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## FOOD & DRINK

TASTINGS | By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

# The Relaxed, Friendly Charm of Prosecco

Italy's sparkling wine, always a favorite, is better than ever these days—just avoid Paris Hilton

**W**HAT DOES Paris Hilton, naked and covered in gold paint, have in common with Italy's Agriculture Ministry? Prosecco.

Prosecco is the soft, delightful bubbly wine most famously made in the Veneto region of Italy. We did our first broad blind tasting of Prosecco in 2004 because there were finally enough of them on shelves for a good sample. Its popularity since then has exploded. There are far more now and all kinds, too: from well-known names such as Mionetto and Zardetto and from smaller producers; frizzante (lightly sparkling) and spumante (fully sparkling); extra dry (which means a little bit sweet) and brut (which means dry, although many seem more dry-ish than dry); vintage and nonvintage; from unknown areas, from the Veneto region or more specifically from the choice area of Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, which is always fun to say after a couple of glasses of wine.

Prosecco is so popular, in fact, that it has inspired imitators. Because Prosecco is the name of the grape as well as the wine, there's no reason voters couldn't make Prosecco in, say, Brazil, which is exactly what they're doing, to the increasing consternation of Italian winemakers. But we'd guess that it was Paris Hilton who pushed them over the edge. A company based in Austria began producing a wine called Rich Prosecco that it sold in cans and then hired Ms. Hilton as its spokesbabe, featured in ads clothed only in paint. Gee, maybe a picture is worth more than a thousand words—but maybe not, since we saw that a British company was auctioning 30,000 cans of the stuff from a Serbian warehouse. Its brochure warned that the Prosecco has a "use-by date" of May 2009.

Hmmm. Prosecco in a can, with an expiration date, hawked by a naked American socialite.



Dylan Cross for The Wall Street Journal

You can imagine this might get the attention of the Italians, and apparently it did. Their appropriate agricultural and trade officials sprang into action and, just last month, declared that Prosecco is a uniquely Italian name that can only be used for wines made in the Veneto region. The winemakers expect the European Union to make this official later this year. For us, as wine drinkers and wine critics, the question was this: Is today's Prosecco worth protecting? With all of this hubbub, we decided to conduct a new broad, blind tasting.

We were surprised how easy it was to gather more than 50 Proseccos from shelves. We were a little concerned, too. If we'd had to guess, we would have assumed that the average quality had dipped in the midst of such a dramatic increase in availability. After all, part of Prosecco's

charm is its soft, easy, simple—in a good way—taste. Compared to so many wines that have fairly dramatic tastes, it has relaxed flavors of pears and apples. When not just right, it can go straight from subtle to simply neutral, tasting more like sparkling water than wine. Not only that, but because Prosecco is so relaxed, even a little bit too much sweetness can leave it cloying and the tiniest hint of off flavors, which might be obscured in wines of more heft, can leave it skunky.

Has Prosecco followed the sad path of other wines that have been ruined by fame? We bagged the wines and popped them open over several nights. And here's the news: They're actually better. What a pleasant surprise. We have always enjoyed Prosecco and have recommended it repeatedly, but the average quality

is up. The wines taste riper, more focused and a little tarter. They are generally less sweet and they have more obvious hints of minerals. But they retain their very friendly, soft, apple-pear tastes. They remain informal, highly pleasant wines, with fairly low alcohol (usually about 11%) that makes them great as an aperitif, a summer quaffer or just a happy-to-be-home sipping wine. And here's the kicker: They remain inexpensive. Few of the wines we bought cost more than \$20 and quite a few cost less than \$10.

Our best of tasting, Mionetto Brut, was a total delight for around \$10, filled with minerals, toast, fruit and life. (It's 95% Prosecco and 5% Chardonnay.) Mionetto says it produces 800,000 cases a year of its various Proseccos and imports 177,000 cases into the U.S. It's the biggest name in Prosecco

## The Dow Jones Prosecco Index

In a tasting of Prosecco from Italy, these were our favorites. These are meant to drink young. They are generally excellent as aperitifs and go well with light appetizers. Some of the best would pair well with sushi and dishes with cream sauce. All of the following are nonvintage except as noted. We have included a formal appellation when it was listed on the label. These tend to be light and lower in alcohol than many wines (around 11%). Serve nicely chilled. They can certainly be served in Champagne flutes because of their pleasant bubbles, but they are also fine in regular wine glasses because of their informality.

**Mionetto Brut.** \$9.99. *Very Good.* Best of tasting and best value. Some Champagne-like finesse. Minerals, toast and real fruit tastes, especially apples and pears. A little bit of weight makes it especially good with food. Repeat favorite. We also liked Mionetto "Sergio" Extra Dry (\$21.99).

**Bartenura Extra Dry.** \$15.99. *Very Good.* Good fruit, with ripe, white grapes, a touch of brown sugar and complexity that many lack. Lovely, with subtle acidity. Kosher.

**Astoria 'Cuvée Tenuta Val de Brun' (Valdobbiadene) Extra Dry 2007.** \$19.99. *Good/Very Good.* Nutty, mineral nose, with some toasted almonds. Very pleasant. We did not like Astoria nonvintage "del Veneto" as much.

**Bisol 'Crede' (Valdobbiadene) Brut 2007.** \$22.99. *Good/Very Good.* John thought it was bland,

but Dottie liked its cleanliness and tastes of mango and lime. Easy drinking.

**Col del Sole (Valdobbiadene) Extra Dry.** \$11.19. *Good/Very Good.* Clean, fresh nose with some minerals. Vibrant bubbles. Lychee and mangoes—in fact, a bit tutti-frutti, but in a fun way. Relaxed, happy wine.

**Di Fiore 'Passionne.'** \$9.99. *Good/Very Good.* Fun, with tart, ripe tastes, nice balancing acidity and a very easy, light finish.

**Foss Marai Extra Dry.** \$15.99. *Good/Very Good.* Lively, with tart, green-apple tastes and a little hint of minerals. Definitely an aperitif wine—start the party!

**Desiderio Jeio Brut.** \$14.99. *Good/Very Good.* Ripe lemons with a touch of sweet fruit. Clean, soft and nice, with particularly charming little bubbles.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at stores in California, Illinois and New York. Prices vary widely.

in America.

To be sure, they were not all winners. Some were too sweet, some were clumsy and some did indeed smell and taste skunky. A few were simply bland. But overall, these are delightful and fun wines in which the fairly restrained bub-

bles are both a cause and a symbol of the wine's subtle, relaxing charm. And that's the naked truth.

► Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about Prosecco, at [WSJ.com/Tastings](http://WSJ.com/Tastings). Email them at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).