

Pronto Prosecco

Italy's darling is dazzling America

By Donald Charles Richardson



Campari with
Prosecco

PROSECCO, Italy's top sparkling wine, is currently illuminating America like a burst of the Venetian sun. The fashionable froth is the celebrity drink of choice at Hollywood hot spots.

One of the most popular makers of Proseccos, Mionetto boasts a 30 percent increase in sales from last year. As sommelier of Insieme at The Michelangelo Hotel in New York, Paul Grieco serves some of the finest wines in the world. He says, "I open my first bottle of Prosecco by noon, and if it's not done by 2:00 it's a bad day." Broadway actors and dancers gather at the popular Etcetera, Etcetera restaurant right off Times Square for Prosecco. And at the legendary restaurant Vetri in Philadelphia, Jeffery Benjamin, the managing partner, says, "Prosecco is an interesting phenomenon, in that it's a classic style and a wine that's been popular in its own right for a while, but one that now seems balanced upon a potential mojito-like wave of success."

Regardless of what you might have heard, Prosecco is not champagne's poor cousin. In fact, other than both being sparkling wines, they have little in common. Champagne is a combination of Pinot Noir, Pinot or Petit Meunier and Chardonnay grapes. Made by the Champenoise method (the second fermentation occurs in the bottle), champagne is often aged for years and may retail for hundreds of dollars.

According to Italian law, only wines produced in the Conegliano and

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Valdobbiadene areas in the region of Veneto (40 miles northwest of Venice and 40 miles southeast of the Dolomite Mountains) can be called Prosecco DOC. A DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) label signifies that the source of the grapes and the origin of production has been controlled by the state, so you are guaranteed an authentic Prosecco. The wine is made of Prosecco grapes and can contain up to 15 percent (but no more) of other grapes such as Verdiso, Pereira, Bianchetta, Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc. "Being made of 100 percent Prosecco grapes or being a blended Prosecco doesn't mean the wine is better or worse. It's just a matter of taste, the style of the producers and the source of the grapes," points out Vittorio Zoppi, spokesperson for the



carpaccio. Zoppi enjoys his Prosecco with oysters.

For visitors and residents alike, one of the most enjoyable experiences in Venice is the Bellini. This extraordinary drink, made with 2.5 oz. of white peach pulp and 2 oz. of Prosecco, originated at Harry's Bar on Sestiere San Marco. Of course, to get an authentic Bellini, you need the fresh Italian white peaches, so it's almost impossible to have a real one outside of Venice. Even to taste the real thing there, you need to be in the city during white peach season (July to early September). However, there are other lovely cocktails that work with Prosecco. Etcetera, Etcetera serves Prosecco Mimosas (wine and orange juice). Kathryn Sullivan Alvera from the aptly named Prosecco Restaurant in Chicago (which she describes as "Chicago's, and maybe the nation's, first 'proseccheria'—a wine bar devoted to the enjoyment of Italian sparkling wines") serves two Prosecco cocktails. Il Classico is a twist on the famous champagne cocktail made with

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Prosecco Consortium. Prosecco undergoes its second fermentation the Charmat way, in a stainless steel tank. Prosecco is not aged and you shouldn't save it. Always drink a bottle within a couple of years after its production.

Brut is the most modern Prosecco, characterized by an aroma of rich citrus and fresh vegetation. Extra Dry is the classic Prosecco. It has aromas of apple and pear with a hint of citrus fruit. A third category, Dry, is reserved for Cartizze, considered by many experts to be the finest Prosecco. This wine is produced at small vineyards between the hills of San Pietro di Barbozza, Santo Stefano and Saccol in Valdobbiadene. It is straw yellow in color with an elegant bouquet and hints of apples and peaches. "Its prestige makes Cartizze the most sought after Italian sparkling wine," says Richard Sanchez, sommelier at DaMarco Restaurant in Houston, Texas.

While usually served in America as an aperitivo (before meals), Prosecco can be paired with light dishes such as antipasti, grilled vegetables and seafood. Some foodies enjoy it with cheese or fresh berries (for a truly decadent experience, pair with dark chocolate cake) and others drink it throughout a meal. Sanchez likes to serve the Bisol Cartizze, which has bright fruit and medium structure, with branzino



Mionetto Brut Prosecco, Angostura bitters, a lemon twist and a sugar cube. The second, La Serenissima, includes Mionetto Brut Prosecco, Chambord and 23-karat gold dust. At Estate Restaurant in Sonoma, California, owner Sondra Bernstein says one of their most popular cocktails is the Fellini, a mixture of limoncello, blood orange juice and Prosecco named for the revered Italian film director.

With its newfound popularity, chances are you'll find a lot of Proseccos in your local wine store. Some of the most renowned names are Bortolomiol, Adami, Collalto, Col Vetoraz, Le Colture, Drusian, Bisol, Nino Franco and Mionetto. Look for

the words 'Prosecco DOC Conegliano-Valdobbiadene' or 'Cartizze' on the bottle. Valdobbiadene and Conegliano Proseccos start at around \$14. A Cartizze can sell for as much as \$40.

"Prosecco is so much fun," says Paul Grieco. Reasonably priced, stylish and friendly, this chic bubbly shouldn't be saved for a special occasion. It brings the charm and elegance of Venice to everything from a picnic to a dinner party. As Richard Sanchez explains it, "When you taste Prosecco, you feel the sun shining on you." ♦