

SAY PROSECCO FOR GOOD TIMES

Add some sparkle to your holidays
with the Veneto's bubbly crowd-pleaser

[By Patricia Thomson]

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If wines had a Miss Popularity contest, Prosecco would take the prize. Who doesn't love this effervescent quaffer? It perks up any party, goes with any menu, and the \$10 price tag is just right. There's no snob factor involved (a big plus in any popularity contest), yet it exudes an air of romance. We're talking Venice, my friends! Gondolas, lagoons, Bellinis on St. Mark's Square!

For me, Prosecco conjures up my first visit to Padua, a serene Renaissance city that was once under Venetian rule. Crossing a piazza one afternoon, I noticed a cluster of people milling about, all holding flutes of wine. Drawing closer, I spied a storefront with a counter facing the piazza, like any *gelateria* on Italy's busy streets. But this was an open-air wine bar. You walk up, get your wine, then stand around sipping from decent stemware, like an al fresco cocktail party on a Renaissance piazza. (Doesn't every city need one of these?) I asked for the fizzy stuff that everyone else was drinking, and it was thus that I discovered Prosecco, with its sea-foam bubbles and fresh, fruity character. (Think crisp, juicy apples and lemon zest, rather than the toasty, yeasty

character of Champagne.)

Italians consume 70 percent of all Prosecco production, which totals 170 million bottles per year. Though Italians are locavores by nature, Prosecco is the exception to the rule. It's been embraced throughout the peninsula, much like *tiramisu* (another Venetian invention). Prosecco is poured in fancy restaurants as a liquid amuse-bouche. It's the only wine you see Italians drinking at cafés before dinner (running second to neon-orange Aperol cocktails). And at holiday time, Prosecco corks can be heard popping all across *bell'italia*.

For most American consumers, buying Prosecco is pretty easy. Just about every wine shop offers at least a few big brands—Mionetto, Zardetto, Bisol—and, truth be told, any will do if you're just looking for a casual but festive sipper.

But Prosecco is more complicated than that—in a good way, like the girl with a pretty face who reveals hidden depths of personality once you get to know her. So to truly understand Prosecco, you need to get beyond the surface and explore things like sweetness levels, vineyard sites, and evolving classification rules. Let's drill down:

Sweetness & Sparkle

Prosecco is by no means a sweet wine, but it does have varying levels of residual sugar hidden beneath those effervescent bubbles. The terminology follows the French system, with labels indicating Extra Brut, Brut, Extra Dry, Dry, Demisec, and so on, progressing from drier to sweeter. By far the most popular style—the one that runs freely at restaurants and bars, including my Padua watering hole—is Extra Dry. This (counter-intuitively) means that it has a touch of sugar (12–17 g/l), which tends to give a fruitier character; it's more of a crowd-pleaser. Personally, I prefer the drier Brut (less than 12 g/l), which is a bit cleaner, more mineral and austere. Try them both.

There are also different levels of fizz. Just eyeball the bottle: If it's a big-busted champagne-style bottle with mushroom cork, it contains a full-on sparkling Prosecco (labeled *spumante*). A normal wine bottle with a regular wine cork offers the gentler *frizzante* style, which is rare but gaining popularity among back-to-the-roots winemakers.

Lay of the Land

Prosecco comes from the former Republic of Venice, an area that fans out towards the alpine foothills of the Veneto and into Friuli. It's a stunningly beautiful region. Decaying



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY PATRICIA THOMSON

VINEYARD VIEW: The vineyards of Valdobbiadene are noted for producing top-quality grapes for prized Prosecco sparkling wine.



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ITALIAN WINES

Palladian-style villas line the back roads from Venice to Treviso—vast compounds encircled by walls topped with statues of graceful goddesses who stare blankly out to the road and pine for better days. These villas were built by wealthy aristocrats and merchants from Venice who fled the lagoon's muggy summers and headed inland. Their exodus was in fact encouraged by the Republic of Venice after the once-indomitable maritime city-state started losing power. Feeling the heat from the Ottoman Empire on its eastern flank, Venice encouraged its citizens to buy land and grow crops that would help the Republic remain self-sufficient agriculturally. And so they did, building these elegant villas and planting grapevines along with the crops. (Some of these villas have been lovingly restored, such as the splendid Villa Sandi, headquarters to the eponymous Prosecco winery and shared by the Geox shoe company, owned respectively by brothers Giancarlo and Mario Moretti Polegato.)

Vast oceans of Prosecco come from this broad stretch of land. That is what's labeled Prosecco DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*), and it's the less expensive, simpler quaffer.

But the magic words for Prosecco are Val-

dobbiadene (VAL-doh-bee-AH-dee-ney) and Conegliano (Co-nel-YAWN-o). The most prized Prosecco comes from the ridge of hills that rises from Conegliano on the plain and runs 20 miles west to Valdobbiadene. This is the DOCG zone (*denominazione di origine controllata e garantita*), and it's the steep slopes around Valdobbiadene where the glera grape does best. (Yes, you heard right: *glera*. But more on that later.)

I've trudged up those hills when scouting a hiking tour in Valdobbiadene. And boy, are they steep—the kind that make your calves burn. I remember scrambling up one path and peering over the far side. There on a slope that plummeted down at a sharp angle were tight rows of vines hanging on for dear life. It's a wonder the harvest workers could arrive without a funicular.

Later I learned this hill was Cartizze, the jewel in Valdobbiadene's crown. Situated between the villages of S. Pietro di Barbozza, Santo Stefano, and Saccol, Cartizze is like a humpback whale rising to great heights over a sea of vines. Its steepness is its secret to success, providing good drainage and, more importantly, longer exposure to the sun due to the angle of the slope. Thus the grapes become more ripe, succulent, and sweet by

harvest time, which results in Prosecco with more focus in its flavors and a higher degree of alcohol.

One million bottles come from this hill, and all proudly display its name: Prosecco Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze. Which brings us to labels.

Labeling: The New Rules

In 2009, the official rules were rewritten for Prosecco. The impetus was to curtail the unchecked growth of imitators on the periphery of the zone and around the world. The upshot was the elevation of Prosecco from Valdobbiadene and Conegliano to DOCG status. Outlying zones were elevated from IGT (*indicazione geografica tipica*) to DOC, with a commensurate tightening of requirements for yield per hectare and so on. Beyond this delimited zone, the word *Prosecco* is off limits. Imitators now have to call their wine something else, like the name of the grape: *glera*.

Most wine encyclopedias list *prosecco* as the grape. They note that it was named after the town of Prosecco near Trieste, where the grape seemingly originated. (The ancient Romans were already using it to make wine here.) The good citizens of Prosecco, however, called their grape *glera*. And hence-

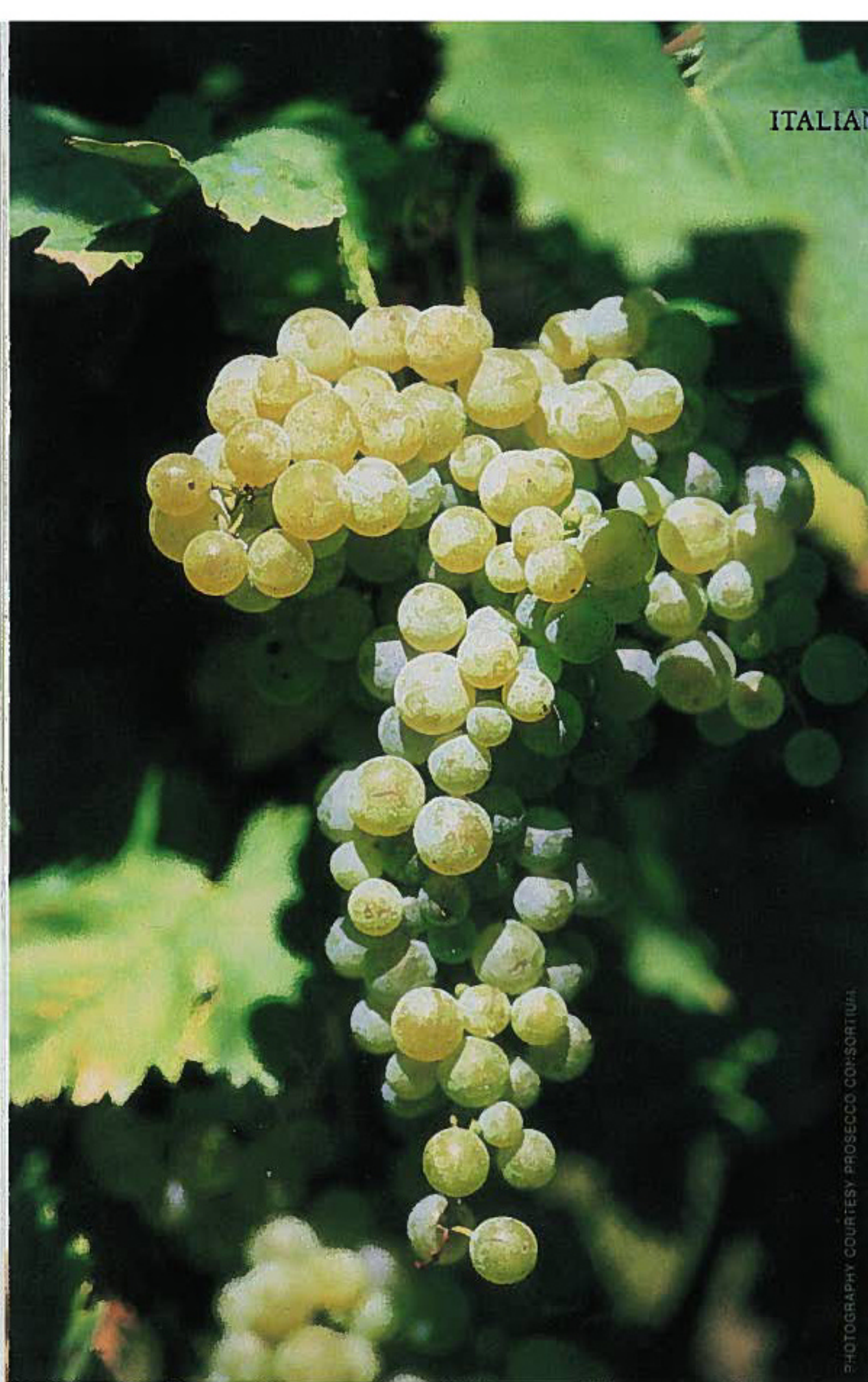


PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY PATRICIA THOMPSON

CLASSIC STYLE: Built in 1622, elegant Villa Sandi is typical of Palladian-style villas in the Veneto, and was restored by the Morretti family for its Prosecco winery.



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GRAPE BOUNTY: Glera grapes for Prosecco; the town of Valdobbiadene; Valdobbiadene vineyards are planted on steep hillsides.



forth, so do we. In sum: Prosecco no longer a *grape*, but a precise wine-producing *region*.

What matters to the consumer is this: Under the new rules, Prosecco Superiore from Valdobbiadene and Conegliano doesn't have to bear the word "Prosecco" on the label anymore. Instead, you're just supposed to *know*. (And now you do.)

Another change: Cartizze isn't the only hill that gets the glory. Other hills in the DOCG zone are being recognized with a new "Rive" specification. *Rive* is a dialect word meaning "vineyards planted on steep land." Labels will say "Rive di..." and specify the commune or hill name. There are currently 43 Rive in Conegliano Valdobbiadene. Expect to see more.

Who cares?

All these rules point to distinctions that Prosecco winemakers care about very much. You can't go to a winery in Valdobbiadene without feeling like you're discussing the *cru* of Barolo. That's not quite the case, but it is fun to taste their line-ups and suss out the finer distinctions.

But for here and now, let's keep it simple. Do you want some sparkle in your holidays? If so, pick up a Prosecco. It's sure to bring good cheer.

Patricia Thomson is author of the blog *Living La Dolce Vita* and runs wine tours in Italy through La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.



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DEVAUX	
Champagne depuis 1846	
ATEAU ARDELLE	147.00
ATEAU ARDELLE	133.00
ATEAU ARDELLE	118.00
ATEAU ARDELLE	111.00
ATEAU ARDELLE	121.00
ATEAU ARDELLE	121.50
ATEAU ARDELLE	175.00