



SPARKLING SUCCESS

Italian bubbly shines with distinctive examples from regions throughout the boot **BY ALISON NAPJUS**

Prosecco has brought Italian sparkling wine to the forefront of the wine world, but delicious sparklers are produced in nearly every region across the country, many of them labeled simply as *vino spumante*.

But if you're a wine lover who wants to get to know Italian sparklers, there are four key areas to focus on: Franciacorta, Trentodoc, Prosecco and Lambrusco. These sparkling wine-specific appellations draw attention to one of the big dividing lines in bubbly production: the method used for the second fermentation and the creation of the all-important bubbles.

Franciacorta and Trentodoc mandate production via the traditional method, also known as the classic or Champagne method. The first step is the same as for all wine production, with harvested grapes undergoing an alcoholic fermentation to yield still wine.

The crucial point of the traditional method is that the second fermentation—the one that turns still wine into sparkling wine—takes place in the bottle that will later be sold to the consumer. For most Prosecco and Lambrusco production, vintners utilize the Charmat method, in which the second fermentation occurs prior to bottling. Also known as the tank or autoclave method, this technique requires a substantial quantity of the still wine blend to be placed in a large, pressurized tank, where the second fermentation takes place.

Italian sparkling wine is defined by its diversity. In addition to these different production methods, the country's distinct grape varieties, unique growing conditions and individual producer interpretations all make for a wealth of options in an exciting range of styles. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at WineSpectator.com/ItalyAlpha103119.)

FRANCIACORTA

Inspired by Champagne

Fraciacorta, located just east of Milan in the Lombardy region, is home to the Italian sparkler most closely connected to France's Champagne. Franciacorta's rolling hills are reminiscent of Champagne's landscape, vintners utilize the same (traditional) method of production and the climate allows the same grape varieties that thrive in Champagne—Chardonnay and Pinot Noir—to excel locally.

Yet sparkling wine didn't arrive in Franciacorta until the 1960s; instead, the area's history includes centuries of still wine production. But Champagne inspired a young enologist, Franco Ziliani, to try his own interpretation at the Guido Berlucchi estate, resulting in the first bottling of Pinot di Franciacorta in 1961.

"Part of the luck of Franciacorta is that we really began in the '70s, exactly when the Italian wine renaissance started," says Maurizio Zanella, owner of Franciacorta's Ca' del Bosco winery. "We started with a clear idea to look to France, not to Italy's industrialized past." That focus has helped Franciacorta to make big strides in terms of quality in a relatively short period of time.

The potential for sparkling wine from the area was quickly recognized. In 1967, the Franciacorta DOC was created under Italian wine law. The designation was raised to DOCG status in 1995, and today, sparkling wine production in the area vastly outpaces that of still bottlings, accounting for roughly 90% of the Franciacorta area's total output.

Area producers happily acknowledge Champagne as Franciacorta's original guiding light, but they are quick to point out that by now their product stands alone.

"I think Champagne is very different than Franciacorta," says Emanuele Rabotti, owner of his family's Monte Rossa estate. "The thing we have in common is the method, but the flavors are totally different, and we want to remain different. And that's fine, because Champagne lovers can drink Champagne, and Franciacorta lovers can drink Franciacorta."

In my opinion, part of Franciacorta's charm is its stylistic divergence from Champagne. Franciacorta enjoys a Mediterranean climate that results in sparkling wines with a different balance than in Champagne. The wines are typically rounder and more approachable, while remaining fresh and focused. Speaking in broad terms, they're aperitif sparkling wines in the best sense of the word: abundantly sippable, with a wide crowd appeal, but also a fine match

for light fare and other food such as Lombardy's famed risottos.

Franciacorta's climate helps to differentiate the area's sparklers, but other factors give the wines their own identity too. Vineyards are planted at about the same elevation as in Champagne, at an average of 750 to 800 feet above sea level. But Champagne's soils are Kimmeridgian chalk, with some clay, while Franciacorta's soils are morainic in origin, the result of deposits left behind by an ancient glacier. This gives the relatively small area, just under 8,000 acres of vines, a diverse range of soil types, from fine-grained and silty locations to loamy sand- and clay-laced sites to those dominated by gravel and stone. These soil types contribute to the rounder, more open-knit quality of Franciacorta's wines, whereas Champagne's chalky base promotes a racier verticality to the region's bottlings.



Arturo Ziliani of Franciacorta's Guido Berlucchi

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir plantings in Franciacorta eclipse those of Pinot Bianco, even though some wine styles legally allow the three grapes in equal proportions. Additionally, beginning with the 2017 harvest, almost all styles of Franciacorta allow up to 10% of Erbamato. With only 25 acres under vine at this time, the inclusion of Erbamato looks to the future, as producers believe this late-ripening, high-acidity variety may be the answer to climate change in coming years.

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir may be the main focus in Franciacorta, but family-owned Mirabella is an advocate for Pinot Bianco, which comprises about 15% of the winery's vineyard plantings and contributes a significant portion to its blends. Winemaker Alessandro Schiavi, working with his brother Alberto and their father,

winery founder Teresio, explains their dedication to Pinot Bianco. “The acidity of Pinot Bianco and its aromatic character help to keep the wine fresh and fragrant even with malolactic fermentation,” he says, referring to a technique used widely in sparkling wine production—and universally at Mirabella—to promote balance and a textural roundness in the wines.

Pinot Bianco is also essential to a signature style from Franciacorta labeled as Satèn. Made entirely from Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco, Satèns are Franciacorta’s take on Champagne’s *blanc de blancs*. They’re aged for at least two years before disgorgement and bottled at less than 5 atmospheres of pressure (Prosecco is commonly 3.5; Champagne is 6). The result is elegant versions with a creamy plushness to the mouthfeel.

Beyond Satèn, consumers should also look for no- or low-dosage bottlings, a popular trend in all sparkling wine regions at the moment. “The future of Franciacorta is no dosage,” enthuses Arturo Ziliani, winemaker at Guido Berlucchi. “It’s the natural vocation of our territory.” He explains that the area’s producers customarily harvest fully ripened fruit thanks to the Mediterranean climate, resulting in wines that don’t need a dose of sugar to balance acidity at the end of production.

“If you love low dosage, then Franciacorta is the place for you,” agrees Lara Imberti Radici, who owns Ronco Calino winery with her husband, Paolo, where they produce a number of no- and low-dosage bottlings.

Producers like Ronco Calino, founded in 1996, and Ferghettina, established in 1990, represent Franciacorta’s next generation of wineries, joining historic leaders such as Guido Berlucchi, Bellavista and Ca’ del Bosco.

In total, Franciacorta’s production is only about 1.4 million 9-liter cases, a fraction of Champagne’s 26.7 million cases and Prosecco’s 35 million cases. And for now, most estates still sell the bulk of their production to the Italian market, with the U.S. representing only the fourth key export country for Franciacorta.

“Franciacorta is not an area with a big name, because we have very little production,” says Teresio Schiavi as he muses on Franciacorta’s place in the world and the next steps for the region. “But the number of producers is stable, so now we’re in the perfect period for us to communicate our product and for everybody to keep the focus on high quality.”

RECOMMENDED FRANCIACORTA

93 CA’ DEL BOSCO Franciacorta	\$90
Cuvée Annamaria Clementi Riserva 2008	
92 CA’ DEL BOSCO Rosé Franciacorta	\$130
Cuvée Annamaria Clementi Riserva 2008	
92 MIRABELLA Brut Rosé Franciacorta NV	\$29
92 MIRABELLA Franciacorta Satèn NV	\$31
91 CA’ D’OR Brut Franciacorta Noble Cuvée NV	\$32
91 CONTADI CASTALDI Brut Franciacorta Satèn 2014	\$55
91 LA MONTINA Brut Franciacorta Satèn NV	\$26
90 GUIDO BERLUCCHI Brut Franciacorta ’61 NV	\$34
90 CA’ D’OR Brut Rosé Franciacorta	\$38
Noble Selezione Grand NV	
90 FERGHETTINA Brut Rosé Franciacorta 2013	\$60
90 LA MONTINA Brut Franciacorta NV	\$22

TRENTODOC

Alpine Minerality

Northern Italy’s Trentino area, the southern half of the larger Trentino–Alto Adige region, offers astonishing beauty. The craggy peaks of the Dolomite Mountains loom above quaint hillside villages and the apple tree–lined valley floor. This dramatic landscape is reflected in the region’s sparkling wines from the Trento DOC appellation, racy versions that marry finely honed acidity with expressive flavor and minerality.

The Trento DOC appellation, whose wines are referred to collectively as Trentodoc, is one of Italy’s youngest areas recognized



Vineyards in Trentino-Alto Adige

for sparkling wine production. Franciacorta, Lambrusco and Prosecco received their own regulated appellations in the late 1960s and early 1970s; Trento DOC was only established in 1993. Yet the reputation of the area’s wines has come a long way in a relatively short time period, with a number of factors helping them to achieve higher quality and growing commercial success.

From a historical standpoint, one of Trentodoc’s largest producers, Ferrari, played an important role in the region’s prosperity. Although Trento DOC dates to 1993, Giulio Ferrari produced the first traditional-method sparkling wine from area vines in 1902, following a visit to Champagne. French inspiration also led Ferrari to plant the first Chardonnay vines in Trentino. Today, regulations for Trento DOC allow equal proportions of Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco, Pinot Meunier and/or Pinot Noir, largely following Champagne’s example.

In 1952, lacking an heir, Ferrari sold his winery to the Lunelli family, who have contributed to Trentodoc’s modern-day achievements. At the time of the sale to the Lunellis, Ferrari was producing fewer than a thousand 9-liter cases annually; today that number is nearly half a million. The winery is one of the region’s biggest promoters, for both Italian and foreign markets, with roughly 20% of its production exported worldwide and 20% of that to the U.S.

“Around 30 years ago, our expansion really began, and since

then it's been continuous," says Matteo Lunelli, CEO of Ferrari, who works with family members Marcello, Camilla and Alessandro, the third generation of Lunellis to run Ferrari. But, he adds, the development of the region overall has been more recent. "For Trento DOC, the real growth has been in the last 15 to 20 years," he says. "Ferrari was always here, and the cooperatives, but now we see other, small producers wanting to start."

"When it began [in 1993], there were only a few wineries producing Trentodoc—only five or six," says Alessandra Caroni, export manager at Maso Martis, a sparkling producer established in 1990 by Antonio and Roberta Stelzer. "Now it's more than 50, and the popularity is only increasing."

Some of Trentodoc's production comes from estates like Maso Martis that began with a focus on sparkling wine. But most were still wine producers who at some point added sparkling wine production to their range, and the region's recent growth is largely fueled by such developments.

Cantine Monfort, owned by the Simoni family, made still wine exclusively for more than 40 years before trying sparkling wine production in 1986. Today its sparkling wines account for 20% of its business, according to family member Federico Simoni. "It's not easy, because the know-how you need for classic method [sparkling wine] is very high," he says. "And to make something, it takes years before you see the results," he adds, referencing the mandated minimum-aging periods for Trentodoc wines. Non-vintage versions must be aged at least 15 months prior to release, vintage-dated bottlings a minimum of 24 months and those labeled as *riserva* a minimum of 36 months.

Contributing to the overall "know-how" are a number of successful cooperatives. With many people in Trentino owning and working very small vineyard parcels—the average plot size in the region is about 2 acres—viticulture could easily have suffered the abandonment issues seen elsewhere in Italy without the financial support of local cooperatives.

That same system of economic support also furthers the transmission of knowledge in the region. Not only can one generation pass on expertise to the next, without opting to sell their vines to a novice, but the cooperative also facilitates communication among all of its growers.

"This area really has a family story," says Corrado Aldrighetti, agronomist for Cesarini Sforza, a sparkling producer in Trento since 1974 that was purchased in 2001 by the Cantina La Vis cooperative. "And the grower's relationship with the vintner is very strong—each working together on a strategy in the vineyard to get the fruit result they want for a specific wine."

Cesarini Sforza works with 700 growers. Mezzacorona, whose Trentodoc bottlings are released under its Rotari line, works with 1,600. Trentino's largest producer, Cavit, a cooperative making Trentodoc under its Altemasi label, works with 4,500 growers.

Like the cooperatives—and similarly to Champagne—many Trentodoc producers take a two-fold approach: In addition to owning land where they grow and harvest their own grapes, they also

buy grapes from the area's small growers. This allows wineries to blend fruit sources from distinct zones within the larger Trentino area, bringing greater diversity and complexity to their wines.

Trentodoc bottlings can legally source grapes from anywhere within the designated boundaries of the Trentino DOC. Bottlings from the DOC encompass a wide variety of white, rosé, red and dessert wines, but sparkling wine is allowed only under the Trento DOC appellation. Trentino's vineyards start at about 650 feet and rise to nearly 2,950 feet; within this range, vineyards that typically contribute to Trentodoc wines go from about 1,000 to 2,600 feet.

Although each smaller grapegrowing area within the Trentino DOC offers its own specific *terroir*, the soil in the region can generally be described as limestone with sand, along with a plateau of porphyry. This distinctive soil type, composed of large, volcanic rocks, is present in greater or lesser quantities depending on a given site's location. Overall, this combination means the region's vineyards are well-drained and mineral-rich. The growing seasons are warm and largely dry, with most of the area's annual 45 inches of rain taking place during the winter months.

Both the climatic conditions in Trentino and the characteristics of its soil contribute to the concentration of ripe stone, berry and citrus fruit flavors exhibited in bottlings of Trentodoc, as well as a pronounced, saline-laced minerality. Partnered with a firm frame of acidity resulting from the higher elevation of the region's Alpine sites, the wines are typically linear and tightly knit. They are excellent for food pairing, particularly with the region's many versions of speck and rich local cheeses.

Like Franciacorta and many other sparklers, Trentodoc owes its inspiration

to Champagne, and it's often held up to its famous French counterpart. But it remains distinctive, expressing minerality and acidic structure in a different way—really homing in on both elements.

"The richness of Trentino is that you have all this altitude," says Matteo Lunelli. "It's all mountain fruit, but with different aromatic character, different profiles, different dates of harvest."

"In the end, we're giving the same components different equilibrium and focus," says Mezzacorona head winemaker Lucio Maricardi. "It's a classic method, but with a Trentino dialect."

"The richness of Trentino is that you have all this altitude. It's all mountain fruit, but with different aromatic character, different profiles."

—MATTEO LUNELLI

RECOMMENDED TRENTODOC

92	CESARINI SFORZA	Extra Brut Trento Tridentum Riserva 1673 2009	\$56
92	FERRARI	Extra Brut Rosé Trento Giulio Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore 2006	\$285
92	FERRARI	Extra Brut Trento Giulio Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore 2007	\$135
92	MASO MARTIS	Brut Trento Madame Martis Riserva 2008	\$170
91	FERRARI	Brut Trento Perlé 2012	\$42
91	MASO MARTIS	Trento Dosaggio Zero Riserva 2014	\$56
91	CANTINE MONFORT	Brut Trento Riserva 2012	\$50
90	CESARINI SFORZA	Brut Trento NV	\$28
90	CANTINE MONFORT	Brut Rosé Trento NV	\$40

PROSECCO

Beyond the Basics

While other sparkling wines from Italy are all about discovery, northeastern Italy's Prosecco region, with its softly sparkling bubbly, has fully integrated itself into the consciousness of American wine lovers. Imports of Prosecco to the U.S. doubled in just five years to reach close to 7 million cases in 2018, according to *Impact Databank*, a sister publication of *Wine Spectator*.

At this point, Prosecco has almost become a byword to mean any sparkling wine. In reality, Prosecco DOC, the most widely available example from the region, is specifically the product of vineyards that span a large swath of approximately 70,000 acres through the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia regions. The soft, creamy texture and approachable structure that Americans love is the result of the Charmat production method, and the pretty floral and peach flavors typical to the wine are characteristics of the area's native Glera grape, Prosecco's dominant variety.

These basic facts are a quick snapshot to explain Prosecco to any novice wine drinker. But like any wine, there are many interpretations of Prosecco. Although area producers are wildly happy about Prosecco's runaway success, they're now struggling to get consumers to pay attention beyond the basics.

"We did this impressive job of exporting the lifestyle of drinking Prosecco, of making it more than just sparkling wine for celebration," says Nino Franco, owner of his family's near century-old estate. "But a lot of people have been jumping onto this train," he adds, concerned about new entries to the marketplace that are made from purchased grapes or wine, with no history or true connection to the area.

Although entry-level Prosecco DOC, with its modest, roughly \$15 price point and easy drinkability, will continue to fuel the category's success, the region's historic producers hope consumers will explore further in order to understand and enjoy the character of Prosecco from specific areas within the larger Prosecco zone.

"We have to convey that Prosecco is not only one thing, it's actually three," says Gianluca Bisol, general manager of his family's Desiderio Bisol & Figli winery, referring to the DOCG zones of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco and Asolo, in addition to the basic Prosecco DOC. "Of every six bottles in the marketplace, only one is from [one of these] historic areas."

Compared to Prosecco DOC, Prosecco's two DOCGs are much smaller delineated areas, both located about an hour north of Venice in what is considered the traditional heart of Prosecco. The tiny Asolo DOCG, roughly 2,000 acres in total, accounts for a limited number of examples in the U.S.

Much more widely available are versions from the larger Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG, a 20,000-acre region recognized earlier this year as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These versions, from vineyards in and around the charming towns of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene, may be labeled as either Conegliano DOCG or Valdobbiadene DOCG, or with the combined Conegliano Valdobbiadene DOCG. Both are tongue-twisters for many Americans; what is easier to recognize (and say) is *superiore*, which is legally allowed on the label of these DOCG bottlings and

is almost ubiquitously used by producers from the area.

The vineyards of Conegliano, located in the eastern part of the historic zone, are characterized by clay layered with stone, sand and iron. The resulting wines typically show more rich fruit and structure, with a notable overtone of zesty ground spice.

To the west, Valdobbiadene's vineyards originate from raised seabeds that left behind sandstone and marl. There's more delicacy to the floral and fruit flavors of sparklers from Valdobbiadene, as well as greater acidity, giving them a sleek raciness. The more pronounced acidic profile is the result of higher-elevation vineyards; sites around Conegliano start at about 160 feet above sea level, while some of Valdobbiadene's highest vineyards rise to about 1,300 feet.

Among these higher-altitude vineyards, some of the steepest are



Gianluca Bisol of Prosecco estate Desiderio Bisol & Figli

Valdobbiadene's prized Cartizze hills, labeled as *Superiore di Cartizze* and representing the pinnacle of quality in Prosecco's hierarchy. Encompassing 265 acres of vineyards, the area is divided between roughly 140 owners. Cartizze vineyard land is among the most expensive sparkling wine acreage in the world; though parcels rarely change hands, recent sales indicate a price of about \$800,000 per acre, more than Champagne's \$540,000 per acre.

The Cartizze harvest is often a week or two later than harvest for other grapes in the Valdobbiadene area. Combined with the convex shape of the vineyard sites, the extremely ripe fruit at harvest results in wines that are richly fruit-forward. Yet the higher elevation of these sites preserves a firm backbone of acidity, a crucial component for balance, as the wines are commonly bottled and labeled under the "dry" designation, indicating a wine with more residual sugar (anywhere from 17 to 32 grams per liter vs. brut's 0 to 12 grams).

As with its vineyard land, Cartizze bottlings typically demand Prosecco's highest prices, anywhere from \$35 to \$50 per bottle. Comparatively, bottlings from the Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG are usually less, typically between \$20 and \$30.

In between, at about \$25 to \$35 per bottle, are wines labeled as *Prosecco Rive*. A *Rive* is one of 43 sub-zones centered on small hamlets in the Valdobbiadene area that have been recognized for the distinctive character of the wine from that hamlet's vineyards.

“We did this impressive job of exporting the lifestyle of drinking Prosecco, of making it more than just sparkling wine for celebration.”—NINO FRANCO

They're not single vineyards, but they provide further definition to the unique *terroirs* present in the Prosecco region.

Villa Sandi has enjoyed success in the U.S. with its *Superiore di Cartizze Vigna La Rivetta*, which retails for about \$50, selling roughly one-third of the annual 1,200-case production in the U.S. “If we have such good sales of *Cartizze*,” says Flavio Geretto, export manager for Villa Sandi, “it means there is the possibility of premium Prosecco in the U.S.”

Enore Ceola, CEO of Mionetto Prosecco, is more cautious about the potential success of DOCG Prosecco in the U.S. “The average consumer, or even the educated consumer, they sometimes have a hard time understanding the difference,” says Ceola. “If you haven't been to Valdobbiadene, if you haven't seen the steep hills—unless you understand this firsthand—it's very difficult to know why there is such a difference [in these wines].”

“I think it's going to be a discovery process,” adds Ceola. “And in the years to come [these differences] will be more relevant than today. But I think the most important thing is that we continue to produce a very good quality sparkling wine, without taking Prosecco's popularity for granted. And there is a very common and focused effort from the top producers to keep our quality high.”

RECOMMENDED PROSECCO

91	LE COLTURE Dry Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore di Cartizze NV	\$34
91	NINO FRANCO Brut Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Vigneto della Riva di San Floriano 2017	\$37
90	BORTOLOMIOL Brut Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Ius Naturae 2017	\$28
90	BORTOLOTTI Extra Dry Valdobbiadene Rive di Rolle Piai Alto 2018	\$27
90	NINO FRANCO Dry Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Primo Franco 2017	\$37
90	MIONETTO Brut Nature Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Cuvée Anniversario 2016	\$22
89	MASOTTINA Brut Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Rive di Ogliano Contrada Granda 2017	\$35
89	MONGARDA Extra Dry Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore 2018	\$18
89	VILLA SANDI Extra Dry Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore NV	\$21
88	BOTTER Extra Dry Prosecco Gran Passione NV	\$13
88	LE COLTURE Brut Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore Fagher NV	\$20
88	MIONETTO Extra Dry Prosecco Made with Organically Grown Grapes NV	\$16
88	ANGELO REBULI & FIGLI Extra Dry Prosecco di Treviso NV	\$17
88	SENTIO Extra Dry Prosecco NV	\$15

LAMBRUSCO

Historic and Distinctive

Lambrusco, northern Italy's lightly sparkling red wine from the Emilia-Romagna region, is not as well-known as some of Italy's other sparkling offerings, and it's not an easy category to sum up. “Lambrusco is not a young wine—it's a very old wine,” says Anselmo Chiarli, co-owner with his brother Mauro of Cleto Chiarli e Figli, one of Emilia-Romagna's oldest Lambrusco producers. “It has its own special history, but it's not really known around the world.”

Lambrusco is emblematic of the distinctive offerings that can be found in Italy: wines rich in regional tradition and history, made from native grape varieties and offering idiosyncratic style and character with few parallels outside of Italy.

But there are also hurdles to overcome. The wine's industrialized past, with the insipid, sweet versions of the 1970s and 1980s, hasn't done its reputation any favors. Even today, with decades of work by area producers to raise the quality and image of Lambrusco, it's hard to get consumers to take this lively red seriously.

Alicia Lini, who works with family members running their century-old Lini Oreste & Figli winery, has seen that uphill battle firsthand. “I'd come to the U.S., to try to sell, but really it was more to teach consumers what quality Lambrusco could be,” says Lini of her early experiences in the American market, in 2004. “While today, there is a request for Lambrusco. I think Americans [are beginning to] understand, and want to dive into it, to experience it.”

Lambrusco is gaining renewed attention with wine lovers in the U.S. on its own merits. But it's also riding the coattails of the easy-going outlook that Prosecco has brought to the sparkling wine category, as well as the advent of the “rosé all day” phenomenon. These two trends highlight the integration of accessible wines into daily routine, and Lambrusco is a fitting complement to that philosophy. Lini reports that exports to the U.S. have increased 85% to 100% each year for the past decade.

It helps that Lambrusco is abundantly food-friendly, and Italian wine in the U.S. often gets its first introduction at restaurants with sommeliers guiding diners to less-familiar offerings. Many Lambruscos layer light tannins with lively acidity, giving them good structure to match with many dishes, from cold cuts to pizza to grilled meats, but not so much structure that it overpowers the food.

It also helps that Lambrusco is a very approachable wine. The light structural components of many versions are cloaked in a soft, creamy mousse, typically the result of the Charmat production method widely used in the area. This method also highlights more primary fruit and aromatic notes, creating expressive character that leaps from a glass of Lambrusco, drawing you in for a sip.

The Charmat method was introduced in the 1950s as a cost-saving technique, and during Lambrusco's boom period last century it widely replaced the traditional method of sparkling wine production. Many producers still bottle at least one cuvée using the traditional method—look for *metodo classico* on these labels—and some wineries, such as Bellei, dedicate themselves entirely to sparkling wine production from the traditional technique. These wines typically feel firmer on the palate, with a fine, detailed mousse, as compared with the Charmat method's foamy creaminess.

Beyond an understanding of the category as a whole and how the wines are made, Lambrusco challenges wine drinkers to explore different grape varieties, appellations and labeling terms in order to fathom what a specific bottle has to offer.

Generically, the term Lambrusco groups more than 60 separate Lambrusco grape varieties. The most successful merit their own DOCs, including the widely available Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro and the Lambrusco di Sorbara and Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce appellations. Each of these Lambrusco-specific DOCs require a minimum of 60% to 85% of the named Lambrusco variety; they allow other Lambrusco and local varieties in the remaining blend, such as the deep-hued Ancellotta. Similar requirements apply to the Emilia IGT and Reggiano DOC, the two other appellations that are commonly seen in the U.S. and that include production of sparkling red and rosé from Lambrusco grapes.

Among these appellations, Lambrusco di Sorbara is the most esteemed. Until the 1950s, it was the only Lambrusco known outside of the Emilia-Romagna region. Sorbara is naturally low-yielding, which provides concentration, and it thrives in the DOC's sand-based soil (with some limestone and clay), bringing a mineral component to the wines as well as a pretty floral overtone.

Additionally, Lambrusco di Sorbara is an outlier among the Lambrusco category for its color, producing a dark pink- or light garnet-hued version, rather than the intensely red-purple color of wines from other Lambrusco appellations.

"Sorbara is natural rosé," says Alberto Paltrinieri, who decided to produce only Lambrusco di Sorbara bottlings when he and his wife, Barbara, assumed responsibility for his family's Cantina Paltrinieri winery in 1998. "It's its own natural color—it's not elaborated that way," he adds, referring to the fact that Sorbara wineries do not utilize the techniques commonly practiced to make sparkling rosé.

In addition to a sense of which appellation names to search for on the label, consumers need to be aware of wine styles from Lambrusco—specifically, whether a version is dry or sweet.

The sickly sweet, colalike versions of the 1980s are largely a thing of the past, but off-dry or lightly sweet versions have a historical place in the region's wines and can still be found today. Wines from the Reggiano DOC, in particular, often include wine produced and labeled as *dolce* (sweet) or *amabile* (slightly sweet). These terms are not always prominent on the front label—in fact sometimes they're in very small print on the back label only. But despite the indication of sweetness, quality producers still make harmonious versions; lively acidity balances the riper fruit profile, as does the interplay with the savory, herbal side of many Lambruscos.

Wine lovers looking for Lambrusco in a drier style should seek out bottlings labeled as *secco* (again, often in fine print on the back



Lambrusco producer Tenuta Pederzana in Emilia-Romagna

label only). Production of these dry versions is far more common today than it was even a decade ago.

"In 2008, I sold about 80% sweet Lambrusco," says Mattia Montanari, owner and winemaker at Ca' Montanari. "Every year I promoted the dry version, because I felt this was and is the *real* Lambrusco. Today, I sell half my annual production in the U.S., about 35,000 bottles [each year], and 90% of it is dry."

"Lambrusco can be a universe of different varieties," says Alberto Medici, who co-owns Medici Ermete with family members Pierluigi and Alessandra. "And each winery can show something completely different in style, and all of it's called Lambrusco."

Lambrusco is a wine that's worth the effort of exploring its varied styles, with a generally high level of quality available from today's producers.

"This diversity," says Medici, "is the beauty of Lambrusco."

RECOMMENDED LAMBRUSCO

91	TENUTA PEDERZANA Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro Gibe 2017	\$20
91	TENUTA LA PICCOLA Lambrusco dell'Emilia Pico Ross 2017	\$18
90	FIORINI Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro Terre al Sole 2017	\$21
89	UMBERTO CAVICCHIOLI & FIGLI Secco Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro Col Sassoso 2017	\$18
89	CLETO CHIARLI E FIGLI Secco Lambrusco di Sorbara Vecchia Modena Premium 2018	\$18
89	LINI ORESTE & FIGLI Lambrusco Rosé Emilia Labrusca 910 NV	\$18
88	CANTINA DI CARPI E SORBARA Brut Rosato Lambrusco di Modena Piazza Grande NV	\$13
88	MEDICI ERMETE Secco Reggiano Lambrusco i Quercioli NV	\$15

Senior editor Alison Napjus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on Italian sparkling wines.