

LAMBRUSCO REINVENTS ITSELF

Lambrusco became hugely popular in the 1970s due to its sweet, fizzy style and then fell out of favour in mature markets. Michèle Shah discovers that new viticultural and vinification techniques are restoring Lambrusco to its rightful place as a terroir wine.

According to Gian Paolo Gavioli, Lambrusco remains one of Italy's most popular wines. He says that the latest Nielsen data for supermarket sales shows "Lambrusco at the top of its list for sales in volume at 28.5m litres at a value of €73.2m (\$99m)."

Gavioli is export manager of one of Italy's most powerful cooperatives, Cantine Riunite & CIV, which has some 2,000 grape growers farming 4,000 ha of vineyard. The company sells 105m bottles per year, mainly Lambrusco, of which 45% is exported globally - a number that is growing, as the company revamps Lambrusco's image and reveals an improved, more terroir-driven wine.

Long history

Over the past 20 years Gavioli has travelled the world far and wide, marketing the wines of Emilia-Romagna and brand-building Lambrusco. According to Gavioli, Lambrusco's main driver of sales is its easy-drinking appeal: a fresh, fruity, bubbly wine that's low in alcohol, which fits today's lifestyle. And it's an everyday drinking style with an excellent price-to-quality ratio.

Lambrusco - the name of both the wine and the grape - is principally grown in Emilia-Romagna, in the areas of Modena, Parma and Reggio Emilia, and Mantua, in Lombardy. The grape has a long history, with archaeological evidence of its existence going back to the Etruscans; the Romans valued it for its productivity and high yields. The most commonly found Lambrusco varieties include Grasperossa, Maestri, Marani, Montericco, Salamino and Sorbara. Many wines are made from more than one Lambrusco variety and additionally often blended (to a maximum of 15%) with other grapes, such as Ancellotta for colour, and Marzemino, Cabernet Sauvignon and others for body and structure.

Lambrusco's big revolution came in the 1960s with pasteurization, which stabilized

the product, enabling Lambrusco to go international and also go sweet, which appealed and still appeals to many international emerging markets. The Charmat method made it even easier to produce Lambrusco on an industrial scale, compared to the traditional re-fermented-in-bottle method. Today, there are various levels of dryness and sweetness available, from dry (secco) to off-dry (amabile) to sweet (dolce).

Sweet Lambrusco, the dolce style, became hugely popular in the US in the late 1970s, which set the trend in Lambrusco exports for many other countries around the world. Cantine Riunite was one of the major players during those years, selling 11.5m cases through its export partner in the US, Banfi Vintners, by 1985. The US remains, together with Russia, one of Riunite's top export markets.

"By the end of the 1980s, Lambrusco was still sold in 2-L bottles with screw caps, not only to the US, but also to main markets such as the UK, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Benelux. It needed to change its image," says Gavioli. "In the 1990s I started exploring new markets such as Japan, Australia and Brazil and then in 1995 came China, which we still need to work on, as with emerging markets such as India and Africa." Lambrusco is now Italy's top-selling wine in markets including Brazil, Spain, Mexico, Russia, Australia, Korea and Taiwan.

In spite of Lambrusco's continuous global success, it has sorely needed to rebuild its image in many of its historic markets, which outgrew the 'cheap and sweet' style. While the potential for a focus on quality is obviously there, the newer markets remain focused on the 'sweet' version of Lambrusco.

International view

Systembolaget in Sweden only lists two Lambrusco wines: Lambrusco Reggiano Dolce and Vecchia Modena Nero. According to Margareta Lundeberg, CEO of Handpicked Wines in Stockholm, neither have received



"Lambrusco is on the fast track - it engages with the young spirited, it is modern and 'futuristic', like the synonymous movement founded by Marinetti."

Gian Paolo Gavioli,
export manager,
Cantine Riunite & CIV

very good reviews from journalists. "A lot of Swedish dishes which can be termed 'heavy' would work very well with the fresh acidity in Lambrusco," says Lundeberg. "I would say premium Lambrusco is good both for premium restaurants and bistro restaurants.

Nicolas Belfrage MW, CEO of Vinexus in the UK, says it's Lambrusco's history that's the problem. "Lambrusco shot itself in the foot too successfully in the late '80s and '90s to have serious hopes of an imminent return," says Belfrage. "The wine was sickly sweet, suspiciously cheap and had little to do with the 'real' Lambrusco that the good people of Emilia-Romagna have been drinking with their pork and cheese diet for hundreds of years." He says that the real Lambrusco is a dry wine, with almost biting acidity and, "while not expensive, not dirt cheap. I personally hope it will succeed, because I believe Lambrusco to be a very valid, unique wine, which definitely deserves an important place in the pantheon of characterful Italian wines."

Gavioli explains that it is possible to find Lambrusco listed even in some Michelin-starred restaurants. One example is Osteria Francescana in Modena, awarded three Michelin stars in 2013, where Chef Massimo Bottura is known to use Lambrusco in his dishes and encourage his customers to discover quality Lambrusco. Gambero Rosso's 'Tre Bicchieri' accolade has been bestowed on Lambrusco wines from both large and small wineries, such as Medici Ermete, Cavacchioli, and Riunite's Lambrusco Emilia Ottocento Nero, produced by boutique winery Albinea Canali.

Renato Cristini is marketing manager of Vinum Ltd in London, which has imported Medici Ermete's Lambrusco since 1999. "Since the beginning we were very confident with the quality, a production of high standard in accordance with tradition and modern technology," comments Cristini. Medici's Lambrusco was featured at Locanda Locatelli's Michelin-starred London restaurant, and has repeatedly been awarded Gambero Rosso's 'Tre Bicchieri' as well as a 2010 IWC Trophy. It retails between £13.00 and £15.95, and is sold at Harrods. "This wine is very sexy when you have it in the glass and people love it, but we have to fight with the old image of a cheap, nasty wine."

Jo Ahearne MW, was acting wine buyer for Marks & Spencer in 2004 when she managed to place a quality own-brand called 'Autentico', retailing at £8.99. "It was predominantly Salamino and a brilliant black cherry red colour with a dry finish and a hint of tannic structure," says Ahearne. "It got loads of press recommendations but it never really took off, so after three years it had to be de-listed." Part of the problem, according to Ahearne, was that it was constantly displayed next to the cheaper 'non-authentic' Lambrusco, so was never seen by the market as a quality product.

Improved quality

Ermi Bagni, director of the Consorzio Tutela del Lambrusco di Modena, says that quality has improved, as in most Italian regions. Emilia-Romagna has implemented stricter production regulations, which include quality control, both in the vineyard and in the winery, with improved vinification technology, while also paying attention to branding and packaging, and the international misuse of the name.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA - LAMBRUSCO PRODUCTION

Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro: The smallest wine-producing region located south of Modena. The region is home to Grasparossa, the most tannic Lambrusco style.

Lambrusco Reggiano: The largest region and source of most of the exported DOC-designated wines. The four grapes that can be used are Maestri, Marani, Montericco, and Salamino. The sweet versions are typically in the light-bodied frizzante style, while the drier wines are more full-bodied and darker.

Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce DOC: The wines of this region must be composed of at least 90% of the local Salamino. Typically light in colour and body. Frizzante, in both semi-sweet and dry styles.

Lambrusco di Sorbara DOC: Located north of Modena near the village of Sorbara it is generally regarded as the highest-quality variety, producing the most fragrant and full-bodied wines.

The latest figures to come from the Consorzio Tutela del Lambrusco di Modena reveal that in the province of Reggio Emilia in 2012, 9.3m bottles of DOC Lambrusco were produced against the 32m DOC produced in the province of Modena; Lambrusco Emilia IGT reached some 125m bottles.

Riunite's second-most important market is Russia, where Alianta Group has been importing Riunite & CIV Lambrusco since 2005. "In 2005 we started importing 100,000 bottles; in 2010, 2.4m, and now we are over 3m, with the prospect of increasing to 4m in 2014 with distribution reaching all channels in Russia," says Armen Grishkian, president of Alianta Group. Grishkian says Russia's consumers are between 24 and 40, and Lambrusco is especially popular with female consumers. Among the styles imported, which include semi-sweet, white and rosé, the latter is seeing a growth almost reaching the sales of white, Russia's most popular style of Lambrusco.

"Young female consumers and 'Amabile' Lambrusco are also the driving force of sales in Brazil," says Celso La Pastina, CEO of La Pastina and World Wine who has been importing Lambrusco for 20 years. In 2000, La Pastina's imports of Riunite Lambrusco were worth €500,000, doubling in 2005 and tripling in value to €1.5m by 2010.

In Asia, drier styles are red sparkling wine are unfamiliar. "Trying to promote the concept they would be starting more or less



from scratch," says Debra Meiburg MW of Meiburg Wine Media. "A few specialised restaurants in HK are carrying Brachetto d'Acqui (which, on the sweetness scale is much closer to the cheaper styles of Lambrusco), but otherwise it's very unfamiliar territory. That said, Moscato is doing remarkably well in mainland China, so there is an openness to sparkling wines other than Champagne." According to Meiburg, it's already challenging to convince Chinese drinkers to consume sparkling wine with their meals, so convincing them to do so with a red sparkler might be a stretch too far.

Ned Goodwin MW, wine consultant to a number of restaurants in Japan, says that while Lambrusco is becoming something of a hipster wine in cities like Sydney and New York, the Japanese tend to prefer Lambrusco in its sweeter incarnation. The exception according to Goodwin are distributors such as Avico in Japan, who import higher-quality examples such as Rinaldini Lambrusco, yet are held back by the over-riding public impression that Lambrusco must be cheap.

"If the sommelier legions in this country supported quality wines such as these across regions and styles, things may be different. But alas, they are largely conservative, unable to sell and unaware of wines from the obvious, established regions," says Goodwin. "Despite the obvious physiological synergies of Lambrusco with many Japanese foods, as well as the fun that it is to drink, it fails to be supported by local conservative tastemakers."

Fortunately, things are beginning to change elsewhere, as terroir styles of Lambrusco come into their own. ■