

# An interview with Romano Dal Forno, a famous Amarone producer

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The keyword here is perfection. A constant strive for absolute perfection. Just like his winery, a sort of Sagrada Familia located in the Illasi Valley of the Valpolicella zone. We are talking about Romano Dal Forno da Lodoletta, a 56-year-old vintner with a burning dream: to bottle a perfect wine, one that could outlive him, and to make sure that when his sons Luca (enologist), Michele (sales manager) and Marco (expert in agriculture) taste someday his Valpolicella Superiore or his Amarone, they will enjoy the best Valpolicella or Amarone possible.

We will not tell here about how the Dal Forno story began, when the young Romano was struck at Giuseppe Quintarelli's vine, about his experiments, his failures, and the years he spent at the local Agricultural High School. We will start from a date considered as a divide, February 1990, when the idea of an imposing cellar was conceived and the foundation stone was laid, a construction site which is still a work in progress.

That year Romano imagined a project that would cost about 300 million Italian Lire € corresponding to approx. \$ 213k – that sharply increased to £1.3 billion, something crazy for a small business which had just released its first bottles and whose turnover at that time was close to £70 million a year (approx.

\$ 50,000). Crazy for a family like the Dal Forno, who had never incurred debts before. "I must admit I spent more than one sleepless night for fear of failing or of letting my father down" says Romano, " and my wife Loretta too".

In 1995 Dal Forno made an attempt to play as international trader and converted his cellar's debt into yen, buying the Japanese currency at 14.60. After rising to 21.50 a speculation that put his nerves to the test when it became time to repay the loan the yen had dropped to 11, and the whole family sighed with relief. Sales were successful from the very beginning, Dal Forno being probably the only winery in Italy and one among the few in the world to sell upon advanced payment abroad and by cash on delivery in Italy. They did not even know what a past-due account was, and in 1997 Romano drank a toast to the balance of all his bank-loans with a magnum bottle of Amarone.

To Romano, this was not a dream come true, but the first step of a long term project. In 2001 they started building the second part of the winery, moving from one bank to another trying to get money. The budget plan was 2.7 billion Lire, but once again the estimate turned out to be much lower than the actual costs.

This was however just another step along the path to perfection, that Dal Forno aims to hand on to his sons. And perfection also means choosing the best marbles of 30cm thickness – medieval-castle-style hardwood doors, cutting-edge technology, extreme grape-growing process, and an accurate cleaning everywhere in the cellar. Since the beginning, the tanks have been changed three times, from concrete to standard steel in 1998 and then to new generation steel tanks suitable to work under pressure, in 2008. Nothing can be left to chance, if the mission is eternity.

"Even if we use dried grapes, we are obsessed with preserving the grape properties, that's why we always aim to prevent any oxidation (carbon dioxide and nitrogen), allowing the wine to last longer.", explains Dal Forno. "The entire process is

under control, until the wine is stored in the barriques, where we add carbon dioxide when topping up”.

The grape-drying chamber is another example of advanced technology: grapes are laid to dry in fan-cooled automatized crates. If the humidity is too low, the fans automatically turn off and viceversa. The windows also open and close automatically depending on preset parameters.

The final result is amazing: 50 thousand bottles of Valpolicella Superiore and Amarone, able to offer unforgettable moments with their intensity and complexity.

Romano Dal Forno's wines share a unique trademark: they all tend to drink well for many years after the harvest, maintaining their flavors, freshness and hints of fruits as no other wine can do.

During outstanding vintages, six out of thirty so far, Romano also produces a small amount of another wine, the Recioto. Even though the market doesn't seem to appreciate its value yet, he has never given up and still believes in the ancient appeal of this wine, considered as the forefather of Amarone.

At the end of the production process, the wine is aged in barrique for three years and in the bottle for a further three years (hence why the 2007 vintage was just released). Many bottles are however kept in the cellar for further development, the reason why Dal Forno decided to organize his cellar on three levels, with different depths from south to north, trying to maintain a constant temperature everywhere.

This huge effort contributed to spread Dal Forno's brand worldwide, leading his products to be among the few Italian wines at Christie's international auction house, and allowing him to overcome the crisis. Despite not taking part to any national or international exhibitions, the turnover of the winery has indeed never decreased. “We expressly decided not to expand our business abroad, only because my sons were not fond of flying nor traveling around the world. Marco, the youngest, is now studying English and will probably visit some

of our partners abroad soon, to endorse their work. Before the crisis we actually used to sell 55% of our products in Italy, whereas now 85% goes overseas. From the very beginning we decided to raise our sons in the estate, surrounded by the vineyards. Since they were children, they have spent some summer nights sleeping on air beds outside by the vines”.

The leading market is still the US ☺ where Romano has been just twice during his life ☺ but East Asia is also growing. “The Chinese are odd people”, says Romano smiling, “we received the first visit from them in 2010; some will work with us regularly over long periods of time, while others will just place large one-time orders, which is undoubtedly a peculiar way to interpret the market”.

Asking a father who is his favorite son is always a sensitive question, but Dal Forno answered, after a brief pause, with a resolute tone: “The 2002 vintage gave an excellent Valpolicella (the first one produced 100% through the process called appassimento, a typical way to dry the grapes) , 2004 a crisp fruit of a persistent roundness, 2011 will astonish all of us, but the real gem will be the 2013 vintage. I haven’t had this feeling in a long time”.