

PROSECCO: GRAPE, WINE OR STYLE?

Prosecco hails from the foothills of the Alps in northeast Italy. Most consumers, however, have no idea whether Prosecco is a grape, a wine or a style. Michèle Shah discovers that the lines between DOC and IGT are equally difficult to understand.

At a time when the world clamours for Champagne but its price is rising, Prosecco's moment seems to have come. But just to confuse matters, Prosecco is not just the name of an Italian sparkling style, but also of a grape and of varying quality levels. Prosecco's original reputation was created by small producers from the communes of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene in the southern foothills of the Alps. Now classified as DOC, this region produces some 50m bottles annually. But it's the less expensive Prosecco IGT Veneto, whose production tops 100m bottles, which has the lion's share of the market. Both wines are called Prosecco, both come from the province of Treviso and both come in the same type of bottle. So where does the difference lie, how can they be told apart and should the consumer even care?

According to Giancarlo Vettorello, director of the Consorzio Tutela Vino Prosecco DOC Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, the difference in quality is not only a matter of soil, climate and identity, but also yields. While DOC crops seldom reach the legal maximum of 130 quintals per hectare (13 tons), similar to those in Champagne, IGT weighs in at double that. Prosecco DOC represents 16% of Italy's total and 33% of its DOC sparkling wine production. It is exported to 50 countries, with both value and volume growing steadily.

Given the fragmented nature of the region, though, most producers buy from the 2800 local farmers. The Ruggeri estate, for example, is a large, modern winery that boasts all the latest technolo-

gy, and which supervises the 100 growers who supply the grapes to produce its 1m bottles. Bisol, on the other hand, is one of the few family estates to bottle the entire production from their own 70 hectares of vines, spread over 16 small estates, reaching 500,000 bottles annually.

Most Prosecco, however, is produced by large Spumantist, including Carpenè Malvolti, Valdo and Mionetto, each moving between three and five million bottles per year: These giants have created new export markets; however, while smaller producers are becoming more savvy, many still lack the know-how to tackle export markets.

"The marketing of Prosecco DOC is not helped by the lengthy name of 'Conegliano-Valdobbiadene', which often alienates consumers," says Gianluca

1 Export 2006				
Rank	Spumante DOC	Frizzante DOC	Spumante IGT	Frizzante IGT
1 Germany	40.0%	72.0%	38.0%	78.0%
2 Switzerland	8.2%	3.3%	13.0%	2.1%
3 United States	8.2%	6.4%	19.3%	-
4 United Kingdom	5.4%	4.3%	-	-
5 Canada	5.2%	-	-	-
6 Austria	4.6%	10.7%	3.5%	10.3%
7 Benelux	3.5%	2.0%	-	-
8 Japan	2.9%	-	-	-
9 South America	2.8%	-	10.0%	3.3%
10 Scandinavia	-	-	4.4%	-

While some of Italy's smaller Prosecco producers have yet to export, international sales are growing.

Bisol of the estate of the same name. "We must find a more pronounceable name that is easier to remember."

However, there is no official interest in amending the name, which is linked to the history of the area of production. Instead, given its scenic setting and historic villages situated a mere 60km from either Venice or the ski resort Cortina d'Ampezzo, the region plans to promote its sparkling wine through the medium of tourism.

In order to maintain a premium status, listing Prosecco in quality restaurants is a high priority. "It is not just an excellent aperitif wine," says Manuela Oregna, export manager of Villa Sandi, "it also pairs well with Asian food, seafood and lighter foods, which is what today's lifestyle trend is all about."

Threats to identity

As most consumers are content with any Prosecco if it bubbles and the price is right, maintaining identity is a key factor for DOC producers. There are also other threats looming, both domestically and internationally.

"There are 800 hectares of vineyard planted to Prosecco in Brazil," says Bisol, "and vineyards in Romania, Australia, China, India and Argentina." According to Vettorello, this does not yet constitute an immediate threat to Italian Prosecco, which is not easily adaptable to other microclimates outside the country. "It is not as ubiquitous as Pinot Grigio, which has more of an 'international' character."

To add to the confusion, there are sparkling wines that are clearly trading off the Prosecco name, such as Secco and Rosecco from Germany.

More recently, fraud has become a serious concern. "Although there are incidences of falsified Prosecco sold both nationally and in export markets, it is limited to IGT," claims Vettorello. Yet most consumers do not differentiate between the two.

According to a study carried out by the Consorzio, about 3% of the total production of Prosecco is falsified by using less expensive Italian grapes. Given Italy's flexible justice system, though, that number is probably higher.

Most of it is sent offshore, primarily to Germany, where it is sold in discount supermarkets. “The problem is that anything that carries the name Prosecco, but does not conform to our quality standards, damages the image of Prosecco,” says Vettorello. “Our guarantee is that all production is traceable.”

The appeal of Prosecco

Carpenè Malvolti was the first estate to put the name ‘Prosecco’ on a label in 1924. Founded by Antonio Carpenè, it was responsible for establishing the first school of oenology in Italy as well as inventing the Prosecco Spumante Charmat method.

“Prosecco is a light, delicately aromatic sparkling wine of medium structure, with usually not more than 11° alcohol, and should be appreciated as such,” explains Lia Teo, export manager for Carpenè Malvolti.

The average price of Prosecco DOC is currently between €6-7 (\$8.50-\$9.00) in Italian supermarkets, while that of IGT is significantly lower, often falling between €2-4. The lower price and larger volume is what makes IGT sales more successful in price-sensitive export markets.

The pricing of Prosecco DOC is obviously influenced by those of grapes, which over the last five years have increased from €1.3 to €1.8 per kg, while that of Prosecco IGT has moved from €0.4 to €1. While emerging markets such as Russia, China or even Great Britain - where Prosecco has taken a position in the on trade that even Australian sparklers and Cava have not managed - buy mostly the more expensive, higher quality DOC wines, mature markets like Germany look almost exclusively at price.

“The sales of Prosecco have increased by 150% over the past three years,” says Guido Marini, president of the Group Vasco in Moscow. “From being totally unknown, its popularity has increased so much that some customers prefer it to Champagne.”

Prosecco Spumante represents 82% of the entire production. Other styles include Spumante Brut, Extra Dry and Cartizze, the latter referring to small 106 hectare

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» Prosecco as a style is becoming very popular in China. The competitive advantage of Prosecco in the market is that it is at an affordable level for the emerging middle class. «

David Andrews

David Andrews is responsible for the Italian portfolio at ASC in China.



cru production site in the heart of the area. Some houses also produce limited quantities of traditional Frizzante Sur Lie (on the yeast) which, as tradition requires, is fermented in bottle. “This traditional Prosecco is coming back in vogue, especially as an export to Germany, which together with Austria and Switzerland, constitute Prosecco’s strongest market areas,” says Franco Adami, president of the Consorzio.

Historically, Prosecco Frizzante was exported to countries that had a tax on any sparkling wine with a Champagne cork. Because Frizzante has less pressure and no crown, but is instead tied with string, it escapes the tax, making it an attractive buy. Today, though, it’s only Germany that maintains this tax.

“Restrictions, regulations and parameters are what we need, in order for Prosecco DOC to maintain its high standard of quality and differentiate itself from the generic IGT quality,” says Teo. “Pricing is also an issue. Although our style and product has its own definite identity, we need to maintain competitive pricing so that we can keep Asti, Cava and even Champagne at bay.” ■

Michele Shah has consulted to the Consorzi Tutela Prosecco DOC di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene. Joel B. Payne contributed additional reporting to this article.