

Italy's prosecco makers go to war against British pubs selling it on tap

A group of prosecco makers, with the support of the Italian government, threatens legal action against British pubs for serving the fizzy wine from kegs



The consortium believe serving prosecco from a keg is unforgivably gauche Photo: Alamy

By Nick Squires, Rome

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For a growing number of Britons it is a well-earned and seemingly harmless aperitif at the end of a long day in the office, but Italian wine makers have declared war on pubs and wine bars selling prosecco on tap.

A consortium of prosecco makers, backed by the government in Rome, is threatening British pubs with legal action and fines unless they stop serving the light, dry fizzy wine from kegs.

The group, which guards the image of prosecco as jealously as the French protect Champagne, has contacted the UK's Food Standards Agency and Intellectual Property Office, asking them to crack down on the "illegal" trade in prosecco on tap in wine bars and pubs across the country.

Outlets which refuse to buckle under could be taken to court under European Union trading regulations, the Italians say.

Serving prosecco from a keg, as though it was mass-produced lager or cider, is not only illegal but unforgivably gauche, they insist.

“If prosecco is sold on tap then it is no longer prosecco – it needs to be served directly from the bottle,” Luca Giavi, the director of the consortium of winemakers in the Valdobbiadene-Conegliano area of the northern Veneto region, told The Telegraph.

The principle is enshrined in a European law from 2009 which states that "prosecco wine shall be marketed exclusively in traditional glass bottles".

“We’re just trying to protect consumers – if they order a glass of prosecco, then that is what they should be getting. We’re safeguarding the reputation of prosecco – the producers of Champagne or Chianti or Barolo would do the same for their wines,” said Mr Giavi.

The row may seem like a storm in a tea cup, but the commercial stakes are high – last year Britain surpassed Germany as the top export market for prosecco, buying millions of pounds’ worth of Italian fizz, with sales spiking dramatically over Christmas and New Year.

“The UK market is growing tremendously and along with that we have seen a big increase in the number of locales selling prosecco on tap. We don’t want to sue but we need to find a solution to this,” said Mr Giavi.

Stefano Zanettin, president of the consortium, said bars found to be serving prosecco on tap could be prosecuted for “fraud” and fined up to 20,000 euros.

The Italian government also weighed into the row, promising to back the winemakers to the hilt.

“The government will act immediately, in conjunction with the EU, against the United Kingdom and the incorrect serving of prosecco in British pubs,” said Michele Anzaldi, an MP from the Democratic Party of Matteo Renzi, the prime minister.

“We will find out if sanctions have already been applied and if not how best we can discourage further violations that are damaging a valuable sector of our economy,” said Mr Anzaldi, who sits on the government’s agricultural commission.

Passing off fizzy wine on tap as prosecco was "a very serious abuse, perpetrated not by just any country but by one of the principal states of the EU," the MP added.

“It’s one thing to drink prosecco, a protected brand, but quite another to drink pseudo-wine pumped with carbon dioxide, as seems to be served in some British pubs.”

Marcus Hilton served prosecco on tap from his wine bar in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, until he was paid a visit by officers from the Food Standards Agency, who told him he was in breach of EU regulations. “They were quite aggressive about it. They said they were acting on complaints they had received from Italy,” he told The Telegraph.

Serving prosecco by pump had been popular with the many customers who did not want to order a whole bottle.

“We get a lot of professionals stopping by on their way home for a quick drink and they don’t want to buy a whole bottle. Selling it by the glass made it much more accessible to Joe Public,” he said.

Mr Hilton still imports prosecco from northern Italy, selling it wholesale to more than 200 bars in the UK.

But he has had to change the name from “draught prosecco” to “DP 1754”, with the “P” the only remaining allusion to prosecco. It sells for £3.95 a glass.

“We import it in casks but we can’t call it prosecco. I understand that the Italians want to protect the quality and image of prosecco, but on the other hand it seems to be going against the principle of free trade in Europe.

“There are other companies importing fizzy wine – in all I reckon they are selling it to 1,000 outlets. I don’t know exactly what they call it but people fly as close to the wire as they dare. “If you call it ‘frizzante’ (Italian for ‘fizzy’), people have no idea what it is.”

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