

## My Story

I was born in the Valpolicella and identify with the land of Amarone. For people brought up in a family of winegrowers surrounded by these gentle hillsides, Amarone is a small universe in its own right: not just a wine, or a technique, it's a philosophy, an art, a life companion. I was born in one of the typical three-story houses; actually, they had four floors if you count the vaulted underground cellar. In such houses the family lived by day on the ground floor, and slept above on the first floor, sandwiched between the grapes quietly drying on trays in the attic and the cellar where all the rites of fermentation and aging took place. Only someone who has lived this closely with the grapes and the wine can know what Amarone signifies. What it means to select the bunches for drying, to lay them out on cane trays, to stack them up in the drying lofts and keep them under constant observation, as you would a family member whose wellbeing is particularly dear to you. And not for just a day or two, but for months, from the end of September through to February, when the grapes are ready for crushing. As children we would wake up early in the morning as the farmhands padded quietly up the stairs to place the wrinkled bunches in copper buckets, which they then took down to the cellar. They went barefoot, so that they didn't dirty the floors. Down below, the cellar door was kept closed to stop the winter cold from hindering fermentation. The grapes were crushed with hand-operated rollers, and the must was transferred to the fermentation vats in shoulder-held conical containers. Everything was done by hand, in a time-honored series of measured actions under the

vigilant supervision of my father. The other person who kept an eye on the whole process was my aunt Toscana, who invited the workers up for a break in the sitting room above, because “you must never eat bread in the cellar.” That applied to us children as well, though I have never quite understood exactly why.

In houses like ours you breathed the scents of the Amarone grapes, and I still have distinct memories of how the intense cherry fragrance of the fresh grapes was gradually transformed into the quietly sweet smell of semi-dried grapes. The turning point for us children was Saint Lucy’s day, at the beginning of December, when another scent pervaded the house: that of oranges, still slightly unripe but already fragrant. The Saint used to leave them as gifts at the foot of our beds.

During those months, the original smell of grapes gave way to other odors that arose from the cellar. At first, it was the penetrating sweetness of crushed grapes, then the acrid pungency of fermentation, followed by the austere aroma of wood and wine that would be ready for drinking by the beginning of summer. For us children, and I believe for the adults too, trying to guess from the smell what the weather was going to be like that day became a kind of game. Different smells came to the fore when the atmospheric pressure was low, and others when it was high. Upstairs as opposed to downstairs odors. But before checking the sky we used to consult a country calendar known as *Pojana Maggiore*, which hung from a hook on the kitchen door. It showed the phases of the moon and offered a weather forecast of its own. That done, we were finally ready to open the window and find out who had won.

As children my brother Sergio and I weren’t supposed to go up into the drying loft. We did of course, drawn not only by the scents but also by the wonderful colors of the grapes that turned from deep red to mauve. Of course we had to sample them, our favorites being the ones that had tiny white

dots on them. These were the creamiest and the sweetest, extraordinarily intense in their over-ripeness, almost like loquats. I only realized later that we were appreciating the magic of noble rot. Bruno and Mario, my younger brothers, were born too late to experience such delights to the full!

Things began to change in the mid-fifties, and over the past several decades what was once a poetic act of love has necessarily become a business. Like the best of products made in Italy, however, premium Amarone still requires the witting collaboration of hands, head and heart. Alas, not every Amarone is worthy of the name.

At present there are over two hundred Amarone labels on the market. Some of them are products of unquestionable quality; others will end up on supermarket shelves and embody little or nothing of the glory of this ancient, noble wine. This exponential growth corresponds to a marked increase in the number of producers, many of whom have jumped on the bandwagon of the wine’s worldwide acclaim. Wineries of this sort consider Amarone as a business opportunity, another way of making money. There are only a dozen or so historic wineries who have Amarone in their DNA, who have devoted their lifeblood to quality production, struggling to make their presence felt on a market that was not initially well disposed towards a wine deemed unfashionable, provincial and rustic. From the grape varieties involved to the production techniques, Amarone failed to fit in with the cannons of modern oenology.

I have many memories of taking important wine critics and journalists around our cellars, watching them to taste the wine, then hearing them say with a condescending smile: “I’m not saying it isn’t a good wine, and of course it’s important for you and your birthplace, but believe me, if you want to get your foot into the international market consider planting Cabernet and Merlot.”

In the first edition of his *Wine Companion*, even Hugh Johnson, that most refined and attentive of critics, declared

that “at any Veronese gathering the last bottle to be served is Recioto either in its sweet form or in its powerful, dry, velvety but astringent and bitter Amarone.” There was a suggestion here that the wine was somehow contradictory, and that its local aficionados were too provincial to know any better. He concluded the entry with some advice: “Keep a glass of youthful Valpolicella at hand to quench your thirst!”

In actual fact Hugh Johnson had a point. The Amarones he referred to predated the early eighties, when we at Masi started introducing technical improvements that were to change the profile of the wine, introducing it to a much wider audience and paving the way for its current success. Sometimes an individual can change dramatically in order to please the person he or she loves.

In recollecting those distant times when I first became aware of my deep affection for the wine, I simply wish to illustrate one aspect of a life devoted to the study, production, tasting and discussion of Amarone. Its technical evolution and the widespread acclaim that came in its wake are part of the same process. I have promoted Amarone with great pride, as one would a precious family treasure, conscious that I was introducing the wider world to one of the most significant symbols of Verona and the Veneto. Granted, there are plenty of others, including the gondola and the domes of San Marco in Venice, and the Arena or Juliet’s balcony in Verona. The difference is, of course, that Amarone is a symbol that can be transported, translated and transferred. I have traveled with it across the five continents, introducing it to myriad different consumers who have unfailingly gratified my efforts with surprise, curiosity and a positive verdict.

Many countries had no experience of Amarone before I took it there. Sweden is a case in point: the State Monopoly had never listed an Amarone before the mid-eighties, when I persuaded them to take the first 240 bottles of Vaio Armaron Serego Alighieri. Today the discerning Swedish market welcomes Amarone with open arms.

It’s hugely gratifying for me to see that Amarone is now appreciated worldwide for its originality, remarkable history, and the cordiality it expresses. On account of my itinerant passion and conviction, I have often been called ‘Mr. Amarone’ by both the international press, and by people who have taken part in the hundreds of thematic tasting sessions organized across the globe. It’s a nickname I like and am proud of, because it makes me feel like a miniature Marco Polo, intrigued by the discovery of new cultures, but also aware of introducing something of my own culture as an Italian, and more specifically as a Veneto, and indeed a Valpolicellese.

I do have one small regret, however: that I never managed to persuade my wife to become actively involved in my adventure with Amarone. Outside the family, the focus of Giuliana’s talent has always been her painting, which she’s very good at. I greatly appreciate that she has accepted my peripatetic existence without making me feel guilty. It is probably due to her wisdom that we still have so much to share, including our three splendid children and their young families.

There are multiple threads to the story of my involvement in the wine business. I have tried to disentangle them for my friend Kate Singleton in a number of long, enjoyable conversations that have continued at intervals since the first edition of this book. The overall narration has now been enriched with an account of the many changes that have come about during the course of the past seven years. With her special mixture of sensitivity and professional skill, Kate has once again captured my emotional attachment to what I do in pages that bring together my own personal story, that of my family and the land I come from with the history of the wine, the way it is made and what it stands for. I am extremely grateful to her.

Sandro Boscaini