

LAMBRUSCO STAGES A COMEBACK

Once a sweet industrial wine, Lambrusco is returning to its heritage. Michèle Shah explains what's going on.

Lambrusco, the frizzante red wine from Italy, is back on the fast track after years in the wilderness. Driven by its pleasurable appeal, this fresh, fruity bubbly wine - low in alcohol, with an excellent price-quality ratio - is one of Italy's top sellers. "Today's Lambrusco has little to do with the sickly, sweet fizz that dominated the market in the 1970s and '80s," says Alberto Medici, CEO of Medici Ermete & Figli. He says that in recent decades, the market has included more high quality Lambrusco in a range of different styles. And as Lambrusco revamps its image, there is a new generation of Millennials and Generation X drinkers reaching for a glass.

The wine from Lombardy

Lambrusco is the name of both the wine and the grape principally grown in the areas of Modena, Parma and Reggio in the Emilia-Romagna region, and Mantua in Lombardy. The grape has a long winemaking 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 Grasparossa, 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.

"Lambrusco Grasparossa has structure and intriguing tannins," explains Medici. "Lambrusco di Sorbara is drier and more acidic. It is possibly the most noble of Lambrusco varieties which is taking hold of the market in all its styles from Charmat and Classic to Ancestrale."

Lambrusco's big revolution came in the 1960s with pasteurisation, which stabilised the product, enabling Lambrusco

to go international and sweet, which appealed and still appeals to many international emerging markets. The Charmat (tank fermentation) method made it even easier to produce Lambrusco on an industrial scale, compared to the traditional Ancestrale method, where the wine is re-fermented in bottle. Today, there are various levels of dryness and sweetness available from dry (secco) to off-dry (amabile) to sweet (dolce). Sweet Lambrusco - the amabile and dolce styles - became extremely popular in the US in the late 1970s, turning it into a hugely profitable industrial product which set the trend in Lambrusco exports for many other countries around the world, a movement which paradoxically greatly contributed to the demise of Lambrusco's image.

The colour and flavour of the wine depend on which of the many Lambrusco grape varieties are used. (The name of the variety is usually on the label.) Grasparossa is invariably dark, redolent of blackberries and, thanks to its tannins, can be suitably matched to hearty food. Sorbara is lighter, usually a hue of salmon pink to garnet. Sorbara's refreshing acidity makes it versatile, and it is becoming increasingly popular for its appeal as an aperitif or matched to lighter foods. Salamino, which is often used for blending, yields sturdy wines that are deep pink to purple, with a tannic twist.

In spite of Lambrusco's global sales, it sorely needs to rebuild its image in many historic markets which have outgrown the cheap and sweet style. Re-styling, packaging and image building is a much debated issue across the board, for the larger more industrial producers and the smaller producers which struggle to be noticed among the sea of Lambrusco. "Packaging is important for successful marketing," says Rico Grootveldt, export manager at Chiarli, a historic winery and one of Lambrusco's main players with exports to more than 55 countries. "Lambrusco producers have made leaps and bounds with modern, updated packaging,

but we need producers across the board to re-style their packaging, giving added value to the product. In order to recreate an image of quality we need all players to be sensitive to all aspects of production, aiming at a universal expression of quality."

According to Ermi Bagni, director of the marketing body Consorzio Marchio Storico Lambruschi Modenesi, it is vital that Lambrusco be reconnected to the traditions, culture and gastronomy of its territory, and that the DOC products and secco, or dry style, should be promoted. "In recent years we have seen a reverse in trend regarding IGT and DOC Lambrusco exports, where Germany and USA have replaced IGT with DOC Lambrusco," Bagni says. "However, the reality is there are still two worlds of Lambrusco, the IGT and the DOC." To put it in context, industrial fizz is represented by the 125m bottles of IGT production versus the 41m bottles of DOC production. It's clear which style dominates the market.

Cantine Riunite & Civ, one of Lambrusco's largest players, produces 60m bottles, of which 30% is DOC, while the rest is IGT, a split that's also reflected in the company's exports. According to Vanni Lusetti, the managing director, over the past five to 10 years innovative technology and a healthier approach to agriculture have resulted in lower yields but better quality, however IGT Lambrusco still plays a major role in exports.

New approaches, old traditions

In 1979, the Consorzio introduced a Lotta Integrata certification, pushing for a more sustainable organic agriculture and





less use of chemicals. Some Lambrusco producers have gone even further with a new certification called VIVA which refers to a broad concept of sustainability. Four indicators are examined: water, air, land and vineyards. “The winery must evaluate all the actions it performs in relation to these four elements, measuring and recording every single activity from the first that takes place in the vineyard to the last,” says Anselmo Chiarli, CEO and owner of the historic family business Chiarli. “This includes evaluating packaging, from registering the weight of the label, to estimating how much glue is used, to the weight of the glass and so on – virtually everything. Believe me, it is a very serious certification which requires considerable organisational commitment.”

Some producers are also returning Lambrusco to its traditional roots using the so-called Ancestrale method, in which yeasts are left in the bottle to create a fizz and leave sediment. This method requires no *dégorgement* or *remuage*. “This was how Lambrusco was originally made. It is nothing more than going back to its roots,” says Sandro Cavicchioli, winemaker of the eponymous Cavicchioli brand, which belonged to his family until GIV purchased it in 2011. Cavicchioli then bought the Francesco Bellei & C winery

to produce what he calls “a real expression of Lambrusco’s Ancestrale Modena DOC”, using indigenous yeast. He prefers the cloudy ‘authentic’ look and fresh, yeasty flavours that come from leaving the yeast in the bottle. “You can say it is more than natural winemaking, taking into consideration that all our vineyards have been converted to organic farming,” Cavicchioli says.

The province of Reggio Emilia once had enormous underground cellars packed with Lambrusco re-fermenting in the bottle. “Back in the ‘60s, many years before I sold my family winery, we would stock about 1m bottles of Ancestrale Lambrusco in the underground cellars,” Cavicchioli says. He says the main problem they encountered back then was that after one and a half years, the corkage didn’t always maintain the pressure, despite it being only 2.5 to three bars. He is a firm believer in Sorbara, the grape used for the Ancestrale Lambrusco. He uses a *pie de cuve* – indigenous yeast taken from the vineyards – but, more importantly, has replaced corks with crown caps to keep the Lambrusco sparkling. In 1987, Cavicchioli became one of the first Lambrusco winemakers to produce a single vineyard wine in the *Charmat* method. The *Vigna del Cristo*, made from Sorbara grapes, is still considered one of Lambrusco’s

premium labels. Today most Lambrusco is tank fermented in the *Charmat* method and many more single vineyards are appearing in the top ranges.

Another stylistic novelty is the increasing use of the classic sparkling method, in which bottles are turned and sediment is removed just before they are corked. This method of second fermentation is used to make white and rosé Lambrusco that today competes with Prosecco and other Italian sparklers. Less vigorous pressing of the grapes helps keep the fruit fresher and brighter. Skin contact is carefully monitored for just the right amount of color and tannin in the wine.

Christian Bellei, winemaker at Cantina della Volta, dedicates production solely to the traditional sparkling method. According to Bellei, Lambrusco Sorbara is the best variety for use in both the ancestral and the traditional sparkling methods. Cantina della Volta’s Lambrusco di Sorbara Trentasei label indicates the number of months on yeast (36) before *dégorgement*. Cantina della Volta produces 150,000 bottles of traditional sparkling Lambrusco a year and is one of the main producers of this new trend. “The acidity and the structure of Sorbara are perfect for making traditional sparkling which can age with dignity many years,” Bellei says.

Selling to the world

Lambrusco is still one of Italy’s most exported wines, not only to traditional markets, but to new markets in the former countries of the Soviet Union: Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia and Kazakhstan. In addition, sales of Lambrusco have taken off recently in Latin American markets such as Mexico and Colombia. According to the Consorzio, Lambrusco is even being sold to Ghana and Nigeria. Medici says that Canada is next.

“Sales in the Canadian provinces are still quite limited in terms of volumes,” he says, but adds that a trend for high-quality Lambrusco is developing. This same phenomenon is also seen in the US, where it began 10 years ago. The trend is building momentum: Lambrusco has been recommended this year by top critics in North America, from Eric Asimov at The New York Times to Bill Zacharkiw in Canada. The days when Lambrusco was nothing more than a cheap, fizzy drink are definitely in the past. ■

	Lambrusco/ha	Ancellotta/ha	Other varieties	Total general
Province of di Modena	6,458	388	1,200	8,047
Province of di Reggio Emilia	3,632	3,655	814	8,101

SOURCE: CONSORZIO TUTELA DELLA ETICHETTA DEL LAMBRUSCO DI MODENA