

CHAMPAGNE AND SPARKLING WINE

Why I'm so pro secco

PROSECCO MIGHT BE fermented in a giant can, but it's much easier to drink than Cava and other supposedly authentic bottle-fermented sparkling wines made from equally unsuitable grapes. Yet it could be so much more. When I visited the hills where Prosecco is grown and ran the soil through my fingers, I realized this land could produce one of the world's great sparkling wines—but it would take a great leap of faith.

In issue 24, I explained my view that Cava's Parellada, Macabéo, and Xarel-lo varieties gain nothing from time on yeast or post-disgorgement aging. There are always exceptions, but in general the process blurs the grapes; the longer they endure it, the duller their fruit. Ditto the Prosecco grape. That's why I applaud Prosecco producers for going to such lengths to preserve as much of Prosecco's primary aromas as possible. They quickly get it in and out of the big can, use unfermented grape juice both to aid the second fermentation and to form part of the residual sweetness, and sell it as fresh as possible. This is why I prefer Prosecco to Cava. Not because it is an intrinsically superior sparkling-wine grape, but because it is unadulterated by autolysis or any significant post-disgorgement aging, even though these are essential components of any great sparkling wine.

In the same column, I also put Chenin Blanc (thus Saumur, Vouvray, et al) in a similar category to the Cava grapes. I confessed I "have had some delicious exceptions." Not unsurprisingly, Chenin Blanc addict Jim Budd jumped on this, writing with heavy irony, "I have to say that in my unbiased opinion Tom is hopelessly wrong about Chenin Blanc. Indeed in conceding that 'I have had some delicious exceptions,' he fatally undermines his case. Had Tom cited a sole exception, that would have been different, but [by stating] 'some delicious exceptions,' he is merely pointing out not that Chenin is not adapted for making sparkling wine but that unfortunately many Loire sparkling wines are not very good." Naturally I disagree. The thought of there being only one exception to any of the



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mysteries surrounding wine is frankly ludicrous. Not only is it possible to encounter a tiny number of anomalies rather than just one, it is far more likely. For example, I have come across some inexplicably wonderful bottles of wine that have been stored under the worst possible conditions, not least a bottle of NV Moët that my great-aunt had kept in her attic for at least 14 years; but that does not mean an attic is a good place for storing wine. When I admit to "some delicious exceptions," it has more to do with being open-minded when an anomaly challenges my preconceptions than it does with a flaw in my logic.

So if, like Chenin Blanc and Cava's holy trinity, the Prosecco grape is not suited to the finer points of classic sparkling-wine production, how could the Prosecco region produce one of the world's great sparkling wines? The answer lies in the question: by growing a different grape variety, of course. I'm not suggesting we ditch Prosecco. It is essential to keep that grape and its unpretentious, user-friendly fizz going. It's cheaper to produce than Cava yet commands a higher price in smart bars, making it ideal to fund production of an additional super-premium "Prosecco," rather than a replacement.

When I first flew over the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene region a few years ago, I was mesmerized by the beauty of this

hilly region just north of Venice, set against the majestic backdrop of the Alps. I was also confounded by the thought of so many fabulous viticultural sites planted with so undemanding a grape as Prosecco. Even from a helicopter, it was clear that these sites were capable of growing far more classic and potentially complex varieties that I was eager to land and see what those grapes might be. Looking at a very steep, south-facing slope with clay and sandstone soil, I immediately thought of Pinot Nero. But as I came across drifts of moraine scree, I thought it could produce a fine Pinot Bianco, particularly in those parts where the scree had banked and the vine's roots could push down to a substantial depth. Then I reconsidered my original choice of Pinot Nero and thought it would be interesting to see how the clayey soil in the first site would hold back the Pinot Bianco. After that I came across calcareous loam and clay soils, which could make possible another, more delicate interpretation of Pinot Bianco. I realized I was looking at a mosaic of truly exceptional viticultural sites that, if planted with Pinot Bianco (admittedly, not the first grape that comes to mind when thinking on a classic scale), could produce an amazing array of truly great sparkling wines.

In my next column, I will elaborate on the potential of sparkling Pinot Bianco in the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene region and the leap of faith it will require. In the meantime, if anyone in Venice wants to drink Bellini (Prosecco with fresh peach juice), taste one at Harry's Bar, where it was invented, then take a short stroll along the promenade to the Hotel Danieli, where you can enjoy the best Bellini in the world. After a Bellini crawl through Venice, I was sure the Bellini served in the Danieli's Bar Dandolo is the best by miles; but it was only while chatting to the barman, Solindo Soncin, that I discovered he has won the Best Barman in Italy title since the year dot. No wonder he makes a great Bellini—and a wicked Rossini with strawberries when peaches are out of season. ■