THE RISE OF RIPASSO

Valpolicella's Ripasso has enjoyed runaway success in the Scandinavian markets, finds Michèle Shah. But as with all successful products, strong competition has appeared.

Over the past decade, Valpolicella Ripasso has become one of the top-selling wine styles in Scandinavia. Today, however, its traditional producers are facing increasing competition from their own neighbours, as well as from makers of similar, more keenly-priced styles produced elsewhere in Italy.

A wine style rises

According to Italian wine law, Ripasso is a red wine from the Valpolicella zone located north of Verona in the Veneto region of Italy, and made from the local Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara varieties. Unlike most other Italian wines, the official name refers to the appassimento way the wine is produced: the process whereby the lighter Valpolicella wine is 'repassed' over the pomace of leftover grape skins and seeds from the fermentation of fuller-bodied Amarone and sweeter Recioto Valpolicellas.

Both of these wines are made with grapes that have been laid out on bamboo racks in drying lofts for the winter period before vinification and then aged in wooden casks for at least two years prior to release. The use of partially dried grapes and the longer ageing process results in wines that are more alcoholic – usually 15% to 16% alcohol by volume – full-bodied and highly structured.

The second fermentation induced by adding their pomace increases the alcoholic strength, while the tannins, glycerine and phenolic compounds contribute to its complexity, flavour and colour, all of which contributes to making Ripasso wines extremely appealing to northern markets such as Scandinavia. While the process of making wine from dried and semi-dried grapes is at least 2,000 years old, Ripasso is a surprisingly modern concept. Its use was first noted on labelled wines in around 1968, and was officially recognised when the DOC Ripasso della Valpolicella was created in 2010. The first Valpolicella producer to commercially market a Ripasso wine was Masi, which launched its Campofiorin in the early 1980s.

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The Swedes have been enjoying the style since the introduction of Campofiorin Ripasso to their market in 1994. According to Jonas Röjerman, head of product quality control of Sweden's Systembolaget, it "became popular very quickly. Since the term Ripasso at that time was Masi's registered brand, it took some years before more Ripassos were introduced. The general opinion is very positive, and the style has high consumer awareness."

The Ripasso style has been similarly well received in other Scandinavian markets. Alko Inc, the Finnish monopoly, now has 14 examples listed in its current selection, selling some 514,700 bottles over the last year. According to Anu Hedman, Alko's wine product manager, this signifies a 12% increase over 2014. "Classical Valpolicella wines such as Ripasso and Amarone have been listed in our portfolio since 1990," says Hedman. "However, they took off in a big way from 2012. Though placed in the premium price range the taste profile suits the Finnish wine consumer's palate and the names Ripasso and Amarone are easy for the Finish consumers to remember."

There are complications, however. "According to the present regulations it is possible to produce six different appellations of Valpolicella Ripasso. This in itself is highly confusing," says Marilisa Allegrini, co-owner of Allegrini, one of the oldest and most respected Valpolicella wineries. So consumers are confronted with labels including Valpolicella Ripasso Superiore, Ripasso Valpolicella Classico Superiore, Valpolicella Valpantena Ripasso and Zenato's Valpolicella Superiore Ripassa.

Apart from the small matter of confusing nomenclature, all is not well in the state of traditional premium Ripasso della Valpolicella. Some producers, most notably Masi, creators of the pioneering Campofiorin, have become disillusioned with the traditional way of producing the style. They believe that the use of the pomace gave the wine an undesirable bitter character, so moved to a process of 'double fermentation' which involves the addition of dried grapes (rather than partially fermented skins and solids) for six weeks to start a second fermentation. This process is not recognised by the regulations governing Ripasso production. The solution for Masi was the same as the one chosen by Tuscans faced with unhelpful rules in the 1970s: to leave the appellation system. Campofiorin, like Allegrini's Palazzo Della Torre and several other well-regarded double-fermented wines is now a Rosso del Veronese IGT.

Allegrini points out that recent decisions taken after the 2015 harvest have further reduced the potential quality of the category by allowing wines to be certified as Ripasso just 20 days after pressing and adding the partially dried Amarone and Recioto skins. In her view, this brief period does not allow the must sufficient time to properly undergo a second fermentation.

Allegrini believes that the legislation has been devised to allow producers to meet growing market demands by releasing their wine more quickly, before it has matured. This in turn, she suggests, damages the image of Ripasso. "The result is that wines from Valpolicella have become a commodity, contrary to the philosophy of the 12 members of the Famiglie dell'Amarone – Amarone Families – who have worked hard to build a prestigious image and preserve terroir identity," says Allegrini.

RIPASSO STYLES:

Ripasso (Valpolicella Classico)
Ripasso (Valpolicella Classico Superiore)
Ripasso (Valpolicella)
Ripasso (Valpolicella Superiore)
Ripasso (Valpolicella Valpantena)
Ripasso (Valpolicella Valpantena Superiore)

Another view

Daniele Accordini, director of Cantina Negrar, one of the larger cooperatives in Valpolicella, and a beneficiary of the new rules, not surprisingly disagrees. With 230 producers, 730 ha of vines, and exports of 2.5m bottles, his business represents 30% of Valpolicella production. No less than 80% of Cantina Valpolicella Negrar wine is now classified as Ripasso. Accordini defends the legislation, saying that it allows greater flexibility. As for quality, he says, all Ripasso has to undergo a chemical analysis and tasting by a panel before being released on to the market.

The commercially positive aspect of the shift in perception of Ripasso from premium positioning to that of a more approachable wine is acknowledged by Sebastian Braun, wine buyer for Systembolaget. "Many of our consumers appreciate the Amarone/Ripasso style," he says, adding he believes it's because consumers feel they're getting value for money, because they "receive a big wine with high concentration of fruit and alcohol. I also believe that the unique production of the wine adds an important story and a selling point. Ripasso benefitted from the popularity of Amarone and, with the former wine's lower price, was perceived as being sort of a baby-Amarone. It became more commercial: an everyday wine."

For Andrea Sartori, CEO of Casa Vinicola Sartori, however, "It is not always right to follow market trends. One should also export culture and the tradition of a terroir, something that we strive to preserve." Ripasso, he says, needs to change its image and be presented as a 'great' Valpolicella.

Despite the success of his Cantina Valpolicella Negrar Ripassos, Accordini recognises the challenges confronted by his region's wines, and proposes that producers in the denomination sit down to seriously discuss its future. "In order to make more Ripasso we need to make more Amarone, which risks bringing down the price of Amarone to sustain the market's increasing demand for Ripasso," says Accordini. "The success of a 'great' denomination depends on its long term commercial success, but in order to reach a lasting stability we need to be aware of the risks and act in time. For this there needs to be agreement among all producers, large, historic, and small wineries."

While Ripasso producers discuss the positive and negative aspects of popularising their wine, they agree that they all are faced with a threat in the shape of the growing trend of similar appassimento wines from outside the Valpolicella denomination. "Since 2011 appassimento wines from Veneto have been seen as a cheaper alternative to Ripasso," says Braun of Systembolaget. But anything the Veneto can do can also be done elsewhere. Of 8m litres of Ripasso-style wine sold by the Swedish monopoly, only half comes from the Veneto. The remainder from other regions such as Puglia, in particular, and sold as Vino da Tavola, Appassimento or under invented names like 'Apparone' or 'Amapasso'.

According to Braun, some of the brands whose Ripasso sells at higher price points are losing sales. In financial terms, 2015 certainly brought a clear warning to the premium producers. After watching sales grow from 1.3m litres and 170m SEK ($20m) in 2010 to 2.6m litres and 340m SEK in 2014, the monopoly registered a fall in sales in 2015, for the first time in 20 years, with a drop of 10% in both volume and value.

Elsewhere in Scandinavia, the story is similar. Cheaper alternatives are hard to ignore in Norway, where the image of Amarone and Ripasso are beginning to weaken. Some of the southern Italian appassimentos owe their success to their sweeter style of wines such as Carlo Botter's market-leading Puglian Doppio Passo. This wine has not only led the way for other southern Italian appassimentos, but also driven Tuscany to launch its own Governo as a competing style in this sector.

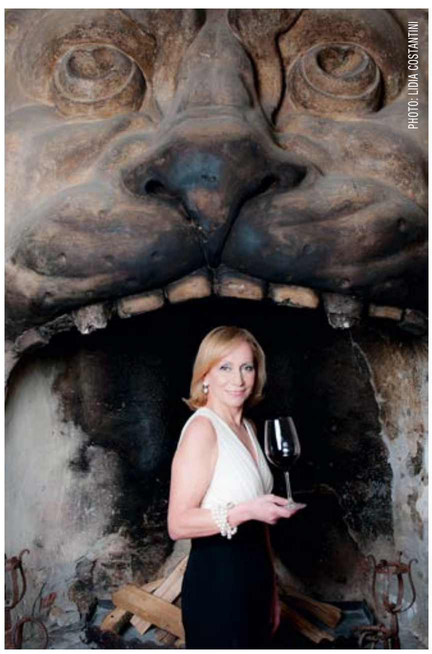
PHOTO: LIDIA COSTANTINI

Marilisa Allegrini, Allegrini

"Our biggest selling Ripasso is Pasqua's Cecilia Beretta," says Torgeir Rosvoll, brand manager of Norwegian distributor Strøm AS. "We have a basic listing for this at the monopoly and sell 15,000 litres per year, with a continuous growth in the market." This figure is, however, dwarfed by the over 1m litres of Tommasi Graticcio Appassionato sold by the monopoly. According to Rosvoll, the growth of Veneto wines over the past 15 years has helped appassimento wines to become the biggest-selling wines at the monopoly. Revealingly – and annoyingly, to those who support regional denominations – Tommasi Graticcio Appassionato is sold without any geographical indication, only that of 'Italy'.

The absence of a state monopoly in Denmark has left it more open to a wide range of imported wines than its neighbours. Jacob Jensen, director of product development at Philipson Wine, sees Ripasso pleasing consumers who do not drink wine often, because of its relatively sweet taste. "When it comes to knowledgeable wine consumers, Ripasso sales are beginning to peak."

Jasper Mohr Holm, product manager of Irma A/S in Denmark, agrees that while Ripasso will continue to have a market presence, Ripasso has already peaked, and will continue to decline given the steady price (and tax) increases of recent years. Around a third of Irma's turnover is Ripasso and Rosso Veronese. "It seems that the Danish taste veers towards power, spiciness and sweetness, and Irma is looking carefully at what will be the next megatrend."

Andrea Sartori sees potential for Ripasso in other markets such as the US and Asia, where it is less well known. He, and his fellow premium producers know, however, that building and maintaining a market share in those countries will be much tougher than it was in Scandinavia. Wherever the Ripasso makers go now, their competitors won't be far behind.