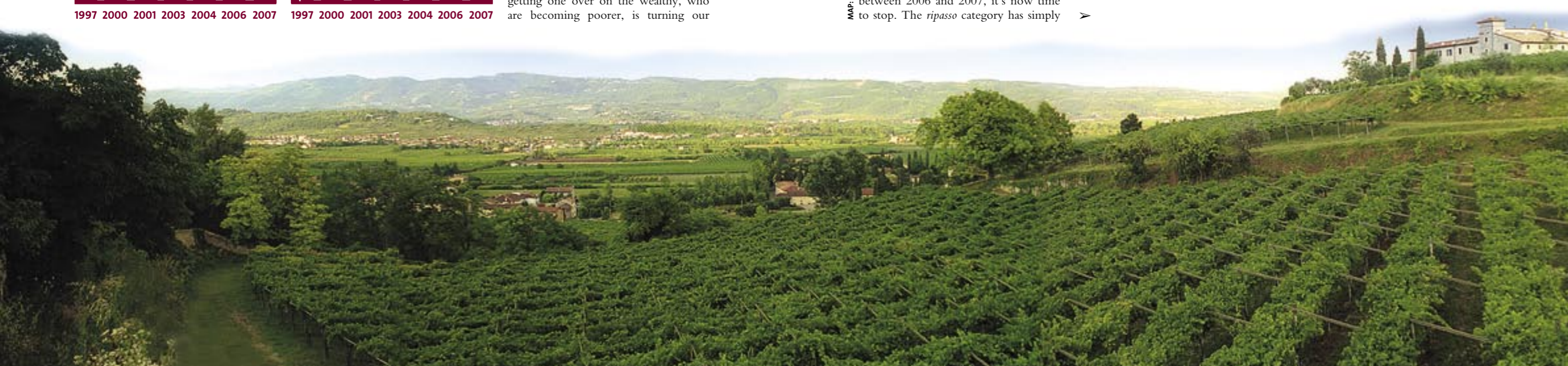
Although Amarone's alcohol levels range from 14.5%–16.5%, wine drinkers today are no longer awed by such power. We've learned to take Australian Shiraz or Californian Zinfandel at 15% or 16% in our stride – so why shouldn't Amarone join this select band of civilised monsters?

There is something about the sheer density of a fine Amarone that would deter me from knocking back a few glasses with a meal, but I would not wish to deter others. As long as the alcohol is not too evident, there is no reason why one should not drink Amarone with food.

In the past, there was a distinction between Amarone, always dry, and Recioto, with discernible residual sugar, although the best examples led to a dry, cleansing finish. Recioto was more traditional, since that hint of sweetness distinguished it from regular Valpolicella. When the yeasts were too vigorous, it became difficult to stop the fermentation, and the result would be a dry wine: Amarone. Today, there are some Amarones with incomplete fermentations, and thus a dash of residual sugar. Such wines would be difficult to match with food, and you wouldn't know whether it was perfectly dry until you poured it.

I still like the idea of Amarone as a *vino da meditazione*, a dry red wine to be treated with respect and admiration. But there are no rules.

Stephen Brook



been afflicted with too many rosy expectations.'

In his opinion, 'The Amarone style is certainly in fashion, but what we need is a production model, some economic sense. If all the Amarone produced in Valpolicella were mine or belonged to a single well-run winery, I wouldn't be nervous, but we are seeing so many directions, many of them contradictory, and this does make me worried.'

Such worry and reservations are shared by Ettore Righetti, past president of the Cantina della Valpolicella di Negrar, who believes that 'the growth of Amarone should be controlled, and we should return to a maximum of 30%–

40% *appassimento* grapes. Currently we're at 70%, and we are in the process of losing our Valpolicella, the standard DOC wine, that is, and the Superiore version, the styles made from non-dried grapes. If this should happen, the damage would be very serious, since this is the wine that has brought us world recognition.'

Valpolicella superstar Romano Dal Forno is more optimistic. In his 'chateau' in the east of the denomination, he opines: 'Amarone should be a wine enjoyed away from the meal, as a wine crafted for the singular purpose of gratifying the palate. In Valpolicella today, we demonstrate a lack of courage

and simply go where the market pushes us, which is towards Amarone. But I think we should forget the Valpolicellas of yesterday, since they were just easy-drinking wines. We must "Amaronise" Valpolicella, make the wine the "offspring" of Amarone, possibly giving it a new name, and thus elevate the noblest part of Valpolicella. Great Italian wines such as Barolo and Brunello should stand against Valpolicella, not Amarone.'

No less a figure than Sandro Boscaini shares the general unease about this juncture. President of Masi, historic sector leader with a solid reputation across the globe, Boscaini says: 'If Amarone is a standard bearer, then it >

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY, AND THE GLORY OF 2004 By Richard Baudains

Valpolicella is currently the most remunerative place to grow wine grapes in the whole of Italy. According to figures released by the producers' consortium, Verona's red wine DOC has the biggest turnover and the highest return per hectare of any wine-producing area in the country.

This flourishing economy is based on a range of wines made from the same varieties and sourced from the same vineyards, but which differ in one fundamental respect. One part of the grape harvest is crushed immediately, another is destined for *appassimento*, the partial drying of the fruit used to make Amarone and Recioto. Production of fresh grape wines used to dwarf that of the dried grape styles. Valpolicella was the mainstay, Amarone was the sideline. Today, Amarone is the focus wine. While the annual production of grapes for Valpolicella has remained stable over the past 10 years, that of Amarone has more than quadrupled.

A key factor behind the boom has been the rationalisation of the grape-drying process. In the past, growers laid out their grapes to dry in lofts in the hills, open to the elements and prey to the vagaries of the weather. Today, fruit dries in giant humidity-controlled hangars which eliminate the risk of mould, and guarantee the degree of concentration a producer desires. The benefits were clearly demonstrated in 2004. The vintage produced a bumper crop of top-quality grapes for Amarone, but the cold, wet autumn and winter would have been its undoing if it had been left to dry in the traditional way.

The huge increase in production has been inevitably accompanied by a



Above: oxygenation of the Amarone must, an increasingly common sight in the Veneto

radical shift in style. Amarone used to be pale ruby with aromas of raisins and figs or of prunes, cinnamon and pot pourri. On the palate it was warm, round and glossy with massive depth. 'Baroque' or even 'decadent' were the kinds of word used to sum up its unique character. The wines of today do not taste like that, and if they had been presented even five years ago, there is a good chance many would barely have been recognised as Amarone. What has happened to the raisined fruit character? The inky black colours, juicy fruit, new oak and chewy textures come from other winemaking traditions, not those of the Veronese hills. In response to the international market, Amarone has adopted the profile of the global premium red.

The 2004 vintage is the product of a year when rainfall, sunshine and

temperature values all slotted neatly into the seasonal averages to turn out a classic Valpolicella, with lots of aroma, good sugar/tannin balance and excellent acidity. The best wines have great freshness of aroma and superb structure. Their raw power calls for bottle age but promises great things. The less successful ones are either over-oaked monsters or, at the opposite extreme, have a hollow fruit-and-oak quality and dry vegetal tannins which suggest grape selection was not as rigorous as it ought to have been. And herein lies the real issue for the future: maintaining quality in the vastly increased volumes. Amarone remains a unique wine. Only perhaps these days, it is a little less unique than it used to be...

Turn the page for Baudains' pick of the 2004s

PHOTOGRAPH: BACCANELLO SANDRA/SIME-4CORNERS IMAGES

Right: Romano Dal Forno believes that Amarone should be drunk by itself, and not with food, so as to 'gratify the palate'

cannot at the same time be treated as a commodity that appears in the discount stores at less than £10. We cannot allow this "colossus with feet of clay" to exploit its moment of high fashion by cannibalising, as it is doing at the moment, our community's most important brand – Valpolicella.'

What should be done, therefore, to restore balance in the production of the various components of the Valpolicella universe, and ensure that Amarone is not a passing fad but an entity with a well-defined character and solid vitivinicultural foundation? Boscaini advocates tighter regulation: 'Firstly, we need an identification system that uses physiochemical protocols to test anthocyanins and microelements. This will reveal, and hence prevent, any use of grapes and wines from outside this zone'. The next step, according to Elena Coati of Corte Rugolin, is to 'restrict bottling to within the zone itself and to lower the yield levels, since it is counterproductive to continue with an *appassimento* ceiling of 70% of 12,000kg/ha'.

'We ought to be improving our selection of fruit to give better structure to our Valpolicella,' suggests Sabrina Tedeschi, of Tedeschi winery. 'By stopping the growth of Amarone production and making more rigorous the selection of grapes for it, we will be producing a wine with a more narrow price range and market niche.' Others, such as Giuseppe Rizzardi of Guerrieri Rizzardi, call for the 'possibility of adding 20%–30% of outside grapes to the

Valpolicella suite of varieties as one possible way to improve our Valpolicella wines [excluding *ripasso* and Amarone]'. Antonio Castagnedi, from the family of growers behind Tenuta Sant'Antonio, believes: 'Valpolicella will attain greatness only when a majority of its producers succeed in making great Valpolicella that will be prized both for its distinctiveness as well as for its quality/price ratio.'

Spot-on observations, but today,

smothered by a media-pumped Amarone and a hulking *ripasso*, true Valpolicella, that youthful, fragrant wine with its hint of cherries, that appealing everyday quaffer, has almost disappeared from the shelf. Such a situation should make no one very happy. **D**

Franco Ziliani is a freelance Italian wine writer who has specialised in Italian wines since 1985



2004: BAUDAINS' SIX TO SAVOUR

Guerrieri Rizzardi, Calcarole, Amarone Classico 2004 ★★★★★

Lovely garnet-ruby. Complex nose with elegant touches of raisined grape. Intense, balanced palate with unobtrusive tannins and a long, savoury finish. 2010–2025. **£49.50; Har**

Stefano Accordini, Amarone Classico 2004 ★★★★★

Bright, dark ruby. Big, rich, complex nose with black cherry, wild berries and Parma violets at the front and an earthy phenolic background. Great depth and breadth on the palate, and a long, intriguing finish. 2009–2020. **£36.50; EnW**

Roberto Mazzi, Amarone Classico 2004 ★★★★★

Bright, modern, well extracted. Fresh, minty oak and violet nose, tight, dry palate, with fine tannins and a long minerally finish with hints of raisins. 2010–2020. **N/A UK; +39 0457 502 072**

Rocolo Grassi, Amarone 2004 ★★★★★

Very dark, extracted look. Complex, dark fruit, smoky nose of great intensity and a solidly structured palate with firm underlying acidity and a grippy finish. 2011–2025. **£48; Nov**

Tedeschi, Amarone Classico Capitel Monte Olmi 2004 ★★★★★

Massive and uncompromising wine, with huge fruit and concentration of tannin both on the nose and the palate, lots of oak to integrate but also lots of aroma waiting to come out. Very long, savoury finish. Needs time. 2011–2025. **£45; Hal**

Trabucchi, Amarone 2004 ★★★★★

Big, dark, rich. Sweet, raisiny nose, and a fleshy palate with excellent fruit and tannin amalgamation, and a vigorous finish with very pure, grapey aromas. 2010–2015. **N/A UK; +39 0457 833 233**

For full UK stockist details, see p100 of the main issue