

AT THE BAR

Italian Wine Trail

Italy has a plethora of wines to spark interest at the table.

By Deborah Grossman

At Donato Enoteca, wines are stored in the back dining room of the restaurant on floor-to-ceiling shelves. Sliding doors with metal grates give the room an old-world look.

A few years ago the buzz in the wine world was all about the New World. We couldn't resist bottles with "Napa" or cute wallabies on the label. But Old World wines haven't lost their allure, especially those that are affordable and well-made.

In Italy, with companies such as Zonin in Gambellara leading the way, the wine industry is experiencing a resurgence of experimentation and development. A hopscotch tour around Italy will reveal varietals and brands that wine directors identify as leaders. From sparkling Prosecco in the North to the Sicilian red varietals of Nero d'Avola and Nerello Mascalese and Sangiovese Tuscan wines, Italy has a plethora of wines to spark interest at the table.

As winemaker at Castello d'Albola in the village of Radda in Chianti, Tuscany, Alessandro Gallo is one of 11 winemakers on the Zonin team. Though he has studied enology widely, he says, "You can't transfer winemaking learned in places like Australia. You need to know the local grapes and how all grapes grow here. In Italy, we have over 350 indigenous grapes."

Italian bubbles on the rise

One of the local grapes is Glera, also known as Prosecco. The name "Prosecco" now refers to the wine proliferating on restaurant lists around the world. Casa Vinicola Zonin has made it since 1975 at Gambellara in the Veneto region of Northeastern Italy.

Francesco Zonin, vice president and eighth-generation family member, has a long personal history with the wine.

Prosecco is a popular adult beverage at Olive Garden, where guests enjoy it as an aperitif and celebratory sparkling wine.

"Around age 5, we're given the last drop or two from the glass of Prosecco—a daily beverage at our table—so we would become familiar with the taste and acidity."

At the 670-unit Orlando, Fla.-based Olive Garden, Prosecco is a popular adult beverage, says Dan Saginario, brand marketing manager for beverage strategy. "Our guests enjoy Zonin Prosecco as an aperitif and celebratory sparkling wine. It provides a safe exploration for guests who enjoy and might be more familiar with champagne, but are seeking an outstanding Italian alternative."

At more upscale venues, Prosecco is also gaining popularity. Rajat Parr, wine director with the Michael Mina group, sells it by the glass at Bourbon Steak in Washington, D.C. But he only offers Champagne at the upscale Michael Mina

A bottle of Arneis is pulled from Scarpetta's wine cellar.



and RN74 restaurants in San Francisco and Seablue in Las Vegas.

Jeffrey Tascarella, wine director at Scarpetta, New York, serves Zonin Prosecco, what he calls an under-appreciated wine. "This wine is affordable, like other brands, but also versatile as either a refreshing aperitif on its own—crisp, clean, and peachy—or in many of our signature cocktails. A favorite is The Spritz, the classic drink of the Veneto made with equal parts Zonin Prosecco, limoncello and aperol."

For the extensive wine program at The Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, Colo., wine director Tim Baldwin sells about *continued on page 43*



Daniel Krieger

Definition of Italian wine designations

DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita)

The word “garantita” is the significant term in this designation. This regulation has the strictest codes. The wine is made from specified grapes grown in precise vineyard areas; yields and production methods must conform to the regulations governing that zone. Wines are also tasted and approved by a commission of experts. Example: Prosecco, Conegliano-Valdobbiadene region

Starting in the 2009 harvest, “Prosecco” is now the name of the wine and not the grape, which is now called “Glera.” The region’s 160 producers may use the term “Prosecco Superiore” on the label. Only Prosecco made from vineyards in 15 communes located between the towns of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene in the

Veneto may use the DOCG designation. There are only 41 Italian wines with the DOCG designation.

DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata)

The regulations are similar but usually less strict than those for DOCG.

IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica)

In this category, wines are produced in a specific geographical area. Usually these production zones are larger than those defined for DOC or DOCG. In some cases an entire Italian region is defined as the IGT zone.

Vino da tavola—table wine

These wines must carry only “Italy” as their geographical indication.

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200 cases of Prosecco a year—small-scale compared with champagne. “At holidays and special events and celebrations, many guests look for champagne with recognizable names. Few people know that Prosecco is both a grape and wine from the Veneto region. But guests enjoy our bar drinks topped off with it, as in the Il Barone Rosso (The Red Baron) cocktail.”

It is also becoming more popular for diners on high-end cruise ships. Rick Garced, corporate wine consultant for Celebrity and Azamara Club Cruises, finds that guests enjoy both white and rosé Prosecco. “Prosecco is gaining popularity for its taste and its great value. Demographically, it satisfies our younger as well as seasoned guests and both men and women. Another advantage—we serve it year-round and it pairs well with all our food menus.”

At Donato Enoteca in Redwood City, Calif., wine director Eric Lecours sells Drusian Prosecco. “We sell more Prosecco at \$8 a glass than \$12 Franciacorta Spumante, an Italian sparkler made in the *methode champenoise*. The image of Prosecco may be the cheap stuff at Trader Joe’s, but with the new DOCG appellation, we are seeing good quality.”

Along with Prosecco, other wines from the northern regions of the Veneto and Friuli are garnering attention. On Celebrity ships, Garced likes to offer indigenous grapes from the area, such as Garganega grape, which is predominate in Soave. He also carries several Italian Pinot Grigio wines, a varietal that has become popular in the U.S.

Lecours also recognizes strong potential for Soave. He stocks single-vineyard Suavia Soave and appreciates the minerality and tropical fruit flavors from the varietal.



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Italian wine varietals rising on the wine list

The Veneto—Prosecco (Glera grapes); Soave Classico (Garganega and Trebbiano grapes)

Sicily—Nero d'Avola; Nerello Mascalese

Tuscany—Sangiovese grape clones (siblings to the original grape variety); Brunello di Montalcino from Montalcino village; Prugnolo from the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano region; Morellino di Scansano from the Maremma subregion

Sicilian surprise

Another trove of up-and-coming varietals is found in Sicily. From the rich, volcanic terrain surrounding Mt. Etna to the broad swath of desert landscape that does receive rainfall, the island is ideal for grape-growing. Several indigenous varietals are appearing on American wine lists.

"Why would you drink Sicilian Chardonnay or Syrah, varietals that are produced everywhere? In Sicily, you can try wines from regions like Etna Bianco or Etna

Rosso near the volcano. Our guests are always surprised to learn these wines are from Sicily," says Lecours.

He serves Benanti Pietramarina from the Etna Bianco region. This wine, he explains, is reminiscent of lively wine styles such as Riesling. "Etna Bianco wines don't scream at you like Chardonnay, and pair well with white fish, such as grilled calamari or branzino with shrimp risotto."

At Michael Mina's restaurants, Parr also sells Benanti Pietramarina along with Etna Rosso wines for their delicate, yet interesting, texture. The Broadmoor serves Benanti Nerello Mascalese from Etna Rosso. After Baldwin introduced the Nerello Mascalese to his servers, they quickly began hand-selling it to locals who return and order it regularly.

Tascarella at Scarpetta is also enthusiastic about guest response to these wines. "We've introduced our guests to Etna Rosso wines that are made with a minimum of 80% Nerello Mascalese. The wines are bright ruby red, with hints of violet, raspberry and worn leather. The most striking feature these wines all share, however, is the distinct minerality that comes from the volcanic soil."

The Principi di Butera winery, whose vineyards and olive trees flourish with Mt. Etna in the background, is just one area on the island of Sicily ideal for grape-growing.

Yet, adds Tascarella, the varietal that has generated broad interest in Sicilian wines is Nero d'Avola. "A few years ago, Nero d'Avola was completely unheard of outside Sicily. I sampled a few wines and was pleasantly surprised by its sweet, velvety tannins and brooding, plummy fruit. Nero d'Avola is very food-friendly. Stuck with what red to pair with a hearty fish dish? You'll be covered with Nero d'Avola."

Baldwin finds that more Broadmoor guests recognize Nero d'Avola as a red wine from Sicily even if they don't know the wine style. On Celebrity Cruises, Garced agrees that guests are becoming knowledgeable about Nero d'Avola, and he serves the wine from Planeta Winery and Feudo Maccari Saia.

When selecting Nero d'Avola for Donato Enoteca, Lecours is careful to choose those wines that aren't produced in an overly fruity and high-alcohol style. "These wines can be 'thick.' If you don't have good farming, the wines become heavy."

Tuscan stars

Yet Lecours still sells more wines from Tuscany than from other regions. While Tuscan producers dial back their heavily oaked and overly fruity style of winemaking, Lecours extols Brunello di Montalcino, a Sangiovese wine from vintners such as Il Poggione.

Pairings with Prosecco

Founded in 1821, Casa Vinicola Zonin is the largest privately held Italian wine producer in regard to vineyard holdings. Zonin has produced Prosecco since 1975. Zonin is now run by the seventh and eighth generations. Francesco Zonin, vice president, suggests the following pairings with Prosecco:

- Grilled bruschetta with shaved prosciutto
- Balsamic-grilled bistecca (beef tenderloin) with rosemary roasted potatoes
- Fried bowties with spicy red sauce
- Grilled herb polenta with sausage/ Gorgonzola cream sauce
- Grilled pork tenderloins with carbonara and pancetta sauce
- Prosciutto, asparagus and fontina-filled turnovers
- Seafood-stuffed manicotti with Prosecco and Parmesan sauce
- Phyllo pastry wraps filled with mascarpone and Nutella

Garced also emphasizes the Sangiovese grape and its clones at the Tuscan Grill and other restaurants on board Celebrity Cruises. He stocks Sangiovese clones such as Brunello di Montalcino, Prugnolo from the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano region and Morellino di Scansano from



the Maremma subregion. Celebrity buys directly from producers such as Marchese Antinori's Solaia and Tignanello and Sassacaia from Tenuta San Guido.

Zonin also produces a wine from the Maremma region. Alessandro Gallo, winemaker for Castello d'Albola in Chianti, believes that wine from the Maremma region, which is closer to the sea, is intriguing. He likes the "sweet tannins" found in one of Zonin's Maremma wines, Rocca di Montemassi Sassabruna. A blend of Sangiovese, Merlot and Syrah, Sassabruna is full-bodied with a slightly spicy finish. He recommends pairing with Bistecca (steak) Fiorentina, zucchini risotto and hard cheeses.

Following the wine trail through the Veneto, Sicily and Tuscany is a small piece of the entire Italian wine geography. Baldwin considers Italian wines a strong addition to any wine list, because of the wide range of styles. Lecours points to the great value of Italian wine—and the economics of supply and demand. While Burgundy limits the supply of high-end wine classified as Grand Cru, there is a large supply of high-quality Italian wine from Sicily and the Veneto. "You can get a \$20 bottle of Burgundy or Pinot Noir. But the \$20 Italian bottle will be better quality."

The wines of Feudo Principi di Butera are served with the staples of traditional Sicilian fare: local cheese, local meats and fresh bread and fresh produce, including tomatoes and eggplant.

In the last 10 years, Italian wines have flourished in Celebrity Cruises restaurants beyond the Tuscan Grill concept. "Better quality, great values, many different varietal choices outside the mainstream French classic noble varietals have certainly helped increase attention to these wines," says Garced.

Meanwhile, Italian wineries explore other regions. Zonin's newest winery is Masseria Altemura in Puglia. Expect to hear about wines produced there such as Negroamaro, Fiano and Primitivo.

The emerging popularity of Italian wine is seen in the surging sales of Prosecco and Moscato from Northern Italy. In the past year, Moscato from Zonin's Castello del Poggio in the Piedmonte region has quickly become a guest favorite at Olive Garden, says Saginario. "Zonin Moscato is one of our top-selling wines. This wine has an approachable fruity flavor and slight effervescence that guests can enjoy with their meal or as a dessert wine."

Deborah Grossman is a San Francisco Bay Area journalist who writes about people, places and products that impact the food-and-wine world.

