

LIVING > FOOD

Lambrusco's Comeback, and Why It's Brushing Shoulders with Rosé

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by JENN RICE



Lambrusco, a type of sparkling red wine
Photo: Romulo Yanes / Condé Nast Archive



Rosé, with its delicate pink hue, is undoubtedly an It drink of summer. #YesWayRosé will never go out of fashion. However, Lambrusco, its underrated fizzy red Italian stepsister, is re-emerging stateside and giving the summery beverage a solid rival.

In Emilia-Romagna, one of Italy's most prized gastronomic treasures, Lambrusco is to Italians as coffee is to Americans. The frothy, refreshing, bubbly red can be spotted at every restaurant table, most likely accompanied by something mouthwatering of the Prosciutto di Parma or Culatello di Zibello nature. "Rosé may be dominating the spotlight lately, but Lambrusco is right on its heels as people look for a wider variety of fresh-drinking options to keep us cool this summer," says Joel Caruso, U.S. brand ambassador and partner sommelier for Vivino.

Converse with anyone of drinking age in the early 1970s though, and chances are, Lambrusco is associated with negative feedback. "Lambrusco at that time was not a real Lambrusco, just a sweet sparkling juice," says Alicia Lini of Lini 910, a top producer in the Emilia-Romagna region. "The quality was very poor and the quantities exported were massive" with an end goal of profit only.

Caruso emphasizes that the wine boom of the 1970s and 1980s gave many wines that are being made well today a bad reputation. "Chablis went through a torturous misusing of its name while Italy suffered greatly with wines like Soave, Chianti, and most definitely Lambrusco as they were quickly made into the most ubiquitous wines of the time," he adds. The new generation of makers is essentially the old generation. "What happened in-between was a one-hit wonder, synthetic fad—kind of like Vanilla Ice," says Tim Kweeder, wine director and general manager of Philadelphia's Kensington Quarters. "The artisans kept with making real Lambrusco this whole time, when brands like Riunite were making cheap, pop idol, castrated versions of the wine and finally, their work is receiving recognition in modern times."

A brief overview on Lambrusco: Just like Champagne, there are several distinct styles that vary drastically—ranging from Sorbara (light in color and similar to a rosé), Grasparossa (bold with mouth-drying tannins), Salamino (dark in color and slightly tannic), and Maestri (fruit-forward and creamy). The fizzy beverage can also be dry, semi-sweet, and extremely sweet, making it adaptable to many palates.

Fast-forward to today and Lambrusco is indeed buzzworthy within the wine industry. “There are more open-minded beverage folks working in cool restaurants and wine stores throughout the country that are charmed by the soul of artisanal Lambrusco,” Kweeder relays. In Brooklyn, Smith & Vine can’t keep Lini 910’s Lambrusco rosé in stock—quite arguably a style that is giving rosé a run for its money. “[New York] has loved our wine since the first day,” she says.

In Los Angeles, Rossoblu, a Bolognese-inspired restaurant with an extensive Italian wine list, features an entire Lambrusco garden. “We wanted to create a space where we could share Lambrusco as what it’s meant to be—easy-drinking and fun, not to be taken too seriously,” adds Jeremy Parzen, wine director and sommelier at the restaurant. Guests can find around 10 Lambrusco options on the menu, with at least three available by the glass at any given time. “We and our guests have been loving Ceci (on the richer side) from Parma and Lini (on the lighter side) from Reggio Emilia. And we’ve just added Paltrinieri from Modena—our favorite producer of Sorbara, a super soulful wine.”

Mulino Italian Kitchen & Bar in Raleigh, North Carolina, recently added a carefully curated Lambrusco section to its wine list, ranging from light rosés to full-bodied options. Also prominent on the gorgeous outdoor bar, the wines were strategically selected to pair with the restaurant’s mouthwatering forno menu. We can attest that there’s nothing quite like a chilled glass of Lambrusco and a wood-fired pizza or fresh focaccia to start the evening.

Lambrusco rookies should start with a Sorbara. It's a "gateway to the wine world, especially for beer folk who are big into sour beers and wild ales," says Kweeder, who's really into Paltrinieri's Radice at the moment. Vezzelli's Grasperossa di Castelvetro is also a great contender. "This is the first wine where I saw the light, with regards to artisanal Lambrusco, many moons past," he adds. "It has notes of dark cherry, balsamic, and subtle cola. Killer with many foods but especially tomato-based pasta and pizza."

Lambrusco's resurgence is fresh and appealing, and there's no denying a chilled glass of red on a warm sunny day. Plus, it's a definite rosé-meets-red-meets-bubbly hybrid that can be enjoyed year-round. "Not all of us want to drink red wine every day, not all of us like bubbles every day, but nearly all of us like bubbles or red wine at some point, even at the same time," Caruso states. In other words, drink up!