

SPARKLING WINE

PROSECCO PARADISE



All you wanted to know about the sparkling history and origins of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore. By *Alessandra Piubello*

Venturing into the lush hills that nestle behind the embrace of the Piave River, covered with the filigree of flourishing vines, one enters the multi-coloured and incomparable landscape immortalised in paintings by Cima di Conegliano.

The vineyard-embroidered hills extending from Conegliano towards Valdobbiadene consist mainly of yellowy-bluish marl accompanied by ash-coloured and sky-blue sandstone. Hills shaped by the hard work and tenacity of vine-growers, where vines are almost exclusively cultivated by hand due to the steepness of the slopes that prevents the use of machinery. It takes up to 800 hours of work per hectare of vineyard, compared to 150 hours required in the plains. Given the difficulty of planting new vineyards in the rugged land, one frequently comes across centuries-old vines, the custodians of a rich biodiversity.

This is a land of noble waterways, an epic river and other tributaries, created by the ancient Piave glacier from the morainic hills, to look admirably like an amphitheatre. A unique setting that received recognition as a "Historical Rural Landscape" in 2016 and which is now hoping to be included on Unesco's World Heritage list in 2018.

The Conegliano Valdobbiadene area includes 15 municipalities (Conegliano, San Vendemiano,

Colle Umberto, Vittorio Veneto, Tarzo, Cison di Valmarino, San Pietro di Felleto, Refrontolo, Susegana, Pieve di Soligo, Farra di Soligo, Follina, Miane, Vidora and Valdobbiadene), lying along the hilly belt at the Treviso Alpine foothills, which provide a shelter against the cold north winds. Since establishing the denomination in 1969, the territory has never extended its boundaries, despite the progressive increase in sales, notes Innocente Nardi, president of the Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG Consortium.



Facing page:
Vineyards planted
in the hilly terrain
of Conegliano
Valdobbiadene

PROSECCO SUPERIORE
DAL 1876

The denomination's vineyards grow at an altitude between 50 and 500 metres on approximately 7,500 hectares cultivated by about 3,200 vine-growers. Exposure is mainly towards the south and east. The most commonly used cultivation techniques are double-arched and Sylvoz vine training systems. The soils are of a highly varied nature with a wide geological range. The carbonate rocks of the Cretaceous period seabed make up the rock base in a succession of alternating sandstone and marl profiles, followed by morainic deposits and sedimentary layers of alluvial origin.

The climate is mild and temperate, so much so that centuries ago the entire area was a popular resort for Venetian aristocracy, desirous of escaping the overpowering humidity of the summer months in Venice. The temperature swing of 12° C to 14° C between night and day in the months of August and September is an important factor and fundamental for the synthesis of the grapes' aromatic compositions.



HISTORY AND TRADITION

Documents by Latin authors confirm that vines were already being cultivated here over 2000 years ago. Prosecco vines of extremely ancient origin, possibly dating back to pre-Roman colonization may have arrived in the Conegliano hills from the Carso Triestino area around the end of the 18th century. This is an "official" date set by scholars which is more virtual than real, since the Prosecco vine apparently was already present in the early 1700s. The wine producers who made this area famous and who value terroir characteristics more than the number of bottles produced - 83 million against 255 million of Prosecco DOC - such as Marco Gino Balbi Valier and Antonio Carpené are a part of local history.

The sparkling wine process originated here at the beginning of the 1900s with Antonio Carpené's experiments at the Carpené company, one of the first great Italian sparkling wine producers. Carpené contributed to improvements in viticulture



Photos: Consorzio di Tutela del Vino Conegliano Valdobbiadene

THE CONEGLIANO VALDOBBIADENE AREA



Left and above: The extreme incline of the hillsides means that the land is cultivated almost exclusively by hand rather than by machines. Below: A cluster of native Glera grapes, rustic and vigorous with medium to large, pyramidal, loose bunches that mature late



and oenology and had the foresight to found a viticultural and oenology school at Conegliano in 1876. Later, in 1973, with the efforts of Professors Giusti and Dalmasso the Experimental Vine-Growing and Oenology Station was set up, the only one of its kind in Italy. These two institutions led the Conegliano Valdobbiadene area to express the very best of its potential and become Italy's most important wine district, specialising in producing sparkling wines with the Martinotti (aka Charmat) method in pressurised stainless steel tanks. The formation of the Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene Consortium in 1962 further added to the wine's prestige, endorsing its promotion to DOCG in August 2009, after 40 years as DOC.

The sparkling process was perfected at the Conegliano Oenology School with the important contribution of Professor Tullio de Rosa's studies. An evolution of the Martinotti method that aimed at enhancing the aromas that naturally characterise Prosecco Superiore, a wine that takes on a unique typicality and character from this territory. The sparkling fermentation lasts at least 30 days but can sometimes be extended to between 60 and 90 days, in order to produce greater complexity from prolonged contact with the yeasts.

VITICULTURE

The Prosecco vine has a mysterious origin. Known as Pucino at the time of the Roman Empire, some say it was used to produce a wine that Empress Livia Augusta was particularly fond of. The main grape used to produce the wine is the native Glera, rustic and vigorous with medium to large, pyramidal, loose bunches, that mature late. There are many biotypes, including Balbi, which is the best known and was the result of a selection made by Count Balbi Valier in the late 1800s.

In some styles of Prosecco Conegliano Valdobbiadene such as "Frizzante" and "Tranquillo", other local grapes can be added to the obligatory Glera base, which must be



Innocente Nardi,
president of
the Conegliano
Valdobbiadene
Prosecco Superiore
DOCG consortium

at least 85%. The other grape varieties are: Verdiso, Bianchetta Trevigiana, Perera, Glera Lunga. Verdiso is used to increase flavour and salinity; Perera gives more perfume and aroma, while Bianchetta Trevigiana contributes to softening the wine, especially in cold years. For Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco "Superiore", the sparkling and most popular type, varieties like Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Nero and Chardonnay grapes can also be used, either singly or together, up to a maximum of 15%.

The regulations allow the sparkling version to be classified as Brut, Extra Dry and Dry. Extra Brut and Dolce are not included

at the moment, but Extra Brut is attracting considerable attention and will probably be added in the future. Wines entitled to the "Rive" denomination are subject to stricter rules than the other Conegliano Valdobbiadene types. Rive wine selections, such as Rive Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG and Superiore di Cartizze DOCG, come from vineyards on the steep slopes and high hills of just one sub-zone. There are 43 Rive wines with just as many territorial expressions. The Cartizze, an authentic cru, is produced from a patch of land covering a mere 107 hectares in the Valdobbiadene municipality, subdivided among over 100 producers. For greater compatibility and environmental sustainability, the Consortium launched a wine protocol in 2011 with the help of the Italian Wine Office, Environmental Ecology Research Centre and Regional Environmental Protection Agency.

As many as 93 million bottles were produced in 2017 for a production value of 521 million Euros. A quantity that has more than doubled the sales in the last ten years accompanied by an obvious increase in value. On the domestic market, production grew in 2017 by 6% in value compared to 2016.

A glass of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore is a good match with contemporary cuisines



About 40% of the production is exported to 130 countries worldwide (primarily Germany, Switzerland, UK, Benelux, USA, Austria and Canada, which together make up 80% of the exports). The Consortium, currently presided over by Innocente Nardi, includes 181 sparkling wine companies, 3,387 vine-growers, 433 wine producers and three cooperatives.

AT THE TABLE

Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG is a natural accompaniment to the typical flavours of its homeland, but versatility is its winning card making it a suitable glass for numerous dishes of contemporary cuisine. The Brut, with residual sugar from 0 to 12 grams per litre, is ideal with fish and vegetable starters, seafood pasta or rice and baked fish, or even throughout the meal. The Extra Dry, with residual sugar from 12 to 17 grams per litre, is suitable with pulse-based soups and seafood, pasta with delicate meat sauces, typical cheeses like Bastardo, Morlacco, Inbriago and white meats, especially poultry. The Dry, which has residual sugar between 17 and 32 grams per litre, is the least common version and is best served with dry desserts or spicy foods.

Just over an hour's drive from Venice, the Prosecco Superiore DOCG hills ring the natural amphitheatre lying between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene. The best way to get to know this area is to take the Prosecco and Vini dei Colli di Conegliano Valdobbiadene wine route, the oldest in Italy, founded 51 years ago, which takes the visitor over three theme routes to discover historic sights as well as the most prestigious crus.

Two films were recently shot among these hills: "Dieci Inverni" directed by Valerio Mieli, and "L'ultimo Desiderio" directed by Antonio Padovan and taken from the amusing thriller by Fulvio Ervas: "Finchè c'è Prosecco c'è speranza" (While there's Prosecco, there's hope).❖