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Lambrusco: Your Fresh Fall Wine



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Spirits

f *Here's a primer on Lambrusco, the perfect summer-into-fall transition wine*

By Lana Bortolot and John Foy

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Why not have a glass (or two) of Lambrusco? ILLUSTRATION: L. BORTOLOTT

In the wake of a pandemic, social and racial unrest to say nothing over an upcoming election, few people have felt much like popping the bubbly this year. The United States may be divided, but there's one thing many of us can agree on: we need a little lift these days.

Enter Lambrusco—in my mind, the perfect wine for the times.

Weighty enough to have some gravity and stand up to anything on the grill, but light and happy enough to get you through the summer slumps, it's a pop of fizz you can enjoy without feeling frivolous.

“Lambrusco is really an incredibly versatile wine—fresh, easy to drink and perfect both as an aperitivo and with meals,” says Julia Prestia, co-owner of **Venturini Baldini**, a producer between Reggio Emilia and Parma, and which dates back to the 17th century.

I asked my friend John Foy—he of the unerring taste buds—to coauthor a Lambrusco piece with me. It happens that he, like many others, has been long keen on Lambrusco’s semi-sparkling charms. Because, like all things Italian, Lambrusco has plenty of charisma.

From the 1960s, Americans linked Lambrusco with Riunite, the cheap, sweet, lightly sparkling Italian red wine. But unknown to most Americans were Lambrusco’s regional traditions, indigenous grape varieties, and styles unmatched anywhere else.

“Lambrusco is part of the history of Italian wine,” says Tommaso Chiarli, export manager and fifth-generation member of **Cleto Chiarli**, a historic producer in Modena.

“Lambrusco today is very different from the wines consumer often got introduced to in the 70s and 80s,” says Prestia. “This misconception that all Lambrusco is sweet has been changing over the last 10 years or so, led by us and several other wineries who produce dry premium Lambrusco.”



Emilia-Romagna is the gastronomic food and wine belt in which Lambrusco is produced. ILLUSTRATION: L BORTOLOTT, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lambrusco hails from Emilia-Romagna, the large belt that cuts a swathe across north-central Italy and is home to Italy's most internationally renowned foods: prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Grana Padano, Mortadella, Balsamico di Modena, Tortellini—founded in Bologna—and arguably Italy's most famous pasta presentation: spaghetti Bolognese. Major production areas are Modena, Reggiano and Parma, and multiple DOCs, grapes and clones are represented in each.

Italian style

Throughout the region, red, white and rose wines are made, but Lambrusco, a sparkling red wine with bright acidity is made from more than 60 grape varieties. The wine is either *frizzante* (gentle bubbles), or *spumante* (forceful bubbles), and labeled *secco* (dry), *amabile* (slightly sweet) or *dolce* (sweet). It's not always easy for the Lambrusco novice to know what they're getting just from reading the label, but it's fun and not too expensive to experiment with a few different styles and come to a few that will be in your regular drinking repertoire.

Most Lambruscos are made in the Charmat method (also called cuvee close, if ya want to get fancy), in which the second fermentation takes place in large, stainless-steel tanks. This is also the way much of Prosecco DOC is made, so if you like Italian fizz, Lambrusco is a good way of keeping it in *la famiglia*.

In the sparkling wine world, the style of wine is regulated by the amount of pressure under which the wine is bottled, called “bars” or “atms” (atmospheres). Semi-sparkling falls in between one and three bars of pressure. (By comparison, Crémants are a minimum of 3.5 atms, and wines such as Champagnes made in the traditional method—second fermentation in the bottle—are typically five to six atms.)

Lambrusco's Charmat process results in a soft creamy texture that offsets the wine's natural high acidity and minerality while highlighting the robust fruit and herbal character of its regional grapes. It pairs well with the heavier regional food of Emilia, but it's a great wine for summer barbecues, sipping with charcuteries and smoked meats and lovely for transitioning into fall.

Goodness grapes!

The other thing about Lambrusco, if you want to really geek out, is that it's not just one grape. While Lambrusco is the multi-purpose name of the wine, it's really an extended family of styles, and clones (the genetic material) that are maddeningly named and cross-named for both their villages and grapes. Because nothing is simple in Italy, right?

Chiarli says most people tend to lump Lambrusco under a generic style of wine, but notes "Grasparossa, Sorbara and Salamino are distinct vines in the Lambrusco family" each with their own levels of dryness, tannins acid and fruit profiles.

"These differences present an opportunity to obtain a wide range of Lambruscos that make this family of wines extremely adaptable throughout seasons, to different food and social occasions," he says.

But here's what you need to know to keep the family tree straight: there are five basic styles with different profiles—all of which are approachable and friendly with food and alone. Most are blended according to appellation rules but have to contain a minimum 85% of the Lambrusco grape.

Lambrusco di Modena. This is the basic level of Lambrusco, sourced from a wide area, mostly in the middle of the province, and under which there are three DOC sub appellations.

- **Lambrusco di Sorbara.** Made around the village of Sorbara north of Modena (home of the eponymous balsamic wine), this is the fancy-pants cousin of the family—dry, crisp, crunchy red fruit (cranberry, pomegranate, plus some violet florals) that often reflects its terroir. Very food-friendly.
- **Lambrusco di Grasparossa di Castelvetro.** Made south of Modena, this comes from a darker-colored grape, so expect an earthier wine with more structure, deeper dark-berry fruit flavors, a few more tannins.
- **Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce.** The workhorse grape in and around Modena and the farther-west Reggio Emilia region, it's the most widely planted and often used to ratchet up the color and acidity in blends, particularly Sorbara (ecologist sidenote: it's often used as a co-pollinator with that variety). Style-wise, it lands between Sorbara and Grasparossa, with fresh, dry red-fruit (raspberry, cherry) expressions but not as much tannic structure as Grasparossa.