

# Dunne on Wine: Italian way with bubbles seizes American palate

## HIGHLIGHTS

Consumers drawn to prosecco's price, freshness

U.S. sales of prosecco are on the upswing

Popularity is gender-lopsided, toward women

BY MIKE DUNNE  
*Special to The Bee*

While Champagne is the most popular wine with which to toast significant milestones like the start of a new year, other sparkling wines are gaining enthusiastic followings in the United States.

They are apt to be from Australia, Chile, Spain or somewhere else, including California, which is yielding many of the best bargains in bubbly to be found in today's market.

But the wine source that looks to have caught the American fancy for wines with sparkle more than any other is Italy. Italian sparkling wines like franciacorta, lambrusco and trentodoc have developed an appreciative audience here.

The Italian sparkling wine that's become most popular in the United States in recent years, however, is prosecco. Sales of prosecco in the U.S. leaped from 500,000 cases in 2008 to 3.5 million cases last year, reports Shanken News Daily, which tracks the wine trade. It also noted that six of the 20 most popular non-Champagne sparkling-wine brands in the U.S. last year were prosecco, and sales of each grew by double digits: Mionetto, La Marca, Riondo, Risata, Zonin, Lunetta.

In Sacramento, prosecco's popularity is mixed, though overall it looks to have developed a solid niche, to judge by an informal survey of wine sales people and bartenders. "Our prosecco sales are great. On a good night we go through a half case to a case," says Scott Martin, bar manager at the midtown restaurant The Press Bistro. Hank Beal, director of adult beverages for Nugget Markets, says, "Prosecco sales have grown steadily over the past five years. La Marca has been a big driver, but we have several brands that do well. I think Sacramento is totally on board with prosecco."

What accounts for its popularity? The consensus of those who deal with consumers say its allure mostly is tied to its price – generally \$12 to \$15 in wine shops and grocery stores, a bit more in restaurants. Sparkling wines from elsewhere, especially Champagne, almost invariably cost substantially more.

But consumers also like prosecco's freshness, fruitiness, gentle fizz and relatively low alcohol (customarily around 11 percent). That several are at least delicately sweet also doesn't hurt. In the force of its beads of bubbles and in the depth and complexity of its flavor, it isn't as forthright, demanding and complicating as Champagne, but no one keen on prosecco is complaining.



Prosecco also has history, tradition and romance going for it. It comes from the Friuli and Veneto regions that sprawl north of Venice, where it's a compulsory afternoon libation, often mixed with white peach juice for a Bellini or strawberry purée for a Rossini. The first written reference to prosecco dates to 1772, but that was to the grape, not the style of wine. Originally, the wine was made with two strains of grape, prosecco tondo and prosecco lunga. As Italian wine authorities formally defined the region for the wine, the name of the prosecco grape responsible for the style was changed to "glera." That's because an appellation in Italy can't have the same name as a variety of grape, explains Sacramento grocer and Italian wine authority Darrell Corti.

While prosecco has been imported to the U.S. for decades, its popularity accelerated over the past few years as promotional campaigns pictured it as a festive, lighthearted and unpretentious sparkling wine that's splendid as aperitif or lunch beverage. The target audience primarily was women who in a bar would like a glass of something sparkling and sophisticated but inexpensive. That strategy looks to have worked.

"We do extremely well with prosecco by the glass," says Christopher Tucker, beverage director for the midtown Sacramento restaurants Hook & Ladder Manufacturing Co. and the Golden Bear. "We pour it both for happy hour and with our regular menu. It continues to be fairly gender-lopsided, skewing towards women, and it is consumed primarily as an aperitif or afternoon relaxer."

Prosecco is less expensive than many other sparkling wines in large part because the secondary fermentation that creates bubbles is done in big pressurized tanks rather than in individual bottles, as Champagne. For the most part, prosecco producers have stuck with the technique on the grounds that it better preserves fruity and floral aromas while also adding secondary fragrances to the final wine. Nonetheless, some vintners are adopting the more laborious techniques of Champagne houses, with consequently higher prices for their releases.

Basically, prosecco is made and marketed in two classifications, the basic DOC (for "denominazione di origine controllata"), and the more refined and limited DOCG (for "denominazione di origine controllata e garantita"). Proseccos bearing the DOC designation come from a broad area between the Adriatic Sea and the foothills of the Dolomites in northern Italy, while DOCG is a small defined zone within that region, stretching between the towns of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano. In 2013, the most recent year for which figures are available, 241 million bottles of prosecco were classified DOC while a bit more than 72 million bottles were DOCG, and that ratio more or less represents how the styles are represented in the American market.

Within the world of prosecco, other label terms that point to more demanding harvesting and winemaking standards and presumably higher quality are "Cartizze" and "Rive" for precisely defined subzones within the DOCG boundaries and "col fondo" for an old technique whereby the wine is bottled with natural yeast. By and large, proseccos are released without a vintage designation.

Stylistically, a prosecco referred to as "frizzante" will be lightly effervescent, otherwise known as "petillant," or what at one time was called "crackling" by California vintners smitten with the gently fizzy style, recalls Corti. "Spumante" is used generically for Italian sparkling wine, but generally suggests a wine that will be more assertively effervescent than "frizzante."

In the glass - tulip-shaped, preferably - well-chilled prosecco generally will be a bright and faint yellow tending toward straw, with languid bubbles, a shallow mousse and aroma and flavor suggestions running to acacia flowers, jasmine, apple, peach and pear.

Especially impressive DOC proseccos I've tasted lately include the Torresella (\$18), unusually rich and complex for the genre; the Lunetta (\$11/\$13), seductively floral, stony, spicy and vivacious; and the Candoni (\$13/\$15), appealingly fruity and liltily sweet, but also memorable for the Etruscan-inspired art etched on its bottles.

DOCG proseccos should deliver more character, and I found that to be true with the Bele Casel Asolo (\$16), whose fine bubbles were tinier and more vibrant than usual for prosecco and whose apple flavor was shot through with a thread of caramel; the Sommariva (\$14), also a study in fine and steady beads, with fruit suggestive of pear tart accented with marzipan; and the Nino Franco Rustico (\$15/\$18), substantial yet refined, with persistent streams of bubbles and clean fruit.