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August 27, 2009

Bloomberg.com

In steamy August, my wine of choice is easy-drinking prosecco, the now fashionable Italian fizz that's still a bargain.

This summer, producers are celebrating its promotion to Italy's A-list wine classification, D.O.C.G., and new European Union rules protecting use of its name, starting with the 2009 vintage. Maybe they should toast Paris Hilton, too.

Let me explain.

In Italy people sip this lightly fruity bubbly made in the hills northwest of Venice anywhere, anytime -- at lunch, after work, before dinner, between shopping and sex.

It's the summer drink in Piazza San Marco, and the national aperitivo. Five years ago, the rest of the world began embracing this sparkler, named after the grape from which it's made. In the year ended July 25, U.S. sales were up 30 percent while champagne nosedived.

Italian prosecco has become a victim of its own success. It's been the grape of choice in the steep-sloped vineyards of the historic Conegliano-Valdobbiadene zone in the Veneto region for centuries. In 1969, the zone was recognized as a D.O.C. (denominazione di origine controllata) area, with regulations imposed on production methods to ensure higher quality wine.

The grape spread to the surrounding unregulated flat plains, which now produce oceans of cheap fizz. Wineries in other countries including Brazil and Australia planted the grape and started making their own version -- like the just-released 2008 Brown Brothers Prosecco from Australia.

Enter Paris Hilton.

Gold Paint

"When an Austrian company launched Rich prosecco two years ago in gold soda-pop cans and promoted it with ads featuring Paris Hilton naked, covered in gold paint, Italian producers felt assaulted," said Vittorio Zoppi, marketing manager for the Consorzio del Prosecco di Conegliano-Valdobbiadene, in a phone interview. "They felt they had to protect the wine's image."

Because prosecco is named for a grape, it's not so easy to give it an official territorial identity. The official solution, starting with the 2009 vintage, is a tangle that involves renaming the grape, elevating the flat plains to a D.O.C. zone that includes the town of Prosecco, and promoting the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene to the higher category of D.O.C.G. (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita).

As a result, the region was able to get the European Union to include prosecco in new protected-origin regulations, making it illegal for producers outside these zones to use the name prosecco on a label, at least in the EU.

Rising Prices

I hope this will improve quality. It will certainly require confusing new labels for the 2009 vintage and surely cause prices to rise. Are high-status proseccos that much better than Italy's cheap best-selling bottlings? I popped the corks on two dozen for a blind tasting. To find the best, just look for the letters D.O.C.G.

First impression: Don't think of prosecco as recession champagne. It has a different character ideal for summer -- softer bubbles, lower alcohol (11 percent), and none of champagne's edgy acidity. Even the best proseccos aren't wildly complex, but who wants that in hot weather? Fresher is better; the 2008 vintage is terrific.

The traditional Italian style, labeled extra dry, is rounder and softer. The drier bruts have had the most international success. My top scorers were all from the 15 communes in the Conegliano-Valdobbiadene zone. Those labeled Cartizze stood out, but seemed overpriced.

Steep Vineyards

A tiny subzone of very steep vineyards where land goes for more than 1 million euros (\$1.4 million) a hectare (about 2 1/2 acres), Cartizze is the region's only "grand cru," though producers are putting out more and more single vineyard bottlings. Most \$10 and under wines were forgettable.

My favorite was the 2008 Bisol Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze (\$45), too subtle for summer. I liked Bisol's 2006 Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Crede Brut (\$18) almost as much. It contains small percentages of pinot bianco and verdiso grapes and has a fresh green apple/white peach scent and delicate bubbles.

Non-vintage Sorelle Bronca Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Extra Dry (\$17), with its orange-blossom scent and lemon-zest flavors, won high marks for gulpable deliciousness. It's ideal for afternoon sipping by a pool.

2008 Bellenda Brut Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene San Fermo (\$18) was light, elegant, and frothy.

Non-vintage Le Colture Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze (\$30) was light but opulent, with a lemon-zest nose.

Bitter Almonds

Non-vintage Col Vetoraz Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Brut (\$15) smelled of white flowers and tasted of bitter almonds, while the 2006 Cartizze (\$35) was luscious and creamy, like lemon custard.

Simple, light, zippy non-vintage bruts from Mionetto and Zardetto (\$10-\$12) were my top cheap picks. They'd be good in fruity cocktails like the famous Bellini, a mix of white peach juice and icy prosecco invented in the 1930s at Venice's Harry's Bar.

There was plenty of fizz left in each bottle, so I phoned friends, shoved the best bottles into a tub of ice on the deck and set out olives, prosciutto and bruschetta to put everyone in an Italian summer frame of mind.

No, there were no cans of Rich prosecco, but we toasted Paris Hilton.