



OVERVIEW

Italy's largest single category of wine is the wildly popular sparkling wine Prosecco. In a decade, Prosecco has gone from being a relatively minor wine on export markets to outselling Champagne (in volume, at least). Prosecco has entered that be-careful-what-you-wish-for territory of having consumers ask for it by name without necessarily realizing that they're asking for a specific Italian wine. Prosecco, like Champagne before it, is becoming a synonym for any sparkling wine.

True Prosecco, however, comes only from three denominations in northeast Italy. Prosecco must be made from at least 85% Glera grapes, with the remainder coming from a short list of other varieties such as Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco, or Pinot Grigio. Most Prosecco is made by the tank method of sparkling wine production, though some uses the classic method of creating the bubbles in the individual bottles. Technically, Prosecco can be still or frizzante instead of fully sparkling, though those are a tiny fraction of production and rarely exported. As a sparkling wine, Prosecco is traditionally made as an extra dry, meaning that it has fairly low but noticeable sweetness. However, given today's general preference for drier wines, it is often made in the brut category with little or no detectable sweetness; it can be sweeter than extra dry, too.

The production zone for Prosecco DOC two decades ago was confined to an area of steep hills in east-central Veneto between the cities of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene in the province of Treviso. After Prosecco was discovered and demand began to skyrocket, however, demand far outstripped supply, and Prosecco began to spread out to the south and east from its original home. To bring some semblance of order to the situation and protect the name Prosecco from use in other regions and countries, three denominations were established.

In 2009, Prosecco DOC was vastly enlarged from its original size to a sprawling area that includes the eastern two thirds of Veneto as well as all of neighboring Friuli Venezia Giulia. The denomination had to be that big to allow producers to source sufficient Glera grapes to feed global demand. A subzone for the province of Treviso was established to acknowledge the origin of the wine in that province.

Meanwhile, the hills where Prosecco wines were conceived received a promotion to the higher DOCG status as Conegliano Valdobbiadene

Prosecco DOCG. Granted, it's a mouthful, but to save ink, labels don't have to use both city names; wineries close to Valdobbiadene can label their wine as just Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG. And a lot of people save time by just calling the denomination Prosecco DOCG. Other words to look for on a label are Cartizze, a subzone that's considered the best of the best, and Rive, which designates a wine that comes from a single town or hamlet. The terrain in Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco DOCG is often ridiculously steep, resulting in exceptional-quality Glera but at a higher cost of production. The DOCG wines are generally a quantum leap above average DOC Prosecco, although they struggle to get a price equivalent to their quality because consumers are used to inexpensive Proseccos.

The third denomination for Prosecco is Asolo Prosecco DOCG, an area with much smaller production on another hillock west of Valdobbiadene. Though not a familiar name yet, it is rapidly increasing its volume and could start making itself known before too long.