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Prosecco: The Pinot Grigio of Bubbly?

By Michael Apstein
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Prosecco's popularity around the world has soared--and for good reason. It's a delightfully fresh and lively bubbly, perfect as an aperitif, especially in the summertime. "It's a party in a bottle," as Paul Wagner, head of Balzac Communications, a leading California marketing and public relations firm, described it. The hallmark of Prosecco is that it is fresh, fruity, and light with low alcohol -- 11 to 11.5%.

Less widely appreciated, but equally important, is the fact that Prosecco is also remarkably well suited to accompany lighter fare at the table. Carlo Paladin, whose family owns both Palladin and Bosco del Merlo, two fine Prosecco producers, summed it up beautifully, "Every time is a good time for Prosecco."

But what is real Prosecco? The name has such wide spread recognition that it is already becoming synonymous with "I'll have a glass of bubbly," especially among Italians, and much to the dismay of the Prosecco producers. Much as most American consumers refer to any wine with fizz as "Champagne," Italians, at least in the Veneto, the region in the northeast that includes Venice and the Prosecco production zones, refer to all bubbly as "Prosecco."

Protecting a Name

In response to rising production from areas outside of Italy--Brazilian "Prosecco" sold in cans finally sent the Italians through the roof--the Prosecco producers moved to protect the name. The problem they faced was that Prosecco was the name of the grape, not a geographic area, and therefore would not qualify for protection under European Union regulations. Unfazed by these hurdles, they promptly changed the name of the grape to Glera and found a small village, Prosecco, near Trieste, some 100-plus miles from the traditional Prosecco production zone. Then, in a maneuver that would make Texas politicians proud, they expanded and gerrymandered a region that included the traditional Prosecco production zone, surrounding areas, and this tail-like appendage encircling the village of Prosecco. Voilà, they now had a geographic region, not a grape, the European Union could protect.

This vast expansion of the zone, while having the advantage of protecting the name, had the disadvantage, at least from the point of view of the traditionally situated producers, of bringing more producers--more competitors--under the umbrella. In response, the Italians changed the DOC categories to keep everyone happy. The former DOC for Prosecco,

officially referred to as Prosecco di Conegliano et Valdobbiadene that encompassed the "original zone" (roughly 10,000 acres of vineyards located on hillsides) received a promotion to DOCG and a cumbersome new name, Prosecco Superiore Conegliano and Valdobbiadene. The newly established and expanded DOC Prosecco zone includes about 50,000 acres of vineyards, mostly situated on the less desirable flat lands.

(For completeness, there's one more designation: Wines made from the very best vineyard on the hillsides, comprising only about 250 acres in the DOCG zone, carry the name Cartizze on the label. A regulatory proposal is in the works to add another layer, termed Le Rive, for other hillside vineyards that are distinctive but separate from the Cartizze site).

Prosecco Quality Pyramid

So there you have it--the Prosecco quality pyramid. Prosecco DOC is the base, Prosecco Superiore Conegliano and Valdobbiadene sitting atop it, with Cartizze at the pinnacle. Rive, when they become formalized, will sit

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just below Cartizze and above Prosecco Superiore Conegliano and Valdobbiadene. (Occasionally you will see Prosecco-Treviso DOC or Prosecco-Trieste DOC if the grapes come entirely from those regions, but I have not been able to discern a consistent quality difference between those two and Prosecco labeled simply, Prosecco DOC, so I count them as part of the base.)

Another word about labeling: You may see either Spumante or Frizzante on a label of Prosecco. Spumante means it's fully sparkling, whereas Frizzante means it semi-sparkling or "fizzy."

Is Anyone Paying Attention?

Producers outside of the defined area certainly are paying attention because there's no more Brazilian Prosecco sold in cans. But the Italians--at least those in Venice, which is a stone's throw from the Prosecco area--don't seem to care about the regulations.

At the bar in upscale hotel perched on Venice's Grande Canal, I ordered a glass of Prosecco. The bartender poured me a glass of sparkling Soave. When I remarked that it was not really Prosecco, he insisted it was--implying that I was an ignorant tourist. At Mascareta, probably Venice's leading wine bar, the waiter offered me a glass of what he called "Prosecco." Indeed, it was fruity, fresh and delightful, like Prosecco. In reality it was not DOC Prosecco because, although it was made from Glera, the secondary fermentation occurred in the bottle, as in Champagne, a practice prohibited by Prosecco regulations for fear that aging the wine on its lees destroys its delicacy. The Charmat method--a secondary fermentation in large pressurized stainless steel tanks--is mandated for Prosecco to capture the fresh fruity nuances of Glera.

The scene was repeated at CoVin a tiny 16-seat trattoria with terrific food and a marvelous wine list. We stood at what serves as a take-out window and sampled an array of cichetti (little snacks) and "Prosecco." Just as at Mascareta, the bubbly was clean and refreshing. The Glera was grown in the Valdobbiadene, the newly created DOCG zone, but since it was re-fermented in the bottle, an increasingly common experimental technique especially among young producers in the area, it could not be labeled Prosecco. That detail failed to stop the owner from calling it "Prosecco." I could go on, but you get the picture.

Does It Matter?

There's no question that hillsides vineyards have the potential to deliver superior Glera grapes compared to vineyards on the flat land. Lorena Salatin of the eponymous superb Prosecco producer explains why with a single photograph, one showing dense fog sweeping in over the plains, bringing with it humidity and obscuring the vineyards. The hillside vineyards remain visible above in drier air. She continues, "The humidity in the plains damages the flowers (of the vine) and harms the delicacy of the grapes. The mountain freshness is responsible for the wine's complexity." That said, 17 of her family's 110 acres lie in the DOCG zone and she and her family don't always prefer those wines to those from the DOC Prosecco zone.

Francesca Ceotto from Le Contesse, an easy-to-recommend Prosecco producer, relates that they have vineyards in both the DOC and DOCG zones. She notes that the wines from the DOCG zone have more perfume and elegance compared to those from the DOC zone. Nonetheless, "DOCG wines are not always better," according to her, "some people prefer the wines from the DOC." She's quick to add that she always prefers the wines from the DOCG zone.

Angelo Facchin, whose wines sadly are not yet imported into the US, believes it's more important to focus on the wine, not the DOC or DOCG, noting, "sometimes the rules get in the way of what a winemaker wants to do." He thinks some DOC vineyards are actually superior to some DOCG sites. He urges consumers to look at the producer.

I find it hard to generalize because head-to-head comparisons between Prosecco DOC and Prosecco DOCG made by the same producer with the same level of sweetness are rare. All Prosecco is at least slightly sweet, but hopefully with enough buttressing acidity from the bubbles so that they are not cloying. Brut is the driest, followed by Extra-Dry. The sweetest style, confusingly labeled Dry, is the least common.

Stefano Gava, an enologist for sparkling wines at Villa Sandi, a superb Prosecco producer, led a comparison of DOC and DOCG wines of comparable sweetness during my recent visit to the area. Gava explains that traditionally Extra-Dry had been the standard style in Prosecco and the style for which producers saved their best grapes. He notes that some still do, including Villa Sandi, but more producers are focusing on the Brut style,

or at the other end of the spectrum, the Dry (sweeter) style.

We compared Villa Sandi, Prosecco DOC Treviso Brut with their Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG Brut. Both are easy to recommend. Villa Sandi's Prosecco DOC Brut was light and airy, clean and fresh, with a delicate creaminess. Their Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG Brut, was, in a word, better. It was just longer and more refined.

Turning to the Extra-Dry versions, my assessment was similar. As with the two Brut styled wines, both of Villa Sandi's Extra-Dry can be recommended. And, once again, the Prosecco Valdobbiadene Superiore DOCG edged out the DOC Prosecco in elegance.

At a reception, would you notice the difference between the Prosecco DOC and the Prosecco Valdobbiadene Superiore DOCG? I doubt it unless you were to taste them side-by-side and were paying more attention to them than to your companion.

Andrea Battistella, spokesperson for the Consorzio of DOC Prosecco, summed-up the distinction between DOC and DOCG succinctly, "There are some producers who are making very good DOC Prosecco and others making poor DOCG Prosecco."

I suspect most Americans won't notice a consistent difference between Prosecco DOC and Prosecco DOCG. To me, the message is clear--producer, producer, producer. With that in mind, let me list some of my recommended Prosecco producers.

Recommended Producers

Adami, Bisol, Bortolomiol, Bosco del Merlo, Ca Bolani, Carpenè Malvotti, Casa San Nicolò, Col Vetoraz, Frozza, Gregoletto, La Salute, Le Contesse, Maschio dei Cavalieri, Mionetto, Nino Franco, Paladin, Ruggeri, Salantin, San Simone, Villa Sandi, and Zardetto. Expect to spend between \$14 and \$25 for a bottle of Prosecco DOC or Prosecco DOCG from these producers. Prosecco selling at \$10 a bottle is likely to be significantly sweeter with far less elegance or complexity. Some of these producers, such as Mionetto, Zardetto, Villa Sandi or Maschio dei Cavalieri, are widely available, while others, such as San Simone, have more limited availability.

Reader, your job is to sample some Prosecco DOC and Prosecco DOCG, Extra-Dry and Brut and see which you prefer. Or stop with the analysis, sit back, relax and enjoy a glass--or two--of Prosecco.

* * *

E-mail me your thoughts about Prosecco at Michael.Apstein1@gmail.com and follow me on Twitter [@MichaelApstein](https://twitter.com/MichaelApstein)

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