

FOOD & WINE

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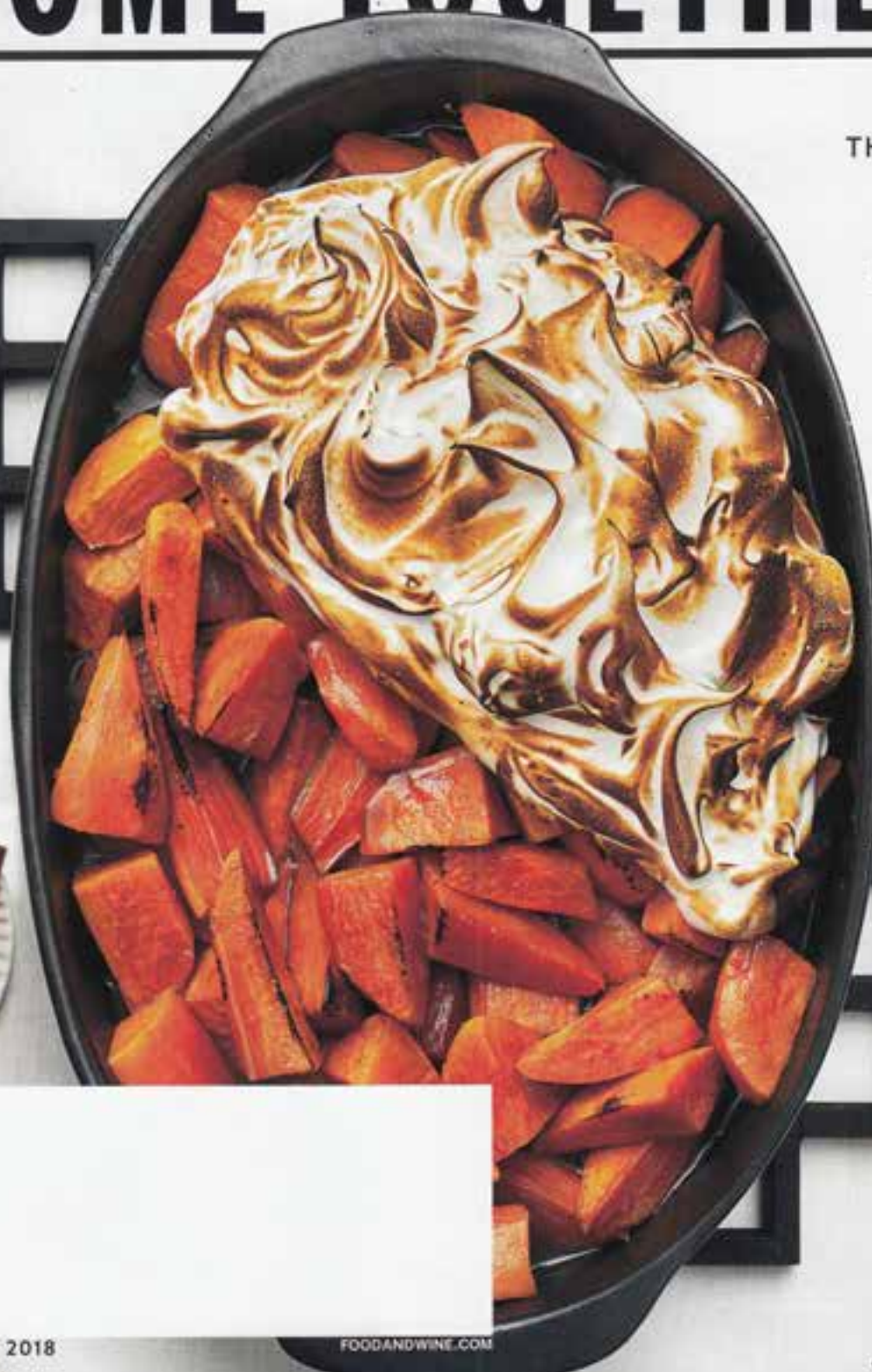
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THE LOST
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OF PAUL +
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TRAVEL

WINE FLIGHT

Exploring Amarone The fertile hills of the Valpolicella region just outside the historic city of Verona are the homeland of Amarone, one of Italy's greatest red wines.

By Ray Isle

Late autumn puts gorgeous color into the vineyards of Italy's Valpolicella region.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW COOPER/ISTOCKPHOTO

Stay in Verona's historic center for easy access to the Valpolicella region.



AS WE'RE WALKING UNDER THE RANKS of beautiful old horse chestnut trees at Tenuta Santa Maria, a few miles outside of Verona, Giovanni Bertani is telling me about Amarone. Winemaking here has gone on for centuries, but Amarone, the formidable benchmark red wine of the Valpolicella region, has only really existed since the early 20th century. "You first see the term used in the late 1930s," he says. "But my family created a prototype of the style in the 1928 vintage. We have bottles of it still—when German soldiers were billeted near here in 1944, the wine was moved to a nearby farmstead and hidden. We only rediscovered it in 1984."

Amarone—high in alcohol; lush with flavors of ripe dark cherries, smoke, figs, and dried herbs; potent and powerful and also expensive—is like Champagne and port, wines partly defined by the unusual way they're made. Once grapes are harvested, they're carefully dried for months, the slow extraction of moisture concentrating sugar and flavor. Drive through Valpolicella's rolling hills, and you'll see the swaths of vineyards that produce the grapes for this process; visit the wineries' drying rooms in late fall, and you'll see the towers of straw mats (or, less traditionally, ventilated plastic crates) in which the newly harvested grapes are slowly drying. It's a hugely labor-intensive task—as Bertani says, "Yes, it's a process. But it's not like Coca-Cola, where you press a button and OK, 5 million more bottles."

This work also takes place in one of Italy's most congenial regions for wine-touring, especially in the late fall, when the leaves on the vines are red and gold. The Valpolicella region surrounds Verona on both sides. Stay in the historic center of town (but skip Juliet's House, a tourist attraction dedicated to *Romeo and Juliet*; it's a mob scene), and venture out for day trips to the west and east. The hills are studded with excellent enotecas and trattorias, most wineries are open to the public, and if you find yourself sated on Amarone's richness, you can always end the day with an Aperol spritz—another beverage that's brought this region fame.

WHERE TO TASTE

ALLEGRI

Head to Allegrini's Villa Della Torre to taste the supple, smoky **2014 Amarone Classico** (\$68). Book in advance to tour the extraordinary Italian Renaissance villa itself—the vast fireplaces, representing the yawning mouths of a devil, angel, lion, and sea monster, are extraordinary (the villa works as a B&B, too, so consider it for a stay). (villadellatorre.it)

MUSELLA

This 988-acre estate nestled east of Verona makes top-notch Amarone but is also an agriturismo, offering rooms, fly-fishing in the nearby Fibbio river, and cooking and yoga classes. All of this is overseen by magnetic owner Maddalena Pasqua Di Bisceglie, who also makes the wines, like the blueberry-rich **2011 Musella Amarone** (\$60). (musella.it)

TEDESCHI

Sabrina Tedeschi is president of the Historic Families group of Amarone producers (the organization's website, famigliestoriche.it, is a great source for more wineries to visit) as well as of her family's winery. The Tedeschi have made wine for some 400 years, producing a range from affordable but impressive Valpolicellas to layered single-vineyard Amarone bottlings like the blackberry-rich **2011 Capitel Monte Olmi Amarone Classico Riserva** (\$65). (tedeschiwines.com)

TENUTA SANTA MARIA

Built in the 1500s, this villa (plus the vineyard around it) is a national landmark. Today it houses the winemaking operations of the Bertani family, who sold their namesake brand in 2011. Sixth-generation Giovanni Bertani now crafts excellent wines here under the Tenuta Santa Maria name, like the dark cherry-scented **2012 Amarone Classico Riserva** (\$80). (Tours by appointment. tenutasantamaria.wine)

TENUTA SANT'ANTONIO

Extraordinary views over hillside vineyards can be had from this winery founded in 1995 by four brothers near the small town of San Bricio. Its single-vineyard **2013 Campo dei Gigli Amarone** (\$60), with its aromas of orange peel and roasted plums, has become a benchmark for the region. (Tours and tastings by appointment. tenutasantantonio.it)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Due Torri Hotel offers luxe accommodations in a 14th-century setting; hand-cut pasta at Enoteca Della Valpolicella; chef-owner Marco Dandrea of Trattoria Al Pompiere.



WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

TRATTORIA AL POMPIERE

A do-not-miss when in Verona, Al Pompiere is overrun during the annual Vinitaly expo in April, but reservations can be had at other times if you plan ahead. Expect exquisitely prepared traditional Veronese cuisine—sage risotto with roasted quail, for example—and a brilliantly curated salumi selection, plus a more-than-lengthy-enough wine list. (alpompieri.com)

ENOTECA DELLA VALPOLICELLA

Owners Carlotta Marchesini and Ada Riolfi concentrate on ultra-local ingredients in this beautifully converted farmhouse from the 1400s in Fumane, about 30 minutes northwest of Verona. Standout dishes include risotto with local aromatic herbs and duck breast with a honey-wine sauce. The vast wine list offers over 800 selections. (enotecadellavalpolicella.it)

RISTORANTE ENOTECA BACCO D'ORO

Located in Mezzane di Sotto, east of Verona, Bacco d'Oro is the sort of place you stumble upon, open the wine list, and say, "Whoa—how did I not know about this place?" Check out the wine cellar, an Aladdin's cave of older vintages, then settle in for deftly done traditional dishes, such as Vicenza-style cod with polenta. (ristorantebaccodoro.com)

WHERE TO STAY

The simplest approach to touring the Valpolicella region is to stay in Verona itself since the vineyard areas extend both east and west of the city. The **Due Torri Hotel**, part of the Leading Hotels of the World group, is an inarguable choice. Located in the heart of the city, it offers easy access to the surrounding countryside. The beautiful 14th-century building, with windows overlooking the Piazza Sant'Anastasia, incorporates elements from different eras of ownership—make sure to check out the gorgeous circus-life frescoes downstairs by artist Pino Casarini, as well as a terrace with panoramic views of Verona's towers while you relax with a spritz or a glass of local Soave at the end of the day. (Rooms from \$230; lhw.com)