

The steep hills of Conegliano Valdobbiadene.



Prosecco

LIFESTYLE BUBBLES OR A SERIOUS TERROIR-DRIVEN SPARKLING WINE?

Prosecco is arguably the most popular sparkling wine in the world right now. It has become synonymous with everyday luxury and the symbol of a glamorous lifestyle that has morphed into an international brand and therefore partially lost its identity. It begs the question: how much do consumers know about the different kinds of Prosecco? What strategies are Conegliano Valdobbiadene producers using to promote Prosecco Superiore and its terroir?

By Irene Graziotto

Photo credit: Irene Graziotto, Arcangelo Piai, photo courtesy of the Consorzio Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco

“**M**ake mine a glass of Prosecco”. How many times have you heard that sentence? But does the consumer really know what he/she is asking for? In actual fact, Prosecco has become a style of wine – fragrant bubbles, easy to drink, cheap – that has partially lost its identity as an agricultural product from a specific region in Italy.

THE PROSECCO WONDER: WHERE DID IT ALL START?

Prosecco has been produced in the hills of Northern Italy since the 19th century: in Conegliano, Valdobbiadene, Asolo and the small village of Prosecco in Friuli, after which it was named. Its boom in popularity at the beginning of the 21st century, caused Prosecco production to expand southwards. Nowadays, production, which is authorised in Veneto and Friuli, amounts to 80 million bottles of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Docg, 7 million bottles of Asolo Prosecco Superiore Docg and 400 million bottles of Prosecco Doc. The first two are produced in the hilly areas, the latter on the flatlands. A Prosecco-style wine has emerged in Australia where Glera, the grape variety Prosecco is made from, was imported by Italian immigrants; in New Zealand and Brazil it is a registered trademark. In addition to these challenges, which fall outside EU regulations, the three different consortia – Consorzio di Tutela del Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Docg, Consorzio Vini Asolo Montello and Consorzio di Tutela del Prosecco Doc – have to fight against thousands of Prosecco-sounding versions, produced by small bottlers but also well organized firms, including UK supermarket chain Asda which recently launched Progrigio sparkling wine.

THE KEY ROLE OF THE UNESCO CANDIDACY IN PROMOTION

Safeguarding Prosecco goes hand in hand with communication, promotion and knowledge of the area. This is why awarding the wine region of Conegliano Valdobbiadene UNESCO status would mark a turning point, believes Domenico Scimone, marketing director at Carpenè Malvolti. The brand, one of the oldest and best-known, played a crucial role in founding the Conegliano Wine Institute “Cerletti” – the first to be created in



Toasting with Valdo Prosecco Superiore.



Conegliano Historic Centre - The Dome.



Giancarlo Moretti Polegato, president of Villa Sandi.

Italy – that would shape local viticulture for years to come. “We are moving towards wine-driven tourism” stresses Elisabetta Bernardi, in charge of export sales at Andreola, a family estate established over 30 years ago, enthusiastically. “With Venice just an hour away by car, many English-speaking tourists and German visitors come over for a visit” confirms Mauro Bonetti, global marketing manager at the popular Valdo Spumanti, “but entering UNESCO’s list will definitely boost their numbers”.

CONEGLIANO VALDOBBIADENE: THE HILLS OF PROSECCO

Whilst the landscape is breathtaking, viticulture is all but easy. “The thing that impresses visitors most – and we have at least 20,000 a year – is the steepness of our hills” reveals Giancarlo Moretti Polegato, president of Villa Sandi, one of Prosecco’s main brands. “Coming here really gives wine lovers an idea of what is hidden behind the name Prosecco Superiore. This is why we also invite our buyers”.

Altitude and constant breezes create important diurnal temperature ranges, therefore contributing to the



Ernesto Balbinot and his family during the charity harvest.

polyphenolic richness of the grapes and the ultimate aromatic complexity of the wines. The name Superiore helps convey this idea of distinctive hillside viticulture.

HOW MUCH DO CONSUMERS ABROAD KNOW ABOUT PROSECCO DOCG?

Exports play a key role in Prosecco sales, with about 40% of production sold abroad. The main markets are Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom – with the latter rising sharply in recent years – along with the United States, Canada and Austria. Abroad, the distinction between Docg and Doc is not sufficiently perceived yet and although in Europe consumers generally have more extensive knowledge thanks to long-term familiarity, in emerging markets they are not even aware there is a difference.

The situation in the US varies significantly depending on both the state and city: “In New York City,” says Ernesto Balbinot, owner of Le Manzane, a very proactive brand in San Pietro di Feletto, “consumers are well aware of the name”.

This is also true in California and New Jersey according to Elvira Bortolomiol, marketing director at Bortolomiol,



From left, Fabio and Filippo Zardetto of Zardetto Winery.

a brand with centuries-old experience of making wine, whereas Elisabetta Bernardi claims knowledgeable audiences can also be found in Austria, Japan, the UK and Switzerland.

EXPORT: THE MOST EFFECTIVE TERMINOLOGY

"The word Superiore works really well for communication abroad," believes Filippo Zardetto, who has been the US Export Manager for his family estate Zardetto for over ten years. "Conegliano Valdobbiadene is difficult to pronounce for foreigners, let alone be remembered; in ten years in the US I never found anyone who could pronounce it correctly. The only time it did happen was when I spent two whole days with my Colorado importer before she managed to properly pronounce Conegliano. Docg does not work either. As an Italian abbreviation, Docg does not have any clear meaning while Superiore reminds customers of the similar French word – we have to remember French arrived first in the wine market – thus conveying quality and a sense of familiarity at the same time. Superiore allows us and the consumer to speak a shared language". "Even if Superiore is difficult for Asian people to pronounce, they manage to remember it" confirms Domenico Scimone, who trades with 65 different markets.

Umberto Marchiori of Marchiori Wines points out how using different names for the label – production rules authorise use of "Conegliano Valdobbiadene - Prosecco", "Conegliano - Prosecco" or "Valdobbiadene - Prosecco" – creates confusion for consumers and should be rationalised.

EXPORT: WINNING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The values that Prosecco Superiore producers associate their wines with are history and tradition, along with hillside viticulture. "Photographs of vineyards are essential for showing consumers how steep the vineyards are and, consequently, enable them to understand how difficult it is to produce Prosecco here" claims Elvira Bortolomiol. Many wineries have their logo shaped like a hill or vineyard - Bianca Vigna, Coesel, Marchiori and Gregoletto, whose owner, 89-year-old Luigi Gregoletto was chosen as Best Winemaker of The Year by FIVI, the



The breathtaking landscape.



The Bortolomiol sisters of Bortolomiol winery.

Italian Association of Independent Wine Makers, for his commitment to quality regional wine. No wonder then that the latest institutional campaign shows a glass of Prosecco Superiore emerging from steep misty hills covered with vineyards. Small is beautiful (and flavourful) is the message they are aiming to convey. The quality pyramid, provided by the Consorzio (see Page “Contact details”), visually represents this concept and it is widely used by producers. Sara Marchiori, Umberto Marchiori’s sister, underlines how social media, especially Instagram with its visual approach, are crucial allies. Attention to terroir has led wine makers to adopt a sustainable approach, with many of them converting to organic farming or developing biodiversity projects such as Marchiori’s work on native grape varieties once widely used for Prosecco production: Perera, Bianchetta, Verdiso, Glera Tonda and Glera Lunga.

PROSECCO DOCG VS. PROSECCO DOC: DIFFERENT DRINKING OCCASIONS

Prosecco Doc is served mainly by the glass during happy hours or used for making cocktails, thus confirming what Filippo Zardetto has noticed so far: that when speaking



Sara Marchiori of Marchiori Winery.

of Prosecco Doc, consumers do not really consider it as a proper wine but more an “industrial” product. “It is only when we speak of Prosecco Docg that they start asking the kind of questions you would usually ask about a wine, such as region of origin, aspect or yield”.

Prosecco Superiore is served instead with meals. “Whereas in the past it was served mainly with appetizers, nowadays it is also paired with main courses” comments Mauro Bonetti.

Pairing with food is thus fundamental, which is why Giancarlo Moretti Polegato has opened a restaurant, Locanda Sandi, next to his winery. If local food and wine is a winning combination, considering how much Italian cuisine is enjoyed around the world, it is also important to explore other culinary traditions. Asian markets are slowly opening up: export managers notice increased interest in Prosecco Superiore, especially at trade fairs such as the Hong Kong International Wine & Spirits Fair. Food pairing might prove to be a helpful tool.

RIVE: CRU PRODUCTION

The aromatic richness of grapes growing on hills is so powerful that it has been given proper recognition. Although Cartizze - the Docg’s 106-hectare hillside sub-region created in 1969 - is better known, in 2009 the Consorzio introduced 43 Rive.

The name Riva, which means “sloped vineyard”, can be used only for cru wines and slopes that have been dedicated to wine growing for a long time. It implies lower yields (13 tons per hectare, whereas the limit for Cartizze is 12), manual harvesting and vintage indication on the label. “The opportunity to compare Rive to a cru makes it much easier for consumers to understand” maintains Filippo Zardetto but “it took a while before positioning Rive, partly because of its price point halfway between a Cartizze and a Prosecco Superiore” says Ernesto Balbinot.

Rive regulations are currently undergoing changes and by the autumn a sur lie Rive with lower sugar content is likely to be introduced. Sur lie Prosecco is not something new: locally known as col fondo (“with sediment”), it was the way natives used to make Prosecco back in time - bottle-fermented and unfiltered. But so far the name Rive is only allowed for wines made using the Charmat method (with secondary fermentation in stainless steel tanks).



Umberto Marchiori of Marchiori Winery.



Rosanna Carpenè of Carpenè Malvolti.

CARTIZZE:

THE SYMBOL OF ELEGANCE AND TRADITION

Cartizze is associated with elegance and tradition and is more popular in Italy than abroad due to its higher price. Abroad, it can be found mainly in Russia, as confirmed by Mauro Bonetti. Almost all Cartizze are Dry, with one of the few Brut made by Giancarlo Moretti Pologato: "Our Dry is sold mainly in Italy, since it was designed as a dessert wine, whereas our Brut is more popular abroad". There is a feeling among some producers that the gap between Cartizze and Rive is narrowing from a quality perspective, probably because of Cartizze's high sugar content which prevents it from fully expressing sense of place and probably because wine lovers are increasingly appreciating Brut versions.