

# Valpolicella, Italy



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## Vineyards of the World

**V**ALPOLICELLA is part of the Veneto Region of north east Italy. Perhaps more than 100 years ago, this may have been a picturesque region. Today, unfortunately, the panoramic view of the vineyards, from the foothills of the Lesini Mountains to the north, is spoilt in many places by a patchwork of unattractive industrial development. Valpolicella literally means 'valley of many cellars'. This part of Italy is best known for production of large volumes of relatively cheap wine, both dry red wine (known as Valpolicella) or dry white (known as Soave). However, as a quality region, the reputation of Valpolicella rests on its famous wines made from dried grapes, i.e. Recioto and Amarone.

The Valpolicella zone, approximately 32 km east-west × 9 km north-south, lies to the north of the city of Verona, itself on the plains of the Adige River. Denominazione di Origine (DOC) status was granted in 1968 and the planted area subsequently expanded. The original zone, now known as Valpolicella Classico, accounts for less than half of the wine produced from the 6,000 or so ha of vineyards. The average vineyard size is just 2.1 ha.

A typical Valpolicella is low quality wine from high yielding vines on the fertile soils of the plains. The best wines come from vines grown on more elevated sites—greater than 100 m—where the limestone-based soils are less fertile and the terraced slopes provide better thermal conditions. Such



A young vineyard with VSP trellis on the La Grola hill



Pergola veronese.

vineyards are mainly located in the Classico and Valpantena zones. The Classico zone (12 km × 8 km) takes up the western portion of Valpolicella, close to Lake Garda, whereas Valpantena is in the east. The Classico zone is made up of three main valleys: from west to east, Fumane, Marano and Negrar. All are open to the north and thus cool winds funnel down from the mountains. Fumane is the most open valley and produces the ripest fruit. Marano is the most narrow, with fewer desirable southerly aspects. Negrar has some of the best sites, but this positive aspect is offset by the higher proportion of the lesser quality Molinara variety. Sant'Ambrogio is a semi-valley, open to the west and most influenced by the moderating effects of Lake Garda, just a few kilometres away. For vineyards within the Classico zone, the average elevation is 200 m, however some can be found up to 700 m.

The climate is characterised by hot summers and cold winters. The MJT<sup>1</sup> and CTL<sup>1</sup> for a typical Classico site at 200 m elevation are approximately 22.6°C and 20°C respectively. The average annual rainfall of Verona is 695 mm of which 63% falls during the growing season. The harvest month (September) rainfall is relatively high at 75 mm. The major problems are hail and fungal diseases.

The best variety, Corvina, has low colour and tannin but good flavour. If grown in optimal locations with good management, wines have an attractive floral cherry aroma. It requires cane pruning and ripens relatively late—about the same time as Cabernet Sauvignon. The small berries have thick skins, making it very suitable for drying. A 'clone' of Corvina known as Corvinone (= big Corvina), which may be spur-pruned, has been recently differentiated. It has larger berries than Corvina and thus takes longer to dry. The earlier ripening Rondinella has higher yield and produces wines of less character. The small berries are also suitable for drying. The area of the low quality, high acid Molinara has declined in recent times. Other minor varieties include Dindarella, Oseleta and Rossignola.

The DOC regulations specify that Valpolicella must comprise 40 to 70% Corvina, 20 to 40% Rondinella, 5 to 25% Molinara with a maximum of 15% from other varieties such as Rossignola, Negrara, Barbera and Sangiovese. In addition, there is a maximum of 5% Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but





Looking down the Fumane Valley.

in practice this may be much higher<sup>2</sup>. It is one of the anomalies of the DOC system that a maximum of 70% Corvina is specified even though it is the best variety. In fact, wines made exclusively from Corvina—for example, the La Poja of Allegrini—have been produced since late 1980s, but these only qualify as the ‘lower’ rated Vino da Tavola, despite potentially higher quality than normale Valpolicella Classico. The maximum permitted yield is 84 hl/ha (approximately 12 t/ha).

Dried grapes have been used for winemaking in Italy for at least 2,000 years. In fact, the practice appears to go back as far as the Ancient Greeks<sup>3</sup>. The starting point for both Amarone (dry wine) and Recioto (sweet wine) is fruit from exactly the same varieties and locations as for normale Valpolicella and Valpolicella Classico. The essential difference is that, for both Amarone and Recioto, the bunches are dried for four months or longer before fermentation. Traditionally, drying was carried out in special chambers where bunches were spread out on mats or wickerwork shelving, or strung up on vertical poles. These days, it is more likely to be done in large rooms with controlled temperature and humidity where bunches are placed in shallow wooden or plastic trays. Bunch weight loss is at least 25 to 30% and may be as high as 50%. In the past, Botrytis infection was relatively common during the early stages of drying. Today, ventilation systems are used to minimise this infection. This has had the effect of removing the oxidised flavours that once characterised the wines<sup>3</sup>. Selected, healthy, whole bunches, harvested in late

September, are dried until January or February at which time they are ready for crushing and fermentation. Amarone wine should not have less than 14% alcohol and may be up to 16%.

Most vineyards use a pergola trellis system, either pergola veronese or pergola trentina where the canopy is approximately 2 m above ground level. Corvina is generally grown on the former. Row × vine spacing is 4 m × 1.2 m with two, 10–11 node canes per vine. Some young vineyards have a VSP trellis with narrower rows but these are relatively few. Irrigation is commonly used in the high yielding vineyards of the plains.

The Allegrini company has a reputation for good quality wines. Its Valpolicella Classico (12.8% alcohol) is 60% Corvina, 35% Rondinella and 5% Molinara, produced from vineyards at 180 to 280 m elevation on pergola trentina, typically yielding 8.5 t/ha, and harvested in the first two weeks of October. By comparison, their La Poja wine (14% alcohol) comes exclusively from a 2.7 ha Corvina vineyard on the very calcareous soil at the top of the La Grola hill (310 m) in Sant’Ambrogio; the trellis is VSP, yield is 6 t/ha and harvest is in mid October.

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<sup>1</sup>MJT = Mean July temperature; CTL = Continentality.

<sup>2</sup>Belfrage, N. (1999) Barolo to Valpolicella. Faber and Faber.

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, J. (ed) Oxford Companion to Wine. Second edition. OUP.