OVERVIEW

Just outside the city of Verona, to the north and west, is the district of Valpolicella. This area is not a single river valley as the name might suggest, but rather a series of long hills and ravines coming south out of the Lessini Mountains. Valpolicella is Veneto's preeminent red-wine area. It has four distinct denominations that cover the same vineyards and have the same requirements for grape varieties, but make different styles of wine.

The senior partner in the grape recipe is Corvina, which in theory must comprise no less than 45% of the Valpolicella blend in theory because a portion of that can be replaced by Corvinone, an unrelated grape variety that has long been interplanted in the Corvina vineyards. The other required grape in the blend is Rondinella, which can make up between 5% and 30% of the total. Most Valpolicella wines also contain at least a small portion of other red varieties of the area such as Molinara, Negrara, or Oseleta. For the less traditional, some Cabernet Sauvignon can be added, too.

The basic denomination of the area is Valpolicella DOC, which is a standard dry red wine made from the required blend. It has no particular aging requirements, unless it's labeled Superiore, which needs a year of aging.

The star of Valpolicella is Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG, which is widely considered one of Italy's best wines. Amarone is not the name of a grape variety the wine has the same blend as the others but means big bitter one, referring to the wine's high alcohol level and lack of sweetness. For Amarone, the harvested grapes are placed in drying rooms in the vineyards or at the winery, where for up to 4 months the grapes stay to shrivel into raisins. This process removes a lot of the grapes' water content but none of the solids, so their juice is much higher in sugar content than normal. After fermentation converts all this sugar to alcohol, the alcohol level in the finished wine can easy hit 16% or more. The wine will then age for a minimum of 2 years, or 4 years for a riserva, making for a blockbuster of a wine.

The style of Valpolicella Ripasso DOC falls in between normal Valpolicella and Amarone. It is not exactly a different wine, but a different process. In the winery, when the Amarone finishes fermentation and is pressed, the little raisins are not quite used up yet they still contain some sugar locked

inside them. If fresh Valpolicella wine is poured into the tank immediately repassed, if you will the fermentation will continue a while longer with this remaining sugar. The resulting wine, Valpolicella Ripasso, will be a little higher in alcohol and will have additional complexity from the Amarone grapes, compared to the original Valpolicella wine. With a lower price tag than Amarone, many people find this a great compromise, and Ripasso is actually the highest-volume category of the four Valpolicella denominations. Ripasso must age for 1 year before release.

The fourth Valpolicella denomination is Recioto della Valpolicella DOCG, which was the area's most prized wine back when sweet wines were more in vogue. Recioto is made the same way Amarone is, except that the fermentation is stopped while the wine still has a fair amount of sugar left. In fact, Amarone was first made by mistake when Recioto was allowed to ferment longer than intended. Recioto is a red sweet tannic dessert wine, but it is not low in alcohol, having at least 12% alcohol by volume.

The Valpolicella area has two subzones, which apply to each of the four denominations. The one you're most likely to see is the Classico subzone, covering the five western hills and intervening valleys of the denomination where Valpolicella has been made for centuries. The other subzone is Valpantena, which takes in one valley in the middle of the denomination. The area on the eastern side, farther from the influence of Lake Garda, is more newly developed and has a reputation for innovating on the traditional Valpolicella theme.