

Tasting Highlights: Amarone

Twenty new rich Italian reds, including classic-rated versions from 2005 and 2003

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The 2005 vintage of Amarone della Valpolicella, Veneto's rich, heady red, seems set to become the latest in a string of very good vintages for Amarone, which kicked off in 1997 and has since been interrupted only once, by the disappointing 2002 vintage.

Alas, prices are of growing concern: Dal Forno's Amarone has always carried a sky-high price tag, but some of the other single-vineyard Amarones listed here are now hovering around \$100 or more. Amarones such as those from Lorenzo Begali, Trabucchi and Righetti offer the best deals in terms of value.

In recent blind tastings of several dozen newly released Amarones, I found outstanding bottlings from the 2003, 2004 and 2005 vintages, with loads of ripe fruit and spicy character, coupled with the solid structure you expect from a top Amarone.

Vintage variation showed more in lower-scoring wines—some Amarones from the superhot 2003 vintage showed signs of imbalance. In addition, the apparent failure to control yields in 2004 resulted in some slightly thinner wines with a hollow midpalate.

Sergio Castellani, owner and winemaker at the Michele Castellani family estate, told me over a year ago at the winery that he believed the 2005 vintage was the best of the three recently released. His three outstanding 2005s include the top score of this report, the supremely elegant Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Cinque Stelle 2005.

Castellani added that he thought the 2006 and 2007 vintages would be even better. While we wait and see, let's enjoy the 2005s, 2004s and 2003s.

[*Note:* At press time, prices on some wines, including the Masi bottlings, had not yet been confirmed by their U.S. importers.]

MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Cinque Stelle 2005 **Score: 96 / \$105**

This is dense, with concentrated, balanced aromas of prune, date and polished oak. Full and compact, delivering layers of ripe fruit and fine, soft tannins that give a light pull on the long, long finish. A super Amarone, with elegance and length. Like cashmere. Drink now through 2012. 500 cases imported. —*J.C.*

ROMANO DAL FORNO Amarone della Valpolicella 2003 **Score: 95 / \$425**

This has a great nose, with loads of peppery, meaty dried black fruit, fig and floral aromas, with an array of spices, fresh herbs and violet. Full-bodied, concentrated and chewy, with a long, intense finish. Built to age. Best after 2011. 120 cases imported. —*J.C.*

TOMMASO BUSSOLA Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2004 *Score: 93 / \$62*
Compact and pure, with lovely floral aromas accompanying the sweet date, currant and lightly spiced vanilla. Full-bodied, with a tight, firm tannin structure underpinning the dense dried fruit, followed by a long finish. A stylish Amarone. Best after 2010. 1,700 cases imported. —*J.C.*

TOMMASO BUSSOLA Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Vigneto Alto TB 2004 *Score: 93 / \$195*

This well-structured Amarone displays aromas and flavors of sweet currant, mineral and vanilla. Full-bodied, with fine yet sturdy tannins, coated with lots of sweet fruit. A little off-dry. Takes on a bitter orange peel tinge on the finish. Best after 2009. 150 cases imported. —*J.C.*

MASI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Mazzano 2003 *Score: 93 / \$NA*

Offers aromas of prune and date, with a good dose of oak that takes on a coffee grinds character on the palate. Full-bodied and sturdy, with a combination of fruit and oak tannins that give a long, firm finish, carrying a concentrated core of fruit. Mazzano is always a big, chewy wine when young. Needs lots of time. Best after 2011. 1,200 cases made. —*J.C.*

MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico I Castei Campo Casalin 2005 *Score: 92 / \$110*

Well-defined aromas of prune, plum skin, date and mahogany follow through to a full-to-medium body, with firm, fruit-coated tannins and a polished, cinnamon-flavored finish. This has distinctive character and a dense palate. Needs time. Best after 2011. 400 cases imported. —*J.C.*

LE SALETTE Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Pergole Vece 2004 *Score: 92 / \$160*

A beautifully poised red from the start, with clean notes of currant, cardamom and oak. Medium- to full-bodied, with a balanced, silky texture, fresh fruit and a quietly persistent finish. A very dry style. Classy. Best after 2010. 150 cases imported. —*J.C.*

LORENZO BEGALI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2005 *Score: 91 / \$55*

Offers an alluring nose, with juicy currant and raisin and hints of dry clay, herbs and pomegranate. This has a full-to-medium palate, firm and fresh, with a clean fruit and mineral finish. Should broaden out with time. Best after 2010. 500 cases imported. —*J.C.*

MASI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Costasera Riserva 2003 *Score: 91 / \$NA*

This clean, well-defined Amarone shows aromas and flavors of currant, berries and mineral, with hints of dried spice and vanilla. Full-bodied, with a smooth, well-balanced palate and fine tannins that pull slightly on the finish. Best after 2009. 150 cases imported. —*J.C.*

MASI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Serègo Alighieri Vaio Armaron 2004 *Score: 91 / \$NA*

Displays aromas of prune and bitter cherry, with hints of flowers and cocoa. Full-bodied, relaxed and balanced, with good fruit, well-integrated tannins and a focused finish of cocoa and mineral. Best after 2010. 1,200 cases imported. —*J.C.*

TEDESCHI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Capitel Monte Olmi 2004 *Score: 91 / \$92*

A dense, fruity red, with ripe wild strawberry, raisin, earth and sweet herb character. Full-bodied, with fine, firm tannins and thick, peppery fruit to finish. Delivers laser-guided flavors of dried fruit and black pepper. An intense Amarone. Best after 2010. 180 cases imported. —*J.C.*

LORENZO BEGALI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Monte Ca' Bianca 2003
Score: 90 / \$75

A compact, superclean Amarone, with a blend of dried and fresh black currant, spice and mineral character. Full-bodied, with firm, fruit-coated tannins and a clean mineral finish. Needs time. Best after 2010. 200 cases imported. —*J.C.*

TOMMASO BUSSOLA Amarone della Valpolicella Classico TB 2004 **Score: 90 / \$125**

Shows aromas of sweet currant and raisin, with hints of mineral, flowers and cedar. Full-bodied, with a dense core of sweet fruit and mineral, fine, firm tannins and a long, evolving finish that's slightly sugary. This is full of youthful energy. Should come together in time. Best after 2010. 300 cases imported. —*J.C.*

MICHELE CASTELLANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Colle Cristi 2005
Score: 90 / \$65

There's lots of ripe currant, flowers and oak on the nose and palate. Full-bodied, with firm tannins and a long finish of spice and mineral. A quality wine, but a little foursquare just now. Needs time. Best after 2010. 1,000 cases imported. —*J.C.*

MASI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Campolongo di Torbe 2003 **Score: 90 / \$NA**

A good concentration of rich raisin, date and mineral, combining with tobacco and vanilla notes, follows through to a firm, full-bodied palate, with persistent fruit and mineral. Good length. Best after 2011. 350 cases imported. —*J.C.*

TRABUCCHI Amarone della Valpolicella 2004 **Score: 90 / \$50**

A rich Amarone, with prune, date and a hint of spice on the nose and palate. Full-bodied, with well-integrated tannins and good fruit on the finish. Well-balanced, clean and long. Turns a little austere right at the end, but a little time should even this out. Best after 2010. 2,000 cases made. —*J.C.*

VIVIANI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Casa dei Bepi 2004 **Score: 90 / \$154**

This offers raisin, fresh clay, fern and oak on the nose. Full-bodied, with lots of dried fruit and spicy oak flavors, firm tannins and a lingering, spicy fruit finish. An intense, muscular Amarone. Needs time. Best after 2010. 120 cases imported. —*J.C.*

LUIGI RIGHETTI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Capitel de' Roari 2005
Score: 89 / \$31

This has fragrant nose, offering compact raisin, citrus peel and flowers, with a lightly polished oak underlay. Full-bodied, with intense, spicy character, firm tannins and a tangy vanilla finish. This intense Amarone needs time to smooth over the rough edges. Best after 2010. 8,000 cases imported. —*J.C.*

ZENATO Amarone della Valpolicella Classico 2005 **Score: 89 / \$NA**

Shows pretty aromas of raisin and cola. Full-bodied, round and full of juicy dried fruit and spice flavors, with fine tannins and a long, tasty finish. Drink now. 3,000 cases imported. —*J.C.*

ZENI Amarone della Valpolicella Classico Vigne Alte 2005 **Score: 89 / \$NA**

Displays pure aromas and flavors of currant and raisin, with notes of citrus peel and vibrant spices that keep everything fresh. Full- to medium-bodied, with a round, fruity palate, well-integrated tannins and a clean, spicy fruit finish. A new winery to watch. Drink now through 2012. 700 cases imported. —*J.C.*