

# PORTOVINO

## IL SASSO VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO

From Verona, walk up Negrar's valley until you reach a 'Rock' of Limestone – this is Il Sasso (sasso is 'rock' in Italian). It's here that the grape varieties Corvina, Corvinone, and Rondinella grow deep into the terraced limestone in search of water. Soon enough, the interaction of roots, water and limestone<sup>1</sup> soils will bring a palpable tension to the bottled wines. And, as we'll see below, Il Sasso's young owner Stefano Bellamoli focuses on preserving this tension. He tracks and knows the terracing here (soil, sun exposition, water retention, grape variety) like the back of his hand, because he has it in his notebook; he eschews wood (and its spice) in favour of unlined cement diamonds and ceramic eggs. All of this is done with the backdrop of an exacting viticulture that also happens to be certified organic. This is Valpolicella for minimalists.

### Valpolicella Classico: Red Cinnabar Sunrise

Il Sasso has three wines, with the Valpolicella Classico being the epitome of the house style, a case study of minimalism. Its color - a translucent red cinnabar - entrances. So too does its essential and subtle feel at 11.50% alcohol, 5.30 g/l total acidity, and 23mg/l SO<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>. The tricky part here is not drinking it too quickly.

It's worth remembering that most producers start with Amarone as the epitome of their house style, and work backwards, with their other wines being lesser shadows of that dark, ripe-cherries-under-alcohol style. In fact, their bottling of Valpolicella Classico is most often an afterthought, as they use the leftover less desirable grapes. Stefano inverts this process, and aesthetic:

*For years, I vinified the [Valpolicella] Classico bottling to better understand the tension obtained by the limestone terraces. No wood, no forced extract, and some use of the whole clusters, which is never seen in Valpolicella. What I tasted in the tanks confused and scared me as much as it excited me.*

*The Valpolicella wines I had been tasting in the area didn't have this translucent color, floral aromatics, and high-acid tension. Some old-time*



<sup>1</sup> These are the 2021 vintage lab results.

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*cellar masters and agronomists who were helping me said the wines tasted like something made a generation ago. That was strangely encouraging.*

He further details some of the process for his 'Classico':

*"It's hand-harvested and collected in small crates to avoid any pre-crushing and fermentation. We pick the younger vineyards and then pick early those vines more exposed to the sun. We do not control the fermentation with sulphites or enhancers. We start with a pied de cuvee and the natural yeasts in our grapes do the rest. This is a coferment of all the varieties, with a little more Rondinella for freshness. This wine is our first fermentation of the year, with grapes that have moderate quantities of sugar, partial destemming and light crushing. Fermentation proceeds to complete dry and then we quickly separate the must. We then proceed to a quick soft pressing - part of the freshness you'll find here. The wine is then fined in steel tanks during the winter and then bottled in spring. No filtration, no blends, no chemicals, only minimum sulphites added.*

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**REGION:** Veneto **GROWING AREA:** Valpolicella Classico

**FARMING:** certified organic (ICEA # E1967)

**VINEYARD ALTITUDE:** 300 m / 980 ft

**SOILS:** yellow limestone, rich in seashell fossils

**VARIETIES:** 45% Corvina, 30% Corvinone, 25% Rondinella

**VINE AGE:** 7 years old **VINE TRAINING:** guyot

**HARVEST DATE:** beginning of September

**YEASTS:** native (spontaneous fermentation) **FERMENTATION & ÉLEVAGE:** during fermentation no sulphites are added; the grapes are used to start a *pied de cuvee* and the natural yeasts in the grapes do the rest. The 20% of the grapes ferments with whole cluster and the rest is destemmed. Co-fermentation happens in steel tanks under 25°C and proceeds to complete dry in about 7 - 10 days and then quickly separation of the must and very soft pressing. Élevage in stainless steel tanks during the winter and then bottled in spring. No filtration and gravity natural decant

**SULPHUR:** 35 mg/L total SO2 added at bottling **ALCOHOL:** 12% **ANNUAL PRODUCTION:** 750 cases