

## The Best Red Wine You Are Probably Forgetting To Drink



Larry Olmsted, CONTRIBUTOR  
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Italy abounds with stunning big red wines, from the better grades of Chianti to Barbaresco to collectible Brunello and Barolo. But often overlooked in this impressive mix is one of the nation's greatest reds, Amarone. What really sets Amarone apart isn't just that it's made from much less well-known grape varieties (mostly corvina), but rather how it is made. Unlike other top shelf red wines, the fruit is allowed to dry for months, becoming raisin-like, before wine making commences. The best winemakers use the traditional appassimento method of air-drying the grapes. While this is more similar to techniques associated with white dessert wines, the result here is not sweet as much as powerful and concentrated (though Amarone does get sweeter with age), with high alcohol levels (15% or more) and a rich, dark, nutty flavor. Expert descriptions often use terms like deep ruby or inky for color, black fruit, such as black figs, black cherries, or black plums, for flavor, black pepper, vanilla, cinnamon or cocoa for spice, while velvety is another word commonly associated with Amarone, and accurate because these wines tend to have great texture.

This is an absolutely perfect fall wine, which means right now, and it traditionally goes with red meat, game, meat stews and strong cheeses. If you love braised meats like short ribs or shanks, you are going to love them even more with Amarone. But it is not as tannic as most other big reds you would often pair with these foods, and has a really smooth finish - hence "velvety." Its full name is Amarone della Valpolicella, and the region in which it is made gets Italy's highest quality wine classification, DOCG. The Amarone DOCG is in the Veneto region, just north of Venice, the same place Valpolicella comes from, but the grading for the grapes to be used to make Amarone is stricter, only the best.

Because of the loss of weight in the drying process - just as with dry aged meat - the result is more concentrated and more expensive. Adding to the cost is the legal requirement that the wine be aged a full two years to bear the name. It also has a very long cellar life. There are really no cheap Amarones, as you'd be hard pressed to find one without spending at least \$50, and often you'll be looking at more like \$80-\$100. But as a result, the care in making them is high and it is one of the easier wines to buy blindly and still get good results.



### Tommasi

*With over 100 years expertise, Tommasi [+]*

That being said, I've been drinking the wine recently, and tried two standouts that I can enthusiastically recommend. Tommasi is arguably the most venerable producer, and among the easiest to find in this country. The family has been doing its thing in Valpolicella for more than a century, is highly regarded, and just released its latest, the 2013 vintage. It is textbook, everything Amarone should be, dark red with a complex mix of fruit and black pepper, with great mouth feel and structure. You can drink this now or sit on it for a decade or two. A true classic! (\$80)