

## Amarone and Ripasso Wine

*My thanks to the Wikipedia, Wine-Searcher, and the Wines From Italy websites for the content and pictures used here.*

### Amarone

Amarone is a process developed in the Valpolicella province just north of Venice that uses the three grapes from that region: Corvina, Rondinella, and Molinara to produce a very full-bodied red wine. Those grapes, particularly the last two, do not get a chance to develop much depth with the cool climate in that region. The winemakers tried putting the grapes out to dry on straw for at least weeks and often up to a few months and that caused a good amount of the moisture in the grapes to evaporate, concentrating the sugars, polymerizing the tannins, and increasing the skin contact of the grapes to pull in more aromas and flavors. The weight loss is generally in the range of 30-45%.

This process is called *appassimento* or *rasinate* (to dry and shrivel) in Italian. You can see in the picture that many of the grapes have started to look like raisins. When the grapes were then gently crushed, the juice did bring much more to work with. In particular, the higher sugar content came into play. But, when the fermentation process hit 14% alcohol, often a target for wines, there was still sugar left. Initially the fermentation was stopped at that point and the result was a sweet red wine with lots of flavor. It is called Recioto and quickly became popular with those liking sweeter wines. It is still made and remains a popular dessert wine.



Occasionally the fermentation was let to run too long until the sugar was fully consumed by the yeast. The resulting wine had very high alcohol, generally 15-16%, was a dry wine, and packed a great deal of flavor from the concentrated juice coming from the dried berries. Because it was so different from the sweet Recioto, the winemakers called it amaro or “bitter”. This accident eventually gained recognition and Amarone wine began to be marketed in 1953. It was given DOC status in 1990 and in 2009 it was promoted to DCOG status.

Today the appassimento process has evolved from bunches of grapes lying on the straw covered floor to sitting on bamboo racks to now be in drying rooms on pallets as shown in the picture from the Wine-Searcher website. Drying time can range from 3 weeks to three months and 120 days is generally the case for the very good Amarones. The grapes are left in bunches with let air flow and reduce the chance for bacteria to cause some of the grapes to show rot. After the fermentation, the wine is strained into barrels for aging. Initially large casks



(botti) were used for the aging but most of it has moved to the 225-liter barriques mostly using Slavonian or French oak. The aging is for at least two years, with the calendar starting on January 1 of the year following the harvest in the first two weeks of October. Many estates bottle age the wine after that and it is not uncommon for those wines to be five years old before they hit the shelves for sale. Amarone is bottled in the slope shoulder type bottle like what is used for Burgundy wines.

## Amarone and Ripasso Wine

Amarone della Valpolicella can be made anywhere in the Valpolicella province but there are sub-zones within that province where this wine was originally made and wines from those sub-zones can show Classico on their label.

### Amarone Recommendations

Estate and any ratings	Typical Price
Masi Costasera Amarone Classico Riserva JS 96	\$70
Bolla Amarone della Valpolicella Classico	\$50
Zeni Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Barriques – JS 92	\$36
Tommasi Amarone della Valpolicella Classico JS 94	\$71
Zenato Amarone della Valpolicella Classico	\$65

## Ripasso

When the juice is strained out after the fermentation process, it leaves the dried grape skins. Most Italian winemakers sell that residue to people who use them to distill Grappa, the very potent after dinner liquor that Italians love, very similar to French Marc. Some of the winemakers tried taking those dried grape skins, which still had a lot of flavors left, and in the following spring added them to casks of their Valpolicella wines, technique that entails a double fermentation. The first fermentation turns the must into basic Valpolicella. The second fermentation is triggered off by adding the skins left over from the Amarone production (but still rich of tannins, anthocyanins and polyphenols) to this basic wine. Valpolicella is therefore “ripassato” on Amarone skins, where it remains for around 15 – 20 days.

The result is wine with a deeper color, more tannins, more alcohol, and more aromas and flavors. This wine was given the name Valpolicella Ripasso. It must be aged for at least six months in oak barrels. It is a very good accompaniment for fatty dishes, as the acidity counterbalances the sweetish flavor typical of fatty meats, for example. The ideal pairing is with red meat, especially grilled meat.

Many Ripasso wines sell in the \$15-25 price range and bring much more flavor and character than most other red wines at that price point. The Trader Joe's that sell wine often have a very nice Ripasso at a very attractive price. Unfortunately, I don't currently have any in my cellar to give the specific name but if you ask at the wine counter at Trader Joes, they will show you where it is.

### Ripasso Recommendations

Estate and any ratings	Typical Price
Masi Campofiorin Rosso del Veronese	\$18- 19
Tommasi Ripasso Valpolicella Classico Superiore JS 92	\$26
Zenato Ripassa Valpolicella Ripasso Classico Superiore	\$30
Remo Farina Valpolicella Classico Ripasso Superiore	\$19
Bolla Valpolicella Ripasso Classico Superiore	\$14