

Tasting Highlights: Amarone

What vintage debate? Amarone della Valpolicella shines in 2001, 2000 and 1999

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There's recently been a lot of talk in Italy about which of the most recent vintages of Amarone della Valpolicella, 2001, 2000 or 1999, is the best. Amarone is the most prestigious red from the Veneto, and based on recent tastings at Wine Spectator's European bureau in Tuscany, all three vintages showed high quality across the board, particularly in the case of wines from producers who have a track record for quality.

One reason for this is the heavy investment in sophisticated temperature- and humidity-control technology that producers have been installing in their drying rooms, where the grapes are partially dried for around four months before vinification. According to Sandro Boscaini, director of Masi, one of the region's leading Amarone producers, the key to making good Amarone is the ability to ensure the healthy state of the grapes during the drying period.

"[These days] there's less difference between the vintages," he said. "In a good vintage, 55 percent depends on the state of the grapes in the vineyard, 45 percent on the drying conditions." It may be one of the reasons why Masi's classic Amarone Mazzano 1999 heads our list below, with a classic rating of 95 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale.

Amarone is a big, expansive red, made from a blend of local grapes, typically Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara. Though it comes in a wide variety of styles, producers tend to fall into two main camps. Some emphasize the spicy dried fruit and nutty aromas and flavors of Amarone, giving it an almost oxidized character. These include producers such as Bertani and Bolla. Others, such as Dal

Forno, Bussola and Castellani, focus on the pure fruit character in their Amarones, making dense, sometimes jammy Amarones, with loads of up-front fruit, spice and vanilla aromas and flavors. Doing a balancing act between the two are Allegrini and Zenato, who make well-balanced and modern wines.

Of the nearly 80 Amarones included in the magazine's tasting this year, the wines that performed best were those that showed an extra degree of complexity in the fruit character, combined with the structure to carry it through to the finish, without any loss of balance or focus on the way. Take, for example, the Masi Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Mazzano 1999 (95 points, \$120). This is a huge, potent wine, with layers of concentrated fruit and mineral that build on the palate. Yet it remains fresh from start to finish. The Zenato Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Sergio Zenato Riserva 2000 (93, \$80) shows the same focused character and structure within a slightly subtler framework. By comparison, there was a tendency in a number of wines, further down the point scale, to start with good fruit, but finish slightly crisp and lean.

If you're looking for value, the Brunelli Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2001 (91, \$43) or the Cecilia Beretta (part of the Pasqua group) Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Terre di Cariano 2000 (90, \$54) are good bets and shouldn't be too hard to track down. But Amarone doesn't come cheap. A good quality bottle will usually coast at least \$60, with some prices hitting the roof, as is the case with the astronomical \$460 price tag on Romano dal Forno's cult-status bottling.

Our list of top scorers from this year's tasting includes some new names—Roccolo Grassi, Viviani, Cesari, Lorenzo Begali and Nicholis in particular. All are worth looking out for.

For Amarone aficionados willing to pay the price, there's a lot going on out there just now. And there's no need to get bogged down in talk about vintages.

Wine	Score	Price
MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico I Castei Campo Casalin 2000	92	\$63
A well-crafted, modern interpretation of Amarone, with lightly raisiny fruit and clean vanilla, mineral and bright spicy notes. Full-bodied, with loads of silky tannins, oak-tinged fruit flavors and a long finish. Best after 2007. — <i>J.S.</i>		
MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Cinque Stelle 2000	91	\$63
Intense young Amarone, with clean black and red fruit and a hint of mahogany. Full-bodied, with wonderfully seductive tannins and a long, long finish. A beauty. Excellent wine. Best after 2005. — <i>J.S.</i>		
MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Monte Cristi 2001	90	\$49
Juicy prune, with fresh herbs and spicy oak on the nose and palate. Full-bodied and silky, with fine, well-integrated tannins and a fresh spicy finish. Balanced wine. Very drinkable already. Drink now. — <i>J.S.</i>		