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How to Find Prosecco That Isn't Terrible

There are luxury proseccos, and they are delicious.

You just need to know how to read the labels

By Elin McCoy

Prosecco is so ubiquitous that you probably think you know what it is—a frothy, fruity, best-selling bargain. But trust me, not all prosecco is equal. Most is boring—some is brilliant.

Luckily more of the truly good stuff is now making it out of Italy—and even the best are way cheaper than Champagne. But the Italians don't make it easy to distinguish luxury bottles from the merely gaseous. You have to read the label—closely.

Here's why: The steep slopes in the band of hills between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene in northeast Italy's Veneto region have been prosecco's home for centuries. Thanks to its southern exposure, stony soils, and breeze from the bay near Venice, this is where the best are made. Rushing to capitalize on the fact that prosecco was outfizzing Champagne, big producers expanded their vineyards into the surrounding flat areas to supply demand with floods of cheap bubbly.

To distinguish between the two, the very Italian solution that went into effect in 2010 was to upgrade the wines from the Valdobbiadene area to a higher status, DOCG (*denominazione di origine garantita*, a guarantee of quality based on geography and winemaking process). Those wines produced on the flats were given the lesser-rated DOC. Some producers make both. My experience is that practically no one bothers to look for DOCG on the label or even knows what it means. But staring at the tiny print is key to finding a prosecco with more intensity, complexity, and flavor, a richer, creamier texture, and tiny persistent bubbles.

More than 300 million bottles of prosecco were produced in 2014. Only about 79 million of those were DOCG, whose sales in the U.S. have increased a whopping 275 percent over the past decade.

Even within the DOCG area, there's better and best. At the top are wines from Cartizze, a tiny 106-hectare subzone at 850 feet of elevation where 1 hectare of vines sells for more than 1 million euros. These tend to have a ripe-fruit sweetness, yet are confusingly labeled dry or extra dry (which really is drier), and sometimes brut (the driest). **My favorites tend to be proseccos from one of the 43 micro areas called Rive that have to be hand-harvested and vintage-dated, like Adami's Col Credas Rive di Farra di Soligo**, and the increasing number of single-vineyard wines like Nino Franco's Grave di Stecca.

Even more exciting are wines from small artisanal producers in prosecco's equivalent of Champagne's grower movement. An increasing number of vintners are going organic, others are hunting down 80- to 100-year-old vineyards and experimenting with adding other grapes to the traditional mix. And a few are finally exporting prosecco col fondo, wines made in a traditional fermentation-in-the-bottle process similar to that used in Champagne.

Even at its top, prosecco doesn't call for analysis, but of course I've been taking notes. Here's a clutch of not-to-be-missed bottles:



**2013 Adami Col Credas
Rive di Farra di Soligo
Valdobbiadene DOCG Brut**
Very elegant, with mineral notes
and a crisp apple-y texture; it
makes a stellar aperitif.