

How Prosecco could be so much more

IN MY PREVIOUS COLUMN, I elaborated on why grapes like Prosecco do not benefit from time on lees, autolysis, or post-disgorgement aging and are thus better suited to a swift bottling and sold as young and fresh as possible. I also discovered, however, a mosaic of exceptional viticultural sites within the Prosecco region that could, if planted with Pinot Bianco, produce an amazing array of great sparkling wines.

What Prosecco producers have achieved in terms of honest quality—not to mention profitability per bottle—is a textbook lesson that Cava, Sekt, and other sparkling-wine industries would do well to ponder. Ten years ago, no one had heard about it, and now it is everywhere. Yet they could do so much better. Not by getting rid of Prosecco; that would be madness. But I would ask producers: Is Prosecco the be all and end all of Conegliano-Valdobbiadene wine? Is it their ultimate ambition? I don't think it should be. I think Prosecco should be the cash cow that drives the industry onward and upward.

Phase one would be to retain the services of one of the very few world-class sparkling-wine consultants—Michel Salgues or Tony Jordan. Their initial task would be to carry out a survey of the entire region by helicopter and on foot, to identify which plots would be best suited to the production of modest-yielding, high-quality Pinot Bianco. While this is happening, a planting program of Prosecco vines should be initiated on some of the flatter land within the DOCG that has not yet been exploited. This is because, as soon as Prosecco vines are grubbed up in the best potential Pinot Bianco plots, new Prosecco vineyards should be in production to prevent any hiatus in the supply of grapes for the vital cash cow that will be funding the new wine.

Currently there are about 1,000ha (2,470 acres) of unexploited land within the DOCG. This is approximately one fifth of the appellation, which should be more than adequate to cover the Pinot Bianco plots that would have to be grubbed up. Some of the highest and



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steepest slopes that could well suit Pinot Bianco are not even cultivated. Not all the best potential sites are either high or steep, of course. There are many beautiful, gently sloping sites that have ideal soil and exposure. All the best sites in Conegliano-Valdobbiadene are on south-facing slopes at an altitude of 165–1,650ft (50–500m), which results in a high diurnal difference in temperatures. The crisp, cool nights preserve naturally high acidity, and this will give the right clones of Pinot Bianco modest alcohol with an exceptional intensity of flavor.

Phase two would be the selection and planting of Pinot Bianco clones. Why just Pinot Bianco when Pinot Nero was my first thought when encountering a very steep, south-facing slope with clay and sandstone soil? The answer is not simply because I came across more plots on which the moraine scree might better suit a fine Pinot Bianco, since that would simply be an argument for planting both varieties. No, I confess that the idea of exclusively Pinot Bianco is influenced by marketing considerations. As soon as Pinot Nero and Bianco are put together, there is the image of Champagne, which fortunately is not conjured up with Pinot Bianco on its own. This gives a Pinot Bianco sparkling wine a chance to establish its own reputation. And since, to my knowledge, there is no pure Pinot

Bianco sparkling-wine appellation anywhere in the world, it represents a niche waiting to be carved. If that niche is carved with a sufficiently high-quality bottle-fermented Pinot Bianco, it should provide the freshness, purity, intensity, and elegance to make a statement—and yet a natural progression from Prosecco.

Phase three would be making and aging the wine, and this is where Prosecco producers will need the assistance of a world-class sparkling-wine consultant. All Prosecco is *cuvée close* and most is non-vintage, with just 20 percent of producers selling vintaged Prosecco cuvées (though this is set to increase with the introduction of the new Rive designation). A vintaged *metodo classico* will therefore be something of a culture shock for most Prosecco producers, and even those who already make an acceptable standard of vintaged *metodo classico* will benefit greatly from the vast experience and focused attention of the likes of Salgues or Jordan. If this new wine is going to work, an acceptable standard just won't hack it. It will be sold at two or three times the price of Prosecco, so the quality must be pretty special from the start. There is, however, one aspect of this project where Prosecco producers need look no further than one of their own, if they are not prevented by their own pride. And that is the marketing of Bisol. Like all Prosecco producers who also make and sell vintaged *metodo classico*, Bisol could do with some help tweaking the finesse of those cuvées; but as far as Prosecco itself is concerned, Bisol has it all meticulously sorted. The consistency throughout the Bisol range is incredibly consistent. What makes this producer stand out from the rest, however, is that it specializes in vintaged single-vineyard Prosecco, and the presentation of those wines is a class apart. Consumers should never judge a wine by its label, but Prosecco producers would be unwise to follow the same advice. Bisol's vintaged single-vineyard cuvées earn a significant premium, and their presentation gives the consumer every confidence that it will be worth paying. ■