

[Back to all articles](#)

Tim Jackson MW

7 Aug 2020

TASTING ARTICLES

ITALY

VENETO

PROSECCO



Premium Prosecco – an oxymoron?

TASTING ARTICLES **ITALY** **VENETO** **PROSECCO**



Tim goes in search of superior Prosecco. Arcangelo Piaia took this picture of some of the better sites in this popular region.

I have been a Prosecco sceptic. A decade of rapid sales growth, especially in the number-one market, the UK, has flooded many markets around the world with lightweight, often slightly sweet – but above all, cheap – bubbles from this vast north-east Italian zone. Most

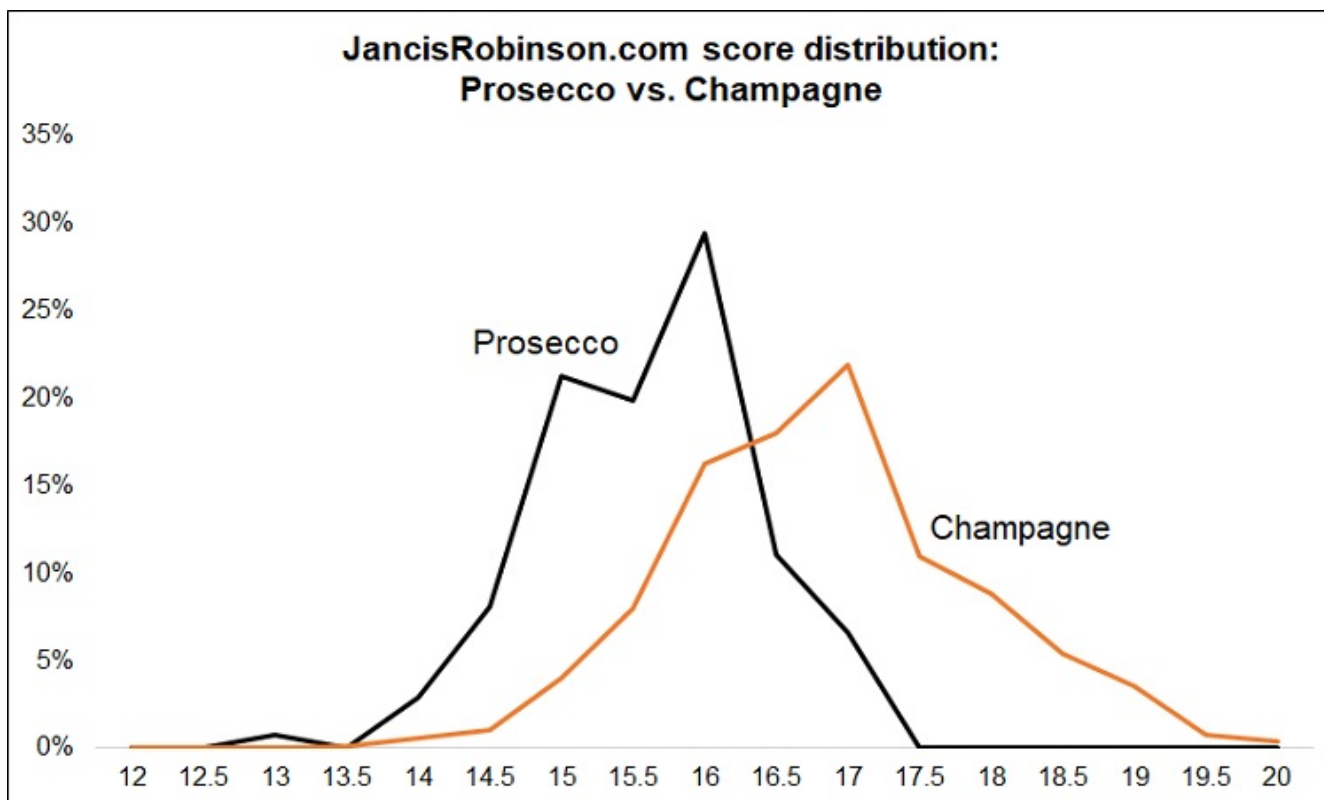
of them are from the broad, fertile plains centred on Treviso. Richard's 2017 description of one of our lowest-scoring wines, 'Really bland. Such a shame that there is so much of this sort of featureless fizzy plonk around these days. How long can its popularity last as it becomes increasingly dilute?', is a perfect one-wine summary.

That comment was incredibly timely. Although DOC Prosecco has been staggeringly successful in volume terms, growing exports to the UK from 12 to 120 million bottles in just six years, 2017 seemed to signal Peak Prosecco, with sales stalling at that 120 million mark. In parallel, production of DOCG Prosecco Superiore from Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, in the heart of Prosecco country, has also shown extraordinary growth. In 2003 around 33 million bottles of sparkling wine were made there, but this almost trebled to 90 million by 2019.

But while the DOC may have stuttered in its biggest export market, the nominally higher-quality DOCG advanced. In 2019 UK sales of Prosecco Superiore from Conegliano-Valdobbiadene doubled over those in 2018, to 12.7 million bottles (in 2003, this figure was a mere 432,000). This not only made the UK mirror its position as the DOC's biggest export market, even more important than the US, by becoming the DOCG's biggest as well, but also suggested a desire for trading up – an openness to a process that marketers love to label 'premiumisation'. It certainly reflects work by the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene Consorzio, which in 2018 began concerted efforts to position the region as a premium style of Prosecco, especially in good restaurants, engaging PR specialists Sarah Abbott MW and Madeleine Waters in the UK.

But is premium Prosecco an oxymoron? Can light-bodied, floral Glera make profound wines? Should fine-wine drinkers look out for it, or is Prosecco condemned for ever to be 'featureless fizzy plonk'? Walter has certainly argued fiercely for the merits of the best Prosecco Col Fondo in the face of Richard's criticism of the entire Prosecco category.

When judging Prosecco blind in wine competitions in the past, I found stand-out wines a rarity and too many in the 'fizzy plonk' category. Analysing the scores for all the 136 Proseccos reviewed in these pages shows 16/20 to be something of a cliff-edge.



Compared with the almost 4,000 notes on champagne, our data suggest not only that champagne routinely outperforms Prosecco – with a 1- to 1.5-point difference in average score (mean, mode or median) – but also that Prosecco seems unable to achieve ‘greatness’.

Hence my scepticism. However, I am a *healthy* sceptic – I’m willing and open to being proved wrong. That’s why I went to last year’s [vertical tasting](#) with DOC Treviso producer Bottega, which showed both quality and some longevity in well-made DOC Prosecco. It’s also why I was keen to join a pair of tastings run by Sarah and Madeleine on behalf of the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene DOCG. These explored drier styles of Prosecco, including Col Fondo, and Proseccos from the region’s Rive and Cartizze subzones. Indeed, of the handful of Proseccos that have scored over 16 in our database, it is noteworthy that nine of the 24 are Rive, Cartizze or Col Fondo wines. That’s a high proportion, since Rive and Cartizze combined make less than 4% of DOCG production.

Walter’s entry in the OCW for [Prosecco](#) covers these terms in more depth, but in brief:

- **Cartizze:** a 108-ha subzone near Valdobbiadene, said to make the finest Proseccos. Top of the DOCG’s quality pyramid and sometimes referred to as their ‘grand cru’.
- **Rive:** 43 ‘cru’ subzones across the DOCG, named after *riva*, the local term for a steep hillside vineyard common in the region. Second tier in the quality pyramid.
- **Col Fondo:** bottle-fermented style of Prosecco that is left without disgorgement, so is cloudy and bone dry. Col Fondo means ‘with sediment’.

From the two virtual sessions I participated in, I had 12 wines, which I opted to taste in one batch. These included nine Rive bottlings, a Cartizze and a Col Fondo. Overall, the wines

were good to very good. Two achieved impressive 17/20 scores and only two were under 16. This was further evidence to support Rive, Cartizze and Col Fondo as markers to identify superior Prosecco. Having spent time with several of these bottles in the following days, I would very happily buy and drink a number of these again.

It was also interesting to see variations among the wines. Col Fondo is clearly a different style, but there was also variance between the others. It should be said, however, that these were variations on a theme and less dramatic than among six Pinots I happened to taste a week later. Although apple aromas and flavours are generally found in most Proseccos, there were definitely those that were floral and those not, those that favoured exotic fruit over orchard fruit, and those that carried brown spice (nutmeg and mace) and those that did not. Acidity also varied considerably, with higher-elevation plots and/or those with higher diurnal temperature variation tending to have more vibrancy, while warmer plots tended to a richer style, often accompanied by body.

A mineral sense was notable on some too, especially those at zero sugar. However, as I have found with some zero-dosage champagnes, these are also accompanied by an austerity that is not always successful. Instead, I found the Extra Brut category – launched only in August 2019, with up to 6 g/l residual sugar – better balanced, just taking the edge off the acidity without taking on a saccharine character that some sweeter, Brut and Extra Dry wines can risk. Looking again at our database, there are Brut and Extra Dry wines that have scored highly, so it is evident that good producers can do this well. However, I wonder if Extra Brut will ultimately prove to be the ‘sweet spot’ for Proseccos that are trying to show a sense of place.

The role of lees also demands mention and not just for Col Fondo. Several of these producers used lees maturation after first and/or second fermentations, sometimes exceeding 12 months in total, and this in wines predominantly produced in tanks. One of my top wines, Sei Solo from Bellenda, takes this further by being bottle-fermented. I thought its 12 months on lees managed a great balancing act: gaining lees complexity and adding finesse to the mousse, without losing Glera’s delicate aromatics. There’s clearly a trade-off here. It could be argued that extending such lees ageing to years, like top champagnes, could take Prosecco to greatness. But I rather suspect that doing so, and suppressing Glera’s floral, fruity side in favour of lees, would be detrimental in the end.

So, can Prosecco ever be ‘great’? Perhaps lower yields could add mid-palate intensity. Yield limits for Rive wines are a touch lower than for the rest of the DOCG, at 13 rather than 13.5 t/ha, and far less than the DOC’s 18 t/ha, but are still generous. That being said, the yield limits on champagne are not exactly low, being up to 15.5 t/ha (even if only around 10.5 t/ha is generally permitted to be used directly rather than committed to reserves), suggesting

lower yields could have only limited effect. And with the economics of working the DOCG's hillside vineyards, where the steepest *rive* can require up to 700 hours of work a year, compared with 150–200 in the DOC, it would be a brave producer who bet on yield reduction to drive quality far enough to cause price jumps.

What I will say, though, is that the explorations of subzones and Col Fondo styles do offer opportunities to take quality higher, even if 'greatness' finally proves elusive. Further, the Rive bottlings do show nuanced differences that offer greater interest to wine lovers. Though I found these nuances more difficult to distinguish Rive by Rive, this does not diminish Rive as an idea. And what can be said, at least as a start, is that there are broadly crisper, floral styles around Valdobbiadene with fuller, tropical ones from the Conegliano area. Nevertheless, local viticultural expert, Prof Diego Tomasi, who has studied Conegliano-Valdobbiadene's zones in depth, described several of the Rive in terms of their physical characteristics, and which chemical and sensory characteristics analyses suggest are typical in their wines.

A brief summary of each, along with Sarah's additional overviews of the Guia and Carpesica Rive, is below. These run roughly from Valdobbiadene at the western end of the DOCG through to Conegliano in the east. On that note, wines are labelled either Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, Conegliano or Valdobbiadene. If you're wondering if the shorter names mean they come from smaller areas around each town, they don't. Producers can use whichever of the three DOCG names they like.

Italy? Complicated? Never ...

Rive

Cartizze: just outside Valdobbiadene. South-facing, fairly steep slopes, with the traditional trellising most common, at relatively high planting density. Soils are deep calcareous marls, giving finesse and fresh fruit – tropical and pear, from the south-facing warmth – but high thermal amplitude retains notable floral character and acidity.

San Pietro di Barbozza: also close to Valdobbiadene and north of Cartizze, this too is a traditional zone. Good-depth marl soils prevent hydric stress. Relatively intense aromatics are found, with rose, yellow stone fruit and citrus fruits common, and a stony, mineral style.

Guia: a little further east from Cartizze and San Pietro di Barbozza, in the upper part of the DOCG's main ridge line. South-facing hills are planted with vines, while north-facing ones are forested. Carries good acidity and lightness.

Col San Martino: a traditional zone, with very steep slopes and a few terraces. Some vines here are over 50 years of age. Soils are shallow conglomerates, retaining less water, leading to

more hydric stress. Peach and floral notes are emphasised here.

Rua di Feletto: a flatter zone, with redder, deep, clay soils that give little hydric stress. Apple, spice and vegetal notes are typical. Overall, the organoleptic profile is close to the regional average, if a little fuller in body.

Collalto and Susegana: moderate slopes, with deep soils that have 30% clay, relieving hydric stress. A little warmer than the DOCG average, this gives a less floral profile, with herbal and spice notes more common.

Carpesica: north of Conegliano in the warmest, eastern part of the DOCG, at the foot of the steepest hills. Sedimentary soils, modified by glaciation, give lots of rocks and some limestone. This combination gives richer styles with more alcohol while retaining acidity.

Scomigo and Ogliano: south of Carpesica is a former glacial melt run-off zone, which forms a 300- to 400-ha area of gravelly soils, leading to some hydric stress. Thermal amplitude is highest here because cold air flows at night down the same path as the glacial run-off did. It is also very windy. Ripe fruit and spice notes are particularly noteworthy.

The wines

The following are presented in the order tasted, which was broadly from driest to sweetest rather than geographically. Note, some producers choose to mention a Rive only on their back label or a separate tag, rather than in the name of the wine. These are noted in the technical information for each wine and not in the wine's name.

Malibràn, Credamora Col Fondo 2017 Prosecco Valdobbiadene 16

Third-generation family producer, Maurizio Favarell, based in Susegana, southwest of Conegliano. Yields 13.5 t/ha. Second fermentation in bottle, under cork, not crown cap, as it is not disgorged. Can be decanted off the lees, or the bottle agitated before pouring, to incorporate the lees into the serve. Frizzante, so cannot be Superiore. No residual sugar.

First pour: almost clear, with minimal lees evident in suspension and a distinct gold colour. Fair intensity of aromatics, but with a clear brioche lees character, with some oxidative development, giving dried stone-fruit and raisin notes. Crisp, dry and saline, this is a little on the frothy side, but certainly carries fair depth of brioche and dried-apple flavour.

Second pour (after agitating the lees): an opaque gold colour. The lees give a creamier aromatic note, like buttered bread, with ripe apple. The palate is a little

fuller and less frothy, though still quite austere. Either way, quite unlike most Prosecco. For sushi. (TJ) 11%

Drink 2019 – 2021

Imported into the UK by Passione Vino

La Tordera, Otreval Rive de Guia Brut Nature 2018 Prosecco Valdobbiadene

16.5

Family producer run by two brothers and a sister. Glera. Single 1.3 ha vineyard at 300 m elevation. Yields 13 t/ha. Gently pressed without sulphites. Settled by gravity. Primary fermentation with selected yeasts. On lees at 10 °C with bâtonnage until second fermentation. Second fermentation in tank for 25 days, followed by three months on lees at 10 °C with bâtonnage. Filtered. Three months in bottle, pre-release. TA 5.7 g/l, total SO₂ 84 mg/l, no residual sugar.

Fair intensity on the nose, with musky spice and acacia, some cheesy lees notes and a core of apple and orange. Dry, flinty and saline, with a real sense of extract – even if this is not much more than light bodied. The palate is savoury and minerally, and it is this that persists. Good stuff. (TJ) 12%

Drink 2020 – 2023

Bortolomiol, Grande Cuvée del Fondatore Motus Vitae Superiore Brut Nature 2017 Prosecco Valdobbiadene

??

Rive San Pietro di Barbozza. Family producer run by four sisters, daughters of Giulio, who was a significant mover in creating the denomination. The sisters have pioneered low-input, sustainable viticulture. Glera. 10 t/ha. Gently pressed. Primary fermentation with selected yeasts. Second fermentation in tank for 25–30 days. Maturation on lees for 10 months. Two to three months in bottle, pre-release. TA 5.5 g/l, no residual sugar.

Restrained, savoury and nose that gives little away. This doesn't really clear up over time. Brett would be unusual at the kinds of pH typical for the region, but this is quite horsey and muddy. Hmm ... bad bottle? Either way, I can't recommend this based on what's in the glass. (TJ) 12%

Drink ??

La Farra, Rive di Farra di Soligo Superiore Extra Brut 2018 Prosecco Valdobbiadene

15.5

Rive di Farra di Soligo is in the centre of the DOCG. Family producer run by two brothers and a sister. One of the brothers, Innocente Nardi, is President of the Consorzio. They also produce DOC wines from the flatter areas to the south of Farra di Soligo. Glera from a single 'Rive dei Nardi' vineyard at 220–300 m elevation, planted at 3,700 vines/ha. Yields 13 t/ha. Gently pressed at 16 °C. Primary fermentation at 18 °C. Second fermentation in tank at 16–18 °C, followed by three months on lees. Filtered. Three months in bottle, pre-release. TA 5.7 g/l, RS 5 g/l, 5 bar.

Overt nose of apples and pears, but with oxidative, apple-peel maturity, alongside white-flower overtones. Frothy mousse, with a palate that is dry and a little hard.

Edgy and not fully in harmony. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2022

Imported into the UK by H2Vin

Bepin de Eto, Superiore Extra Brut 2019 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

16

Rive di Rua di Feletto. 100% Glera at 270 m elevation and 4,000 plants/ha. Yields 13 t/ha. Primary fermentation at 20 °C in stainless steel, followed by one month on lees. Second fermentation in tank at 12–14 °C, followed by short lees maturation. Bottled at 4.5–5 atm pressure. TA 6 g/l, RS 3 g/l.

Expansive, nutty nose suggestive of lees (despite one of the shortest periods with lees contact!) with spices like coriander seed and ripe fruits: melon, apricot, passion fruit and candied peels. The palate is much, much drier than the fruit intensity on the nose suggests and, initially, felt like it was a little empty after all that. However, flavour depth *is* there – I wonder what a couple more g/l sugar would have done for this? Flinty, peppery, fair-length finish. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2022

Imported into the UK by Divine Importers

Bellenda, Sei Uno Superiore Extra Brut 2017 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

17

Rive Carpesica. Family producer run by two brothers, founded in 1987. Glera at 180 m elevation, planted at 4,000 vines/ha. Yields 80 hl/ha. Destemmed and pressed. Settled by gravity. Primary fermentation at 18–20 °C. Second fermentation in bottle with maturation on lees for 12 months. Disgorged. Six months in bottle, pre-release. TA 5.44 g/l, pH 3.08, RS 3.48 g/l, 6.2 bar.

Golden tinge. Marked nose of toasty, flinty lees, giving a dusty and savoury character. Lots of lees, but supported by depth of melon and stone fruit. Really fine mousse at over 6 bar pressure, as well as a beautiful balance despite the low sugar levels. Crisp, lively and pure. This has lovely length and is a class act. Period.

(TJ) 11.9%

Drink 2020 – 2026

Imported into the UK by Les Caves de Pyrène

Conte Collato, Isabella Rive di Collalto Superiore Brut 2018 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

16

100% Glera from south-facing slopes. Yields 12 t/ha. Gently pressed. Primary fermentation at 18 °C in stainless steel, followed by three to six months on lees. Second fermentation in tank, followed by nine months on lees. Stabilised and filtered. Bottled at 4.5 atm pressure. One to two months in bottle, pre-release. TA 5.8 g/l, RS 5 g/l.

Distinct green tinge to the colour. Stone, elderflower, some doughy lees notes and a core of apple. Delicate mousse, representing its lower pressure, with dry, stony flavours supported by a touch of apricot. Attractive pithy bitterness through the good, lengthy finish. (TJ) 12%

Drink 2020 – 2022

Imported into the UK by Thorman Hunt

Siro Merotto, Rive di Col San Martino Superiore Brut 2018 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

17

100% Glera from south-facing slopes. Primary fermentation in stainless steel, then on lees until May. Second fermentation in tank, followed by five months on lees. Filtered. RS 4.8 g/l, 4,000 bottles.

The nose is a little reticent, but don't let its aromatic restraint fool you into thinking it doesn't have complexity; it gives tropical, passion-fruit and pineapple notes, toasty, biscuit lees character and brown, sweet spices – a lot more than the vast majority of Proseccos. Fine mousse. Dry, with some roundness and oily richness, primarily from lees. Apples, brown spice and flint marry with some salinity. Long. Serious. (TJ) 11%

Drink 2020 – 2024

Ruggeri, Cartizze Superiore Brut NV Prosecco Valdobbiadene

16.5

100% Glera. Primary fermentation at 16 °C in stainless steel. Second fermentation in tank at 14–15 °C. Bottled at 5.5 atm pressure. RS 8 g/l.

Really restrained, delicate nose of chalk dust, white flower and lemon sherbet, with some guava and white peach if you really coax it out of the glass. The palate's a different matter, with a punch of ripe apple, guava, apricot, banana and brown spices filling the mid palate. Pretty fine mousse – especially at this relatively high pressure – that gives some elegance. Decent, nutmeg-spiced length. Certainly good, though not the best in this line-up. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2023

Imported into the UK by Enotria & Coe

Vincenzo Toffoli, Biologico Superiore Brut 2019 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

16

Family producer from Refrontolo, though this is not a Rive bottling. Organic viticulture. Glera at 200 m elevation. Yields 13.5 t/ha. Tank method for at least 90 days. Residual sugar tends to boost the aromatic, floral style. Closer to the conventional Prosecco style. RS 7.5 g/l.

Bright, fruity and floral nose of orange blossom, apricot, tropical fruit and ground mace. A mouthful of ripe apples, passion fruit and banana is supported by a roundness from the residual sugar. A more conventional Prosecco style, but well done. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2022

L'Antica Quercia, Matiù Rive di Scomigo Superiore Brut 2019 Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene

16.5

Organic. Small producer. Each cuvée has a dedicated plot. 100% Glera on boulder clay. Whole-grape pressing. Experimenting with indigenous yeasts. Primary fermentation followed by ageing on lees over the winter. Second fermentation in spring. TA 5.5 g/l, pH 3.2, RS 6 g/l.

Aromatic style, with pear, passion fruit, guava and spice, but underpinned by a clear, nutty, slightly vegetal note from lees. Fine mousse, with more guava and passion fruit on the palate, supported by apple acidity and a long, floral finish. Quite a classical Prosecco in style and very well done. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2021

Seeking UK representation

Co-operative producer. 85% Glera, 15% Pinots and Chardonnay. Yields 13 t/ha.

Charmat method in stainless steel. RS 10 g/l.

Another with a restrained nose, giving flinty notes over lemon sherbet and pear.

This is a bit lightweight on the palate, though, and it isn't crystal clean. Compared with its peers in this line-up, the sugar is a bit clumsy. (TJ) 11.5%

Drink 2020 – 2021

[View next article](#)

WWC20 – Cowhorn, Oregon

Morgan Mellish CSW is the sales project manager for Cowhorn Vineyard in Jacksonville, Oregon. She makes a passionate bid for...

Or, view previous article: Antech, Réserve Brut Blanquette de Limoux