



# Tim's Wine Market

May 2023

By Tim Varan

I have been dancing around this category for a while, an obscure Italian feature with each offering, but it has been more than a year since we did a deep dive into Italy. This quarter the stars aligned for three amazing wines that show the incredible range produced from the north to the south of the peninsula.

## **2016 Nicolis Amarone della Valpolicella Classico - \$69**

This is only the second Amarone I have selected for this club since 2014. I will say upfront that I typically do not drink Amarone, as I find them too heavy for my taste, but there are times when I find the wines very agreeable with the right food. This is especially true with braised short ribs, which I typically cook with port wine and prunes as part of the braise. The combination of ripe fruit flavors and rich meat are a match made in heaven.

During my tastings for this offering I was very surprised by this wine, which is heavier than most table wines, but shows a freshness that is not common in the category. It is distinctive enough to merit a feature, and if you typically shy away from the category for the same reasons as me, then I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

Talking with customers I find that the names for this region can be confusing, so let me explain what is an Amarone from the Valpolicella region. To start, the Valpolicella region lies east of Lake Garda and north of the city of Verona, on a series of hills that extend south from the Alps. The soils are complex in this region because they are a mix of ancient sea bottom (limestone), volcanic remnants from the lifting of the Apennines, and moraine deposits from vast glaciers that covered the area during the Ice Age. This diversity of soils helps create complexity in the wines as much as the unique grape varieties grown in the area.

The red wines grown in this area are entitled to the Valpolicella classification, but there are many quality levels. Entry level Valpolicella is a light, fruity red wine similar to Beaujolais. The additional designations of "Classico" mean that it comes from vineyards in the hills, not the valleys, and Superiore means the wines achieve 1 degree more alcohol. Producers can also opt to pick the grapes later, then dry them whole cluster (with stems) for three months to dehydrate them and concentrate flavor. This wine is then called Amarone. Additionally, in the past 20 years the category of Ripasso has become very popular, a hybrid style where producers take the skins that remain from the production of Amarone and re-ferment them with their Valpolicella. This not only gives the wines a boost of alcohol but also imparts some of the dried fruit quality of the Amarone.

The Nicolis family founded their estate in 1951, and today they farm close to 100 acres, in the Valpolicella Classico zone near the village of San Pietro. Today the estate is managed by second generation winemaker, Giuseppe Nicolis. Although not certified organic the family farms without using herbicides, pesticides, or fungicides. In addition, all of the Nicolis wines are produced using ambient (wild) yeast, making them some of the purest expressions of Valpolicella found in the market today. I was very impressed with both the pure character of Amarone as well as this wine's precision and balance. Far too often the wines of this category are too alcoholic and oaky.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for at least a half-hour and I recommend cellar temperature, 55 degrees. The nose is an enticing combination of dried cranberries, dried figs and dates, leather, anise seed, candied orange peel and soy sauce. On the palate this wine is dry, with a savory quality and very nice freshness for this category. Drink 2023-2033 with braised short ribs, steaks with Maître d'Hôtel Butter or a rich, meaty lasagna.

## **2019 Felsina Chianti Classico Riserva "Rancia" - \$55**

Since my early days in the wine business I have been a fan of the wines from the great estate of Felsina. Like all Tuscan properties there is evidence of winemaking here from the middle ages, but the modern history begins in 1966 when the estate was purchased by Domenico Poggiali. It is hard to believe now, but those were dark days in Italian winemaking with emphasis on quantity, not quality. Domenico had the vision to invest in talented viticulturists and winemaking advice that helped put Felsina on the proper track. Then in the late 1970s Domenico's son-in-law, Giuseppe Mazzocolin took the helm.

Mazzocolin hired Luigi Veronelli and oenologist Franco Bernabei, who very quickly launched this estate to the top of the Chianti Classico category. Today the property is managed by Giovanni Poggiali, Domenico's grandson, who assumed control in 2011 when Mazzocolin retired.

The property that Poggiali purchased in 1966 is massive, more than 1100 acres but only a small amount dedicated to grape vines. Today the family farms 220 acres of vines, along with cereal crops, olive groves and other cover crops to maintain soil fertility. In addition, they have set aside areas of natural growth forest to harbor wildlife they feel is integral to the health of the vines. Since their inception the estate has been farmed using only organic practices, and since the 1990s they also incorporate biodynamic principles too. They achieved organic certification with the 2000 vintage.

Although they produce more expensive wines, to me their flagship is this single vineyard bottling of 100% Sangiovese from a site they named Rancia. The name is given to the site because of an 11th century building on the property that was used for storing grain, the local name being a "grancia." This vineyard was planted over the late 1990s and early 2000s from a massale selection of cuttings that have grown on this site since before WWII. It is 100% Sangiovese and aged in French oak barriques for 20 months before bottling.

This vintage is showing deep notes of tobacco, dried porcini mushrooms, fresh blackberries, dried cherries, dried plums, balsamic saba and cocoa nibs. On the palate this is a very muscular and dense expression of Chianti Classico, with very polished tannins and nice length. Drink 2025-2034.

### **2021 Pitzner Lagrein Scharfegg - \$55**

Most of you are familiar with Chianti Classico and Amarone, this third, "wild card" selection comes from the Trentino-Alto Adige region of Italy, which is the state that meets the border with Austria high in the Alps. Primarily known for great hiking in the Dolomites, the wine scene is dominated by white wine, mostly Pinot Grigio and increasingly, Chardonnay. Lost in the shuffle are the two local heroes for red wine; Teroldego and Lagrein. Although I intended to feature this and the Foradori Teroldego in the same quarter the shipping gods had other ideas. Thankfully, this wine fits the theme for this quarter too.

Like Teroldego, this wine thrives in the warm, sunny vineyards around the town of Bolzano, which is located about an hour from the Austrian border. It is a grape with a long but relatively obscure history in the area and was in danger of extinction after WWII. Thankfully a few die hard fans in the region kept it alive and today it is enjoying a resurgence as young winemakers look to produce more distinctive wines. Recent DNA testing shows Lagrein is a crossing with Teroldego, and an unknown other parent. It also shows markers that it is related to Syrah and Pinot Noir. I find that producers seem to pull out different attributes in the wines, sometimes showing all of the characteristics of its complex family.

Our version comes from Markus and Thomas Pitzner, who work a tiny estate of 11 acres around the village of Cornedo all'Isarco. Here, the vineyards cling to the incredibly steep slopes on both sides of the Isarco River, on sandy moraine origin soils left from the receding glaciers of the last ice age. Unlike the majority of the Alto Adige vineyards, which are planted in the rich, alluvial soils of the flat lands formed by the Adige River, these vines endure far greater hardships. As a result each vine yields tiny amounts of intensely flavored grapes, making it the perfect spot for serious, category defining wines.

The single vineyard Scharfegg is made from a combination of two plantings; one that is 25 years old and one that is 45 years old. The slope is 15% on this vineyard so all of the work must be done by hand, which is all done by Markus and Thomas. From the door of their winery cellar there is a commanding view of the river valley below, with mountains in the background. All of the grapes for their wines are hand harvested and destemmed before going into stainless steel tanks for fermentation with wild yeast. They keep the skin contact short, only 10-12 days, because Lagrein is known for stiff tannins which they hope to avoid. Once dry the wine is racked to French oak barriques, 20% new, for a few months, then bottled.

When you pull the cork on this wine you will want to decant it for a few minutes, and serve at cellar temperature. The nose of this wine is evocative of picking wild berries in a high mountain pass. Notes of fresh black currants and blackberries mingle with hints of violets, juniper, graphite, espresso coffee beans, citrus peels and petrichor. On the palate this wine is brisk, with a big pop of fresh black fruits that are quickly encapsulated by polished tannins and crunchy acidity. This wine is delicious now but will mature nicely, with a long window of drinkability, 2023-2031. Serve with rich dishes like slow braised pork shoulder with orange or grilled sausages with lentils.