



COURTESY OF THE ASOLO CONSORTIUM

ASOLO

THE OTHER PROSECCO

Located in Italy's Veneto region, this lovely town is filled with lively bars, elegant 18th century villas, and Neoclassical art, but is also home to a booming industry that produces sparkling wine.

BY PATRICIA THOMSON

Pruning the vines in winter.
Opposite page: Prosecco is the perfect aperitif.



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ITALIAN WINES

Once upon a time in the land of Prosecco, things went like this: In the Ferraro household, near the town of Asolo, Grandma Gina would empty the living room of furniture. Her family would then cart in several hundred bottles of wine to kickstart a second fermentation inside each bottle, to create the bubbles. They knew that yeast needs warmth to start feeding on the sugar added to the wine, and the living room was warmer than the garage, the rudimentary “cellar” where the base wine was made. Only once did the corks leak on the living room floor.

This was a time of farmer wine, of what’s now called *col fondo* (“with sediment”), well before pressurized stainless steel tanks or “autoclaves” made it possible to create Prosecco bubbles in bulk and industrialize the process. Prosecco has come a long way since then. In fact, Prosecco DOC (denominazione di origine controllata) has been one of the most successful worldwide phenomena, growing to a record-breaking 627 million bottles in 2021. Its popularity is completely understandable. Pour a glass of Prosecco and the party begins! It’s never intimidating. Couple that with its freshness, versatility, and pizzazz, and you’ve got a sure winner.

But to fully understand Prosecco, you have to imagine a vast sea of Prosecco DOC wine. Out of that sea rise two islands. These are the Prosecco DOCGs (denominazione di origine controllata e garantita), the *crème de la crème*. The largest and more famous is Conegliano-Valdobbiadene (100 million bottles). The smaller is Asolo (21 million bottles). The two are divided by the Piave river and share a hilly terrain (unlike the DOC which came from the plains). Remember, as the ancient Roman historian Pliny the Elder said, “Bacchus loves hills.”

I went to Asolo to explore its wine. The town itself is lovely, perched high on a hill and filled with porticos, lively bars, and elegant 18th century villas. The 16th century architect Andrea Palladio worked in these parts, as did Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, a favorite of Napoleon Bonaparte. The elegance of Asolo Prosecco is all part of a piece.

The little winery that could: Bele Casei

I visited two wineries, one big and one small. The smaller, Bele Colle, is more typical of the area. It’s this winery that’s owned by the Ferrero family. They never stopped making *col fondo* (a style



Top: A lineup of Asolo Proseccos. **Above:** Enrico Bedin, far right, with two of his children, Francesco and Benedetta.

that’s now ultra trendy because of the natural wine movement). But they also make four Asolo Prosecco Superiore DOCGs, arriving at 150,000 bottles in total. “If you hear the number 150,000, it sounds like a lot of bottles,” says Paola Ferrero, Gina’s granddaughter. “But if you think about the Prosecco world, it’s a very tiny number.”

From those humble beginnings of making *col fondo* in the living room and base wine in the garage, the winery slowly grew. Paola and her older brother, Luca, were mostly raised by their grandparents. After their parents came home from their day jobs, they went to work on the wine. Luca stuck close to Grandpa Ilario, who made him a child-sized rake, wheelbarrow, and other farm tools. “I was practically born in the fields with my nonno,” says Luca in Italian, who is now Bele Casei’s agronomist. “When he chopped hay, I chopped hay. When he adjusted the farm machines, I was with him. When he watered the vines, I went too. He had big tools, I had small ones.” Ilario died when Luca was nine, but by then his attachment to the vineyards ran deep.

The transition from garage to winery is often hard for small family operations. Fermentation tanks and other winemaking gear cost well beyond most family budgets. But the Ferraros had an ace up their sleeve. The father, Danilo, happened to be a sales rep for filters and other winery equipment. When some winery wanted to upgrade or had a machine break down, he would take the old unwanted machine home and fix it up. So little by little, they acquired all the requisite gear. “Otherwise it would have

been so expensive, we wouldn’t have been able to afford it,” Paola says.

The great leap forward came in 1998, when they got their first importer. From there, things went full-steam ahead. Today their lineup includes five sparkling wines. The most popular is Extra Dry, which makes up two-thirds of their production. Counterintuitively, Extra Dry is on the sweeter side of the Prosecco dryness scale, at 12–17 grams per liter of residual sugar. Most Americans prefer this style, with its hint of sweetness (perceived as fruitiness) and its suitability as an aperitif.

Personally, I prefer the bone-dry Extra Brut (0–6g/l), a category introduced in Asolo with the 2014 vintage. For that same reason, Bele Casei’s *Col Fondo Agricolo* suits me too, since it’s even drier than their Extra Brut (4g/l), coming in at 0g/l by law, the yeasts having eaten every last morsel of sugar in the bottle. By definition, *col fondo* is unfiltered, without added sulfites, and not disgorged, so it’s cloudy with lees (the dead yeast cells) when poured in a glass.

Both Prosecco and *col fondo* have to be at least 85 percent *glera*. Winemakers can add up to 15 percent of Chardonnay, pinot noir (vinified as a white), or obscure local varieties like *bianchetta*, *perera*, and *rabbiosa*. Bele Casei distinguishes itself by using these local grapes, found in an old vineyard they purchased in 2013. From that field blend, they make both the *Col Fondo Agricolo* and the Extra Brut. “I like to define them as brothers at the beginning when it’s the base wine, then cousins at the end,” Paola says. “You can tell they come from a similar base, but the ways of producing them are very different.”

Five antique grape varieties plus *glera* make their way into their *Vecchie Uve* (“old grapes”), coming from vines averaging 50 years in age. To increase complexity and richness, the base wine spends a full year on the lees with regular *batonnage* (stirring), followed by another year in autoclave. There’s a rule that all Asolo Prosecco must make its bubbles in tank, using the



Bedin's brand-new Extra Brut Asolo Prosecco.

ITALIAN WINES

“I CALL THIS A BIKINI WINE, BECAUSE IT HAS NOTHING TO HIDE BEHIND.”



PHOTOS: PATRICIA THOMSON

Top: Paola Ferraro shows the antique grapes that grow in their old field blend.

Above: Villa Barbero, also known as Villa di Macer, was designed by architect Andrea Palladio in the 1500s.

Charmat method. But with Vecchie Uve, they're trying to approach the complexity of a metodo classico wine (where secondary fermentation happens in bottle on the lees before disgorging, like in Franciacorta and Champagne) without breaking Prosecco's rules. Vecchie Uve is an elegant, creamy sparkler, brimming with ripe pear, lime, and minerality. I call this a bikini wine, because with 0g/l, it has nothing to hide behind.

Bedin's pivot to success

Bedin is now the second-largest winery in Asolo, with 2 million bottles and 19 labels. But it's still family-run. It officially started in 1948 as a traditional farm with animals and mixed crops, including some vineyards planted by Giacomo Bedin, grandfather of the four brothers who now run the show: Enrico (on the commercial side), Denis (winemaker), Damiano (vineyards), and Luigi (the restaurant). In the 1980s, the brothers shifted focus. They sold the animals, opened an agriturismo (a type of farmstead B&B), stopped with the vino sfuso (bulk wine), and started bottling under their own name. By the mid-1990s, they were exporting to Austria, Germany, Switzerland; other markets followed. Now they also buy grapes from other growers to meet demand.

I sat down with Enrico and two of his children: Benedetta, who joined the winery just one year ago, and Francesco, who's still studying enology in Conegliano. All the locals can taste the difference between the two DOCGs. "Asolo is more fat (grasso), more creamy, with a finer, more elegant bubble," Enrico says in Italian. "It's more robust in structure, the bubbles are more velvety and less violent in the mouth. Valdobbiadene is a bit skinnier with a bubble that's a bit more aggressive." This confirms my first impression of Asolo Prosecco, that it had a finer bubble than Valdobbiadene.

In Bedin's case, their Brut (8g/l) is the most popular of their Proseccos, with 80 percent exported. But the Extra Dry (14g/l) remains the favorite among Italians, who like it both as an aperitif and with dinner. I liked it too. It has white peach aromas mixed with golden apple and linden blossom. The fresh acidity perfectly balances the dollop of sweetness. This year, Bedin added an Extra Brut to their lineup of Proseccos, which now number four. In addition, they also have a Prosecco Rosé (more on this new DOC in a future article).

Bedin has felt the growth in demand for their Asolo Proseccos. That echoes a boom in the appellation as a whole. "The DOCG born in June 2009. Before it was Montello-Colli Asolani DOC," Enrico says. "In 2010, Asolo made 1.2 million bottles. By 2021, it was making 21.6 million," a remarkable growth by any yardstick. To make that possible, vineyards have increased, more than doubling over that period, going from 800 to 2000 hectares (1976 to 4942 acres). To enable this growth, the consortium has allowed planting on the plain. The jury is still out as to how that affects quality.

Other Asolos to try

When exploring Asolo Prosecco, there are other quality producers to seek out. Giusti has a female enologist, Graziana Grassini, who's also been the winemaker behind Tuscany's famed Sassicaia since 2011. There's Perlage, one of the first to go organic. Tenuta Baron is a small operation recently started by two young brothers. Plus there's La Gioiosa, owned by the same family who owns Villa Sandi, maker of Valdobbiadene Prosecco.

Next time you need an excuse for an instant celebration, whether it's the winter holidays or just a get-together with girlfriends, reach for a bottle of Asolo Prosecco.

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