

BRACHETTO: FROM CLEOPATRA TO THE PRESENT

A SWEET, FOAMY RED WINE THAT'S GREAT WITH
CHRISTMAS SWEETS AND CHOCOLATE

BY PATRICIA THOMSON

There's a legend about brachetto tied to Cleopatra. Brachetto is the aromatic, sweet foamy red wine that tastes like strawberries, red raspberries and roses. Its production is centered around Acqui Terme, founded by the ancient Romans in Piedmont. The more romantic version of the legend goes like this, according to Lorella Carresi, communication manager at Banfi, which makes a Brachetto d'Acqui called Rosa Regale: "Legend says that both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony presented Cleopatra with several wine skins filled with this luscious elixir [then called vinum acquense], knowing it would be love at first sip. The empress then had her lovers drink the wine in order to unleash their passion, and the rest is history."

Andrea Costa, the fourth generation at Marengo winery, which makes four versions of brachetto, has a different take on the tale. According to Costa, Julius Caesar was on his way to conquer France when he stopped in Piedmont. He noticed the hot springs and vineyards, so he decided to stay awhile and founded the town of Acqui Terme. They started to make a sweet and fruity wine with the brachetto grape. Julius Caesar hadn't yet conquered Egypt, which he set out to do through Cleopatra. "The legend says that the Julius brought brachetto to Egypt to convince Cleopatra," says Costa. "It's a convincing wine, I have to say."

For those who have never tried it before, Costa says brachetto is best described as a red moscato. Both Acqui Terme and Strevi, where Marengo is located, are ideal for brachetto to develop its intense aromatics due to the proximity of both the Mediterranean and the Apennine Mountains.

"This light, together with this nice wind that refrigerates the grape, is very useful for the creation of terpenes, which are the primary aromas in moscato. And brachetto is the same, just with red skin." Costa goes on to say, "Linalool is the most present terpene in moscato and Geraniol is the most present in brachetto. The terpenes are the aromas of the so-called primary aromas, because those are in the berry."



Marengo's single-vineyard
Pineto Brachetto d'Acqui.
Photo courtesy Marengo

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Above: Vineyards of Marengo winery in Strevi. It is ideal for growing brachetto because of its location between the Mediterranean and the Apennine Mountains. Photo courtesy Marengo.
Below: Freshly picked grapes await the next step in the harvest. Photo courtesy Marengo.



He continues: “The area of brachetto is much smaller than moscato. Moscato has nearly 2,500 acres, whereas brachetto has less than one-tenth at that.” Ten villages around Acqui Terme are permitted to grow brachetto, making less than one million bottles. That’s not a whole lot.

How brachetto is made and food pairings

How Brachetto d’Acqui is made has evolved over the years. One constant is that they stop fermentation at 5% alcohol through filtration. That’s very low alcohol; nowadays most still wines range from 13-15% ABV. In the 19th century, stopping fermentation used to be done by repeatedly filtering the wine through tubes of a Dutch fabric resembling sailcloth. Marengo still has some on display in their cellar for history’s sake. But then Martinotti invented the pressurized autoclave in 1895 and the Gancia winery put it to use, first on moscato and then on brachetto.

Nowadays, everyone uses the temperature-controlled stainless steel autoclave as it allows for refermentation at low temperatures, which preserves the aromas.

Brachetto is traditionally drunk around Christmas with panettone (a towering round bread with raisins and candied citrus peels) or Easter with colomba (Easter dove bread). It’s popular to give as a present around the winter holidays or for a birthday. And since brachetto goes so well with chocolate, it’s popular around Valentine’s Day, too. Italians serve it with



Above: Andre Costa and his father, Giuseppe, flank the three Marengo sisters, Patrizia, Doretta and Michela. Photo courtesy Marengo. **Below:** Banfi’s Rosa Regale Brachetto d’Acqui. Photo courtesy Banfi.

bunt, a custard-like Piemontese dessert made with cocoa and crumbled amaretti cookies.

Speaking of pairings, it goes great poured on strawberries. It even couples with watermelon. It also goes well with spicy foods. In Piedmont, that would include spicy salumi with black pepper and garlic. Costa has even tried brachetto accompanied by risotto with beetroot and Gorgonzola at a restaurant in Milan. “I wouldn’t have invented it, but the chef did. It’s amazing.”

Another legend

There’s a relief embedded in the small piazza in front of Marengo’s winery. Beneath the Latin text “Septe Brium” are seven chalices. They stand for the seven brothers who founded Strevi. Costa tells me the story: “So the legend says that there used to be a family of ten brothers. Of these ten brothers, seven of them really liked wine. They came here to Strevi, because this is a place suitable for vineyards, and founded a village called *Septebrium* in Latin, which means seven drunk people, or let’s say seven wine lovers to make it softer. And the three that didn’t like wine founded another village on the other side of the river. This village called Trisobbio: three sobers. So the seven wine lovers made Strevi and the three sobers made Trisobbio. I don’t know if they tell the legend the same way over there, but that’s how we say it in Strevi.”



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Above: The Pineto vineyard where Marengo grows its cru brachetto. The wine is traditionally enjoyed during holidays where it pairs beautifully with sweet bread such as panettone. Photo courtesy Marengo.

Brachetto's more recent history got a big push by the Bersano and Banfi wineries, which invested heavily in technology and communications. "I have to say that it's thanks to them that consumers even know that brachetto exists," says Costa. Arturo Bersano, based in Nizza Monferrato, was a pioneer who understood the potential of brachetto, making his first brachetto in 1957, using the autoclave. Banfi is based in Montalcino and the Mariani family bought property in Strevi in 1978, just one year after acquiring the Tuscan property.

Marengo's four versions of brachetto

In the 1990s brachetto became trendy, so many wineries were planting the grape. But Costa's grandfather started with brachetto in the 1950s. Costa observes, "We were making brachetto before the trend, during the trend, and after the trend." Marengo currently makes four types of brachetto, and there's soon to be a fifth. There's the classic Brachetto d'Acqui, called Pineto after the vineyard it comes from, which is a frizzante wine, sealed with a straight cork. They also make a spumante Brachetto d'Acqui, with higher atmospheric pressure inside the bottle, which requires a Champagne cork. The spumante ferments longer, so it has less natural sugar and one degree more alcohol. Personally, I prefer the frizzante version,

which has more fruit and is more aromatic. Costa says, "I'm with you on that."

Marengo makes a rare brachetto passito, a still dessert wine made from dried grapes and aged two years in barrel. Their newest brachetto, a rosé, they came up with during the pandemic when they had time to play around in the cellar. It's fresh and aromatic and has everything you'd want from a rosé. And there's a new wine on the horizon: a still, dry brachetto. I've tasted one at Matteo Corregia winery in Roero and it's very good. Rounding out the list is a grappa distilled from brachetto pomace.

Other brachettos to try

The two most popular Brachetto d'Acqui's according to wine-searcher.com are Marengo's Pineto and Banfi's Rosa Regale. Third in line is Giacomo Bologna's Brachetto d'Acqui, which is where I first tasted this wine. I've also had Bersano's Brachetto d'Acqui, which is quite good and highly aromatic. For a bottle of Brachetto d'Acqui, you'll spend around \$15 to \$20. The chocolate is extra, of course.

Patricia Thomson (patriciathomson.net) is a wine writer and brachetto fan ever since she first tried it.