



Forget pinot grigio. This summer make it red and fizzy

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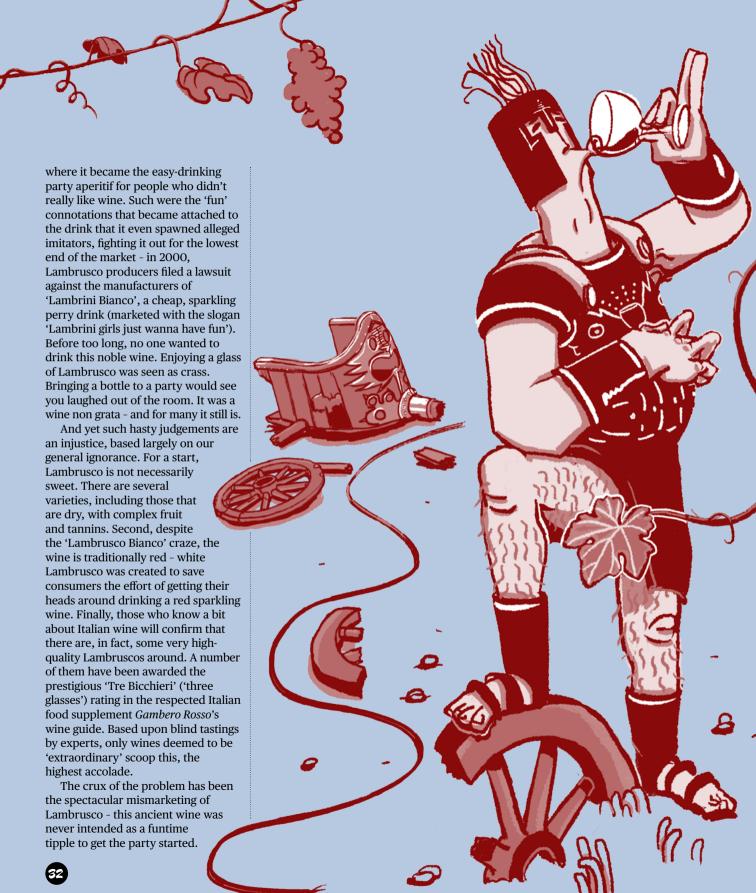
ine can be confusing, which is probably why those rules exist - white with fish, red with meat; white wine chilled, red at room temperature; only white wines are sparkling. But while they are a helpful rule of thumb, it's only normal to want to shake it up a little every now and again. In this sense, Lambrusco is more than just literally refreshing. Red and sparkling and slightly lower in alcohol than a typical wine, often at around 11 per cent ABV, it offers something new and possibly quite exciting for those willing to open their minds and give a second chance to a

wine that has been tragically abused over the years.

Lambrusco may fly in the face of what most wine drinkers would expect from an Italian red, but it's no postmodern Johnny-come-lately. This is an ancient wine, a Roman favourite. It doesn't break the rules so much as precede them by a couple of millennia. It is produced in Emilia-Romagna in the north of Italy, and, unusually for modern viticulture, the six main grape types are all indigenous to the region. There is some evidence to suggest winemaking activity in the region in the Bronze Age and certainly that the Etruscans (around

800-200 BC) were making wine using the local grapes. It was in the Roman period, however, that the wine really came into its own. The word 'Lambrusco' comes from the Latin 'la brusca', meaning 'the wild', since the wild vines sprouted naturally along the edges of fields, and there are several references to the wine in Roman writings.

Despite its pedigree, there are few wines as grossly misunderstood as Lambrusco. For decades it was marketed as a kind of cheap and cheerful alcopop. Low-quality, sweet varieties were mass exported, mostly to the US and northern Europe,





The crux of the problem has been the spectacular mismarketing of of Lambrusco - this ancient wine was never intended as a funtime tipple to get the party started

Michèle Shah is a wine writer and consultant specialising in Italian wine. She explains that, in its best-quality incarnations at least, this is a serious, grown-up wine, made to be drunk as the perfect accompaniment to the food of the region in which it is grown.

"Each region in Italy has its own food, its own wine and its own specialities, and the main essence of wine and food in Italy is that wine is principally made to be drunk with food. And so Lambrusco drunk in Emilia-Romagna with the food from Emilia-Romagna makes a lot of sense," she explains. Not for nothing is Bologna, culinary capital of Emilia-Romagna, known affectionately as 'La Grassa' ('The Fat One'). Cheeses, salami, butter-soaked pasta, pork trotters stuffed with sausage meat traditional Emilia-Romagna fare could perhaps best be described as 'hearty'. And for a cuisine that is renowned

throughout Italy as one of the most indulgent, Lambrusco acts as the perfect foil, its natural acidity cutting through the fattiness and making the meal altogether easier on the digestive system. This is where it comes into its own, not sold at rock-bottom price and marketed as a poor (wo)man's funtime fizz. "It has to be put in some kind of context where it can show its value," Shah adds.

The problem is that presenting Lambrusco as the perfect accompaniment to a specific cuisine limits its marketability. But for those willing to give sparkling dry red a try, an epiphany may be in store - and you don't need to nestle down in a dark corner of a trattoria to a plate of spaghetti to get the best out of the bottle. While Lambrusco does work well as a refreshing summer drink, Shah says that a Lambrusco Grasparosso di Castelvetro or

Lambrusco Salamino will also go down very well with 'heavy' food, such as a hearty winter stew, while a Lambrusco di Sorbara, which is the most acidic of the varieties, works as an excellent 'palate cleanser' and pairs up perfectly with a curry. Given the variety in styles - with sweet, semi-sweet, dry, tannic, acidic and fruity, sparkling and semi-sparkling ('frizzante') - there is plenty to play with.

The wider wine world won't be persuaded overnight, but Shah says there are signs that the rehabilitation of Lambrusco is under way. "Having done events with international importers, I have seen that there is an interest in going back to Lambrusco," she says. "However, [the producers'] main problem is to try and convince the restaurants and so on that these products are good, and then, of course, the final customer has to be convinced. It's a massive work of promotion and marketing and it's still a work in process." The good news for the open-minded and curious is that a little bit of tentative experimentation won't break the bank - even the finest examples retail at a very palatable price, at around £10-£15 a bottle. Time to grab a few bottles now, before the rest of the world catches on.

LAMBRUSCO – GETTING STARTED

Sweet, dry or somewhere in between, deep ruby red to rosé (and occasionally white), sparkling or 'frizzante' – Lambrusco is a wine with myriad variations. To help you get started, here's a quick cheat sheet on three of the best-known varieties.

LAMBRUSCO SALAMINO DI SANTA CROCE — light in body and colour, with delicate aromas and complex fruitiness. 'Frizzante', with a distinctive purple froth, it is found in both semisweet and dry versions.

LAMBRUSCO GRASPAROSSO
DI CASTELVETRO – the
darkest of the styles,
usually a deep ruby red.
Typically dry, intense and
rich with tannins, and with
higher alcohol than other
Lambruscos.

LAMBRUSCO DI SORBARA – the lightest in colour, resembling rosé, and the most acidic. Thought to be the best, with a smaller grape yield giving more concentrated flavours. Similar to a Salamino, but with fuller body and hints of mineral.