

Fifty Years of Secco Bertani Amarone

CELEBRATING
A MODERN WINE
BORN FROM AN
ANCIENT METHOD

by Deborah Parker Wong / photos by Becca Henry

WHEN WINEMAKER ANDREA LONARDI took the stage at September's Full Circle Beverage Conference in San Francisco to present a tasting of Bertani Amarone Classico, he had what amounted to a Sommelier Justice League by his side: Master Sommeliers Brian Cronin, Tim Gaiser, and Peter Granoff, all of whom provided perspective and humor as they tasted through 50 years' worth of Bertani winemaking prowess.

Born and raised in a vine-growing Veronese family, Lonardi began his tenure at Bertani in 2012. Although he didn't personally make any of the wines tasted during the masterclass—though the 2008 Amarone was bottled in 2016—the pride he showed while presenting them was rather paternal. “The wines we are making today will be presented by another winemaker 50 years from now,” he told attendees.

The Birth of Bertani Amarone

Being both modern and ancient, Amarone is a paradoxical style. Its rising popularity and commercialization in the 1950s gave the Valpolicella region a wine of true cult status: one that holds its own next to ageworthy Barolos and Brunellos.

Despite the well-worn anecdotes about the “accidental” discovery of the style, Lonardi contests that it was made intentionally at Bertani and, as such, the winery is actually Amarone's birthplace. It was first produced by Bertani after the producer purchased the Tenuta Novare estate in the heart of Valpolicella Classica in 1957, and while the label has never changed, Lonardi said climate shifts drive the style's natural evolution. “Climate change is a positive for the Valpolicella region, but I'm missing some of the traditional 'greenness' in the wines,” he explained.

The Amarone wines made at Bertani in the early 1980s saw their first flush of success on the international market in the late 1980s and early 1990s as consumers gravitated toward bigger, richer wine styles.

During its evolution in bottle, Lonardi sees Amarone progress through three stages of development: showing primary fruit like cherry, plum, and orange from seven to ten years; progressing toward sour cherry and secondary notes of chocolate between ten and 20 years; and, beyond 25 years, being dominated by secondary and tertiary flavors. “A nervous profile is what we desire most,” Lonardi said, adding that Bertani has persisted in building that character despite the ebb and flow of various trends over its history.

An Interpretation of Terroir

By adhering to a house style, Bertani now finds itself in an optimal spot as consumer preferences turn to lighter, brighter wines that serve as an effective interpretation of Valpolicella's terroir. Lonardi credits a number of factors, including the region's higher altitudes among the Prealps mountain ranges, the temperate effect of nearby Lake Garda, and the limestone soil, but human factors have played a role as well.

Since Bertani established its winery in Valpantena and its vineyards in the old Roman site of Arbizzano di Negrar, it's ushered the estate into the contemporary era by transitioning from the traditional pergola trellising system to Guyot trellising and vertical-shoot positioning. The latter method allows the native Corvina Veronese and Rondinella grapes to yield expressions across a combination of volcanic basalt, chalky limestone, and clay soils.



Master Sommelier Brian Cronin, National Manager of Wine Education for importer Taub Family Selections, with Bertani Operations Director Andrea Lonardi.

“Corvina planted to basalt gives us flinty, higher-alcohol wines,” Lonardi explained. “Our limestone vigor is low and we taste tangy dark cherries, while iron- and manganese-rich clay soils are lower yielding and contribute welcome floral and strawberry notes.” Here in the cooler area of Tenuta Novare Corvina offers up a pepperiness similar to Syrah from the Rhône Valley, and Lonardi particularly enjoys the zesty notes the compound rotundone brings to Bertani wines.

At the masterclass, Cronin—who serves as National Manager of Wine Education for Bertani's importer, Taub Family Selec-

tions—pointed to the range of styles and distinctly different expressions achieved by various producers. “In Amarone production there are 10,000 ways of doing the same thing,” he said. Cronin also made an unexpected pop-culture reference during the event, noting that Hannibal Lecter enjoyed an Amarone with his dish of liver in Thomas Harris’ novel.

Demonstrating Character

Acinaticum, a wine made from dried grapes beginning in the fifth century, is believed to be the precursor to the sweet wine Recioto della Valpolicella, from which Amarone was created. “The method for making Amarone may be easy to copy,” Lonardi said of the *appassimento* method, “but you cannot copy the place.”

To create the elegant, Burgundian-style wines Bertani is known for, Lonardi oversees a long, cool drying period spanning more than 100 days that allows the finished wine to better demonstrate the character of the vintage. Bertani is one of very few

producers carrying on this traditional and natural method, in which grapes are left to rest on the “arèle” (racks made from bamboo canes) in the drying room. There, they dry naturally and slowly without the use of any type of device to remove humidity. “If your temperature during drying is too warm, you lose water too quickly and get concentration of sugars but not complex flavors,” Lonardi explained.

Lonardi prefers these dry, cool conditions—with temperatures below 10 degrees Celsius—to better showcase a site like the Ognissanti, an estate cru that took its name from a church belonging to the Saint Thomas Aquinas friars. It also enables him to demonstrate how the soils affect the finished wines. “Bertani doesn’t manipulate the wines to create a market-driven style,” Granoff said as he remarked on Amarone’s ability to show vintage character with age. “With Bertani Amarone, people pay attention and recognize this style of wine for what it is and what it should be,” Lonardi added. S

Tasting Through the Years with Bertani Amarone della Valpolicella



1967: This vintage is cited alongside 1964 as the warmest of the decade due in large part to a dry, hot summer; its wines weren’t bottled until the beginning of the 1980s. With notes of faded potpourri, dried plum, walnut, amaro, and celery salt, it’s an umami-driven wine in which the alcohol provided fuel for longevity. The acidity remains precise.

1975: Although 1975 is not considered a great vintage, Lonardi cited it as one of his favorites largely due to it being a cooler year. Pale and Pinot Noir–like, the wine showed orange peel, walnut, and leather notes while being quite linear. “Bertani has been considered the Burgundy of Valpolicella,” Gaiser said.

1981: Bottled after spending a decade in casks, this expressive and richly textured wine features hints of dried plums, walnut, anise, and mocha bolstered by dusty tannins. “Appassimento is an oxidative process, but the aging process of Amarone is reductive,” said Lonardi. “There is always a percentage of press wine in the final blend that brings tannins to the wine.”

1998: Bottled in 2005, this vintage is a more oxidative style dominated by black cherry and extracted darker fruits. Lonardi noted that it was “too warm at harvest,” resulting in a powerful nose. However, it shows muscle, remarkable structure, and persistence.

2005: Although the vintage suffered from hail, resulting in the lowest yields of the past 20 years, Lonardi credits the 2005 as the “most valuable wine for the future.” Compared by the panel to the 2010 for structure, power, and verticality, it features a distinct evolution of aromas and gives an overall impression of being seamless and complete. Balanced and fresh, it shows a mélange of tea, coffee, sweet tobacco, and cocoa.

2008: This highly aromatic, rich, and red-fruited yet elegant wine was bottled in 2016. “You can form a precise idea of the architecture of the wine,” Lonardi surmised while tasting. Chocolate tannins, truffle, and balsamic notes with a core of strawberry compote and orange peel precede lingering hints of freshly roasted coffee. Vibrancy reigns.