

Prosecco on tap – why do Brits trash great food and wine?

As the Italians try to ban British pubs and bars serving prosecco on tap, Harry Wallop examines the long history of British consumers adapting foreign cuisines in their own peculiar way



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

By Harry Wallop

3:50PM GMT 08 Jan 2015

Mamma mia! The expressions of horror from Italian wine-makers can be heard from across the Alps. British wine bars and pubs have been selling prosecco, the Italian sparkling wine, from a tap.

To the noble prosecco producers that dot the spettacolo near Treviso, Britain is treating one of Italy's finest exports as if it were no better than warm ale. The Queen might as well rip up her collection of Leonardo sketches and use them as scrap paper.

Giancarlo Vettorello, director of the Consorzio di Conegliano Valdobbiadene, one of the main consortiums of prosecco producers, has said: "For the British consumer, we say if they want to drink a real prosecco, they have to open a bottle, because prosecco can only be sold in the bottle." That British drinkers are being served the sparkling wine on draught, from a keg rather than a bottle, is being raised in the Italian parliament.

For Italians – and, indeed, many British epicureans – this is yet further proof that the UK is a country with no love nor care for great food, a country that considers the pinnacle of global cuisine as the frozen chicken tikka lasagne from Iceland (89p for 500g). Yum.

It is true that prosecco, back in 2009, was granted European protected status, but so are 221 other Italian food products – and 63 British ones for that matter, such as Buxton Blue cheese and Arbroath smokies.

This protected status means that the food or drink has to be produced in a certain geographical area and/or made in a certain way. It does not mean that we have to consume it reverently, with our heads covered in a linen cloth.

Prosecco was never a great European drink, aged for decades in cellars and fetching eye-watering prices. It was always a light, tasty, inexpensive aperitivo; it can come as no surprise to the producers that the likes of Lidl and Aldi shift hundreds of thousands of bottles at £5 a pop. As Peter Harden, the publisher and restaurant critic, says: “It does seem a bit precious to complain about how we are serving it.”

Crucially, pubs sloshing prosecco into glasses as if it were an alcopop is part of a long, and sometimes noble, tradition of Britain, magpie-like, nicking cuisines from around the world and adapting them in our own special way.

“The British palate is like a sponge,” says Elizabeth Carter, editor of the Good Food Guide. “Because we were a colonial power, we went around soaking up different dishes and making them our own. Look at tea-drinking, at chutney, at kedgeree. If you went to Bangalore or Delhi, I’m sure you couldn’t find Mulligatawny soup, but it originally came from India.” (Mind you, if you went to Basingstoke or Dudley, you’d probably couldn’t find this rather odd, deeply unfashionable beef soup either.)

But Carter is right. We are a country that has always embraced the exotic in our own peculiar way. Let’s not forget, Britain is a trading nation, whose stock exchange started in a coffee house and whose navy was fed on Caribbean rum.

When a wave of Hong Kong immigrants arrived in Britain, around the time food rationing was ending in the 1950s, Chinese takeaways boomed and we lapped up sweet and sour pork – but in those early days it was often served alongside bread and butter or chips. In 1958, Billy Butlin offered chicken chop suey with chips at his holiday camp.

Famously, chicken tikka massala is not an Indian dish, but concocted by immigrant restaurateurs from East Pakistan (as it was known then) trying to mollify British diners, who complained about tandoori-cooked chicken being too dry.

Snobs may decry Britons’ inability to spot an authentic dish from an ersatz one, but there is something rather marvellous about our desire to endlessly adapt, tweak and bastardise.

The 1990s craze for pesto, which swept across the country, soon sparked such aberrations as “red pesto”, “fiery spicy pesto”, “reduced fat red onion pesto”.

Balsamic vinegar from Modena is another Italian product with European protected status. But the British consumers, aided and abetted by the food manufacturing industry (incidentally, the biggest manufacturing sector within the British economy), has scant regard for such niceties.

Walk into a supermarket and you can find Hellmanns Balsamic Vinaigrette and “Special K Sea Salt and Balsamic Vinegar Flavoured Tapioca, Potato & Wheat Snack”. It’s not my idea of a tasty treat, but we are a nation with more flavours, spices and cuisines available than almost anywhere in the world. How we chose to consume them is up to us.

Let’s all raise a glass of (on-tap) prosecco to that.

How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2015