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## Lauding Lambrusco

Jeffery Lindenmuth / September 2012

**Emilia-Romagna's versatile varietal earns some hard-won respect from sommeliers.**

A new generation of American diners appears prepared to give Lambrusco a fresh start. And sommeliers who clamor for lower alcohol, food-friendly, and affordable wines are ready to oblige. There are many facets to DOC Lambrusco: The wines range from deep red to rosé, from generously fizzy to lightly *frizzantino*, and may be secco (dry) or amabile (off-dry), in addition to sweeter styles. While it can be

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incredibly challenging to sell a wine that has zero name recognition among restaurant diners, Lambrusco is even less fortunate. Ever since Banfi Vintners' Riunite Lambrusco attained the position of America's number one imported wine in 1976, the Lambrusco wines of Italy's Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy regions have been members of a dubious club—wines that serious wine drinkers avoid.

"Emilia-Romagna was a region with many big co-ops, willing to make and sell whatever wine you wanted. Riunite created a wine and did a very good job," says James Koch of California's JK Imports, who began importing small producer, secco Lambrusco in 1995. "For 10 years, until about 2005, I was literally laughed at." During that same period, other culinary traditions of Emilia-Romagna—Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano—established proud reputations in the United States. Now, it may finally be Lambrusco's turn at the table.

"The people who are enjoying Lambrusco either don't know anything about wine and want something friendly or are very savvy. It's all the in-between people who think they know Lambrusco who are the most apprehensive," says Jim Kennedy, partner/wine consultant at Uva Enoteca in San Francisco. With a *carne* selection including a rich variety of prosciutto, mortadella, salame, speck, and bresaola, Uva embraces one of the key signatures driving the Lambrusco revival. "With cured meats and cheese, it's a great wine because of the low tannins and high acidity. We carry Pronto Lambrusco and actually have trouble keeping it in stock. Few wines are as versatile as a slightly chilled, fizzy red," beams Kennedy.

Few wines are as challenging to categorize on a restaurant wine list, too. Koch says he prefers to see quality Lambrusco in the red wine section because they are red wines first. Being *frizzante*, with about half the fizz of spumante wines, he fears some consumers will declare them flat. Then again, a frothy red wine served at Champagne temperature (below 45 F) defies most red wine expectations. For most restaurants, Lambrusco seems at home filed under "sparkling," often served in a red wine glass, with ample explanation.

At Coppa in Boston, general manager Mary Edes includes several Lambrusco wines in the sparkling section of her list of about 50 wines, all under \$100. Currently on offer are Medici Ermete Quercioli Regguabi, a dolce style (\$25), Cavicchioli Col Sassoso (\$40), and Mionetto il Lambrusco (\$30), an ambitious assortment for a wine best consumed within a year of release. "It was a reaction to our salumi, because these wines are ideal with fatty, salty cured meats. But we're also a big industry hangout, and focused on value, so we have the right audience," says Edes.

Through dedicated staff education and salesmanship, Edes says she has built an eclectic following for Lambrusco. "It's both the person who wants a sweeter, approachable red wine and the guy who orders the pig's ear terrine. We get a lot of people hooked on it, and they keep coming back searching for it," she says. Indeed, the bigger challenge has now become maintaining a steady supply of quality Lambrusco at Coppa.

At Maialino, part of New York City's Union Square Hospitality Group, wine director Liz Nicholson offers Lini Lambrusco Labrusca Rosso by the glass, quartino, or bottle (\$9, \$15,

\$36) listed under *Bollicine* (“bubbles”), selling between two and three cases each week. “It’s really getting popular among 20-something wine drinkers. They don’t even know the name, but they want the wine that’s red, sparkling, and Italian. For someone who has been drinking wine for 30 years, that stigma of Lambrusco is much harder to overcome,” she says. Fellow USHG wine directors have also experimented with dry Lambrusco, offering it by the glass at Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe, especially in the warmer months when chilled red is an easier sell.

In addition to Lambrusco with salumi, Nicholson pairs the wines with spicy tomato dishes, including *bucatini all’amatriciana*, and lamb chops with black pepper. “Once you begin to look at the variety within real Lambrusco, the big range of fizz and acid and tannins, I think it fits into every portion of the meal. I like rosé as an apéritif, dry red with food, and the sweeter styles with dessert, especially fresh peaches and nectarines.”

According to Rico Grootveldt, export manager for Chiarli 1860, the wines of Lambrusco Grasparossa Di Castelvetro DOC are the driest and most powerful. “You must remember that the food we have around Modena is not Mediterranean, but rather fatty and rich. So you’ll find these wines that are full-bodied Lambruscos are a good partner with barbecue, Brazilian *churrascaria*, and Argentine steak and *asado*,” says Grootveldt.

With six approved grape varieties and five DOC regions, sorting out the new wave of quality Lambrusco, crafted in dry and off-dry styles, from the industrial wines can be a challenge. According to Koch, the alcohol level is the fastest and easiest way to deduce the difference. “Real Lambrusco has a minimum alcohol of 10.5 percent by DOC standards. When it’s less than that, you are sampling your grandmother’s Lambrusco,” he says. While it’s unlikely to rival the 2 million cases of Riunite wine consumed annually in the United States, Banfi, too, has moved into small-production, dry Lambrusco with Albinea Canali Ottocentenero Lambrusco, offered primarily to restaurants.

Still, any wine director who chooses to suggest a Lambrusco wine should probably be prepared for sneers, giggles, possibly even a rendition of the catchy disco-era “Riunite on ice, Riunite so nice.” Koch has heard it all. “I tell them, forget what you know of Lambrusco. It’s not what you think,” he says.