

Prosecco Growers Act to Guard Its Pedigree



Hillside vines up to a century old in Valdobbiadene, Italy, are sources of prosecco superiore.

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PROSECCO came down from the hills of Treviso after World War II, making a name for itself in the chic cafes of Venice, and later around the world, as a fresh, simple and appealing sparkling wine. But lately it's become a lot less simple. Two years ago, a new area for prosecco production was created in the flat valley extending into the Friuli region, and this has encouraged winemakers in the original zone to set their wines apart from the new ones.

In the new area, which encompasses nine provinces, most vineyards are large and their permitted yields high, and the vines can be mechanically harvested, all of which facilitates more-generic, lower-priced wine. Here in the original zone, amid the steep conical hills between the towns of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene in the province Treviso, most of the tiny plots carved out of the twisted earth centuries ago continue to be worked by hand by independent farmers. This area, now called prosecco superiore and designated a Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (D.O.C.G.), the highest level in Italian wine, is a complex mosaic of microclimates. Many winemakers are trying to showcase these distinctions, with noteworthy results.

While most prosecco is nonvintage, enabling producers to blend wine from the previous year, more and more superiore wineries are making a millesimato, in which all the grapes must be from one vintage. Moreover, a new system called rive indicates vintage-dated proseccos made entirely of grapes from a single town or hamlet.

"Every hillside — or rive, as we say in dialect — has a name, and each offers small particularities in pedoclimatic conditions," said Franco Adami, winemaker and former president of the consortium of producers that is responsible for creating and administering the D.O.C.G. regulations. "The Rive Farra di Soligo is different from the Rive di San Martino, which is different from the Rive di Ogliano. This specialization of micro-zones, as exemplified by the rive system, was something I was committed to bringing to this region."

Many of the winemakers are specializing even further by producing a wine from a single vineyard. An excellent example is the Brut Prosecco Particella 68, made by Sorelle Bronca from a tiny parcel in the Rive di Colbertaldo. It has a subtle yeasty aroma of roasted peaches and dried flower petals, with a long, refreshingly acidic finish.

Winemaking itself is changing in the region. Prosecco is generally made using Charmat (also known as the Italian method), whereby wine, following its primary fermentation in stainless steel, undergoes a second fermentation in large pressurized tanks called autoclaves to make it sparkling. This practice was developed in the late 1800s at the Scuola Enologica in Conegliano, Italy's oldest wine school, and local producers have an almost paternal affection for it. But there is nothing that says prosecco must be made this way.

A growing number of winemakers are experimenting with classic method refermentation in the bottle. Usually, sugar is added along with the yeast to induce the second fermentation, but some, like Bellenda in the S.C. 1931, are making a bottle-fermented pas dosè (without added sugar), creating a wine that is drier, yeastier and more complex than most proseccos.

There is nothing that says a prosecco must be bubbly, either. Though uncommon, nonsparkling prosecco is an intriguing wine that retains the inimitable character of the glera grape, as the prosecco grape is now called, and the unique terroir it comes from. Adami, for example, makes a beautifully aromatic prosecco tranquillo in which the absence of bubbles seems to make the particularities of site and grape stand out even more.

Prosecco is made predominantly from glera, but the regulations permit up to 15 percent of other approved grape varieties to be used. Cuvée del Fondatore by Valdo, one of the oldest wineries in the region, is made with 10 percent [chardonnay](#) matured in small oak barrels for six months, blended with 90 percent glera. The wine is then slowly refermented in autoclaves for one year, resulting in an unusually sophisticated prosecco that seems more mature than it is.

While some winemakers are exploring new techniques, others are looking to the past. One promising example of this is sur lie, which is how prosecco was made before the advent of the autoclave. After the wine is bottled, a small amount of yeast is added and refermentation occurs. But, unlike the classic method, here the sediment remains in the bottle.

This makes for a slightly cloudy, fizzy wine that combines a distinctly rustic quality with straightforward elegance and restraint, like the Sottoriva Sur Lie of Malibrán, which has the aroma of rising bread dough and a lean, almost metallic attack with prickly bubbles, followed by tart crabapple and a bone-dry finish.

Another taste of the past comes from Paolo Bisol of Ruggeri winery. “I was fascinated by the old vines — 80, 90, 100 years old or more — scattered throughout Valdobbiadene with their thick contorted trunks and roots that go way, way down into the earth,” said Mr. Bisol. “They give a prosecco that is more robust, more profound and a bit more mineral than a regular one.”

Indeed, Ruggeri’s Vecchie Viti prosecco made from ancient glera, verdiso, bianchetta and perera vines is an extraordinarily subtle though lively, elegant and unique wine, of which less than 5,000 bottles are made annually.

While the existence of two prosecco appellations is bound to create some confusion, the much stricter D.O.C.G. regulations will limit yields and ensure that the grapes actually come from the hilly area, while the need to distinguish prosecco superiore from the regular one will encourage producers to excel.

Still, results remain to be seen.

“We can make regulations,” said Franco Adami, the former president of the producers’ consortium, “but we can’t regulate the market. People must be able to taste the difference. The qualitative value of these changes is up to consumers to decide.”

Taste for Yourself

Here are new and noteworthy proseccos from D.O.C.G. producers available in the United States.

ADAMI *Valdobbiadene Prosecco Tranquillo Giardino*; imported by Dalla Terra Winery Direct and Martin Scott; \$16. A great example of the little-known still version of prosecco. Aromatic and medium-bodied with tropical fruit flavors.

MALIBRÁN *Valdobbiadene Frizzante Sottoriva 2009*; the Admiralty Beverage Company and George Wines; \$18. Bottle-fermented in the traditional sur lie manner. A bit cloudy with an almost prickly fizziness and crisp sour-bitter flavors. Rustic yet elegant.

PERLAGE *Valdobbiadene Spumante Extra-Dry Rive di Ogliano Col di Manza 2010*; Chatrand Imports; \$18. From one of the new rive designations; some residual sugar is balanced by mouth-puckering green apple and nice mineral finish. Biodynamic.

RUGGERI *Valdobbiadene Spumante Brut Vecchie Viti 2010*; Villa Italia; \$39. It’s 90 percent glera, with verdiso, bianchetta and perera grapes from 80- to 100-year-old vines.

SORELLE BRONCA *Valdobbiadene Spumante Brut Particella 68*; Polaner Selections and Oliver McCrum Wines; \$20.

From a parcel in the Rive di Colbertaldo, using no added sugar and minimal sulfur.