Seeing red

Tom Stevenson

Earlier this year, I confessed on Twitter that I have Lambrusco in my cellar. As my newfound respect for what was once widely avoided has come rather late in my life, I should explain why I eventually crossed the fizzy red line and, hopefully, encourage some fellow fizz fanatics to try it sooner rather than later.

Part of my cellar is set up for "rotating" stock, both still and sparkling. This is where I keep wines I love but do not wish to age, such as magnums of *brut nature* and—*voilà!*—Lambrusco.

Why, after a lifetime of tasting Lambrusco professionally, have I only now started to enjoy it socially? It is all thanks to a new generation who have increased quality and, crucially, focused on brut styles. They are producing wines that increasingly have a sense of place and true varietal expression. Where there was once little more than a rustic, overly sweet cherry flavor, there is now a richness without weight and an elegance of fruit that makes new-wave Lambrusco a joy to drink. Moreover, in the best examples we find a fine, tapering tannin structure that makes them uniquely useful with food.

Don't get me wrong: It is not a complete makeover. The domestic market is still flooded with the old-fashioned stuff, mostly churned out by industrial-sized cooperatives (though not all Lambrusco co-ops are bad), which keep harvesting the same volume of grapes and putting it through its first fermentation, even though the bottom has long since fallen out of their market. So, the wines stack up, and by the time of the second fermentation, they are already old, brown, dull, and lifeless.

They could improve quality overnight by dumping their geriatric stock and starting afresh, but since this would leave a massive hole in their accounts, it would require a tax break to make it practical and a law ensuring that all Lambrusco must be bottled within six months of harvest to prevent history repeating itself.

The new wave is part of a trend not merely to restore pride in the Lambrusco name but also to push the sparkling-red concept beyond anything achieved elsewhere. This has seen an increasing number of growers leave the modest yet secure income that co-ops offer to set up their own domain-bottled ventures and the exciting new ventures of long-established producers—such as the Cleto Chiarli estate set up by Chiarli, the largest and oldest of all Lambrusco producer.

On the one hand, we have growers reducing yields, exploring the effects of terroir, and being fascinated by the potential of Lambrusco's unique contribution to gastronomy. On the other hand, we have the likes of Cleto Chiarli, who are challenging the very basis of how Lambrusco should be made.

Chiarli still operates its massive bottling plant in Modena itself, but at Cleto Chiarli, in the rural environs of Castelvetro di Modena to the south of the city, it makes a range of Lambrusco by a single fermentation. Here you find no wines stored in tank awaiting a second fermentation, just refrigerated fresh must. Significantly more expensive, but Chiarli believes this process creates greater freshness and typicity. Tommaso Chiarli and other like-minded producers have agreed to make Lambrusco by both methods from grapes grown in exactly the same vineyard and harvested on exactly the same day, and I cannot wait to put these wines through triangular tastings.

Lambrusco is supposed to have its roots in antiquity, but a reliable source of consistently *frizzante* or *spumante* Lambrusco did not emerge until 1860, when Chiarli was established. As a wider-based industry, Lambrusco took off after 1895, when Federico Martinotti invented the *cuve close* method, and in 1926 Frank Hedges Butler noted that "when carefully made and bottled at the right time, it is an admirable wine." By 1964, however, quality had declined, prompting Waverley Root to write disparagingly that "every Lambrusco I have ever tasted has been thin and tart, perilously close to vinegar."

Until this juncture, dry Lambrusco was as well known as sweet, and the best were considered artisanal products. But the image of Lambrusco changed in the 1970s, when Villa Banfi made a fortune selling cheap, sweet Lambrusco in the United States. For almost two decades, Lambrusco was America's biggest-selling, imported wine, and its sweet, cheap, mass-produced image persists, even though the US today is probably the most exciting market in the world for new-wave Lambrusco.

There are a number of different Lambrusco appellations in Italy, most in the lush valley vineyards of Emilia-Romagna, where we find the DOCs (or DOPs) of Grasparossa di Castelvetro, Modena, Reggiano, Salamino di Santa Croce, and Sorbara, with just one in Lombardia (Mantovano). Three quarters of all Lambrusco is sold not under a DOC/DOP but as Lambrusco Emilia IGT. Grasparossa, Salamino, and Sorbara are also varieties of Lambrusco, and many other varieties and subvarieties exist.

Secco, not brut!

Lambrusco is produced as either fully sparkling (*spumante*) or semi-sparkling (*frizzante*), and under blind conditions, I prefer 20 times as many *frizzanti* as *spumanti*. Don't ignore *spumante*, but explore *frizzante* first. Stupidly, the term brut is not allowed for *frizzante* (EU-wide), and while most fizz geeks steer clear of secco for a fully sparkling wine because it has 17–32g/l RS, they should zero-in on it for *frizzante* because it represents an entirely different sweetness category of 0–12g/l RS: *Frizzante secco* is a brut in all but name.

Try one of my current favorites: Cantine Lombardini 2018 Il Campanone; Cleto Chiarli 2018 Vecchia Modena Premium; Salamino di S Croce 2018 Tradizione; Albinea Canali NV Foglie Rosse; Albinea Canali NV Codarossa; Cantina Settecani NV Vini del Re; Corte Manzini NV Bolla Rossa. ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell