

lambrusco is making a comeback

my grandfather was a cellar master in Sorbara, a little town near Modena. The village is famous for its Lambrusco di Sorbara, and as a child, I grew up on lambrusco, a slightly sparkling rosé or red wine that also comes in a white varietal. It is a fragrant, tart, sprightly wine that helps with digestion and is said to lower cholesterol.

In Italy, the wine is widely popular, but it hasn't enjoyed the same status in the States. For many years, it was considered a second-tier wine, on account of a low-grade, sugar-laden variety that was common in the 1970s. These bad bottles of lambrusco earned it the nickname "black Champagne," and it ended up on the shelves in cans, like soft drinks.

Although people have enjoyed these bottles in the U.S., lambrusco lovers are turning the tide, and higher-quality producers are becoming more common in wine stores and restaurants nationwide. "At first, lambrusco was a hard sell, because it's chilled, slightly frizzante, and people didn't know what to make of it," says Dulcinea Benson, co-owner of Peasant restaurant and wine bar in New York City. "But when we opened our wine bar three years ago, people came to love it. It's a perfect by-the-glass wine."

The name lambrusco comes from the Latin "labrusca" or "lambrusca," a wild grape vine that grew at the edge of the fields and was discovered by the Romans. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were 56 red varietals and 27 white, but today eight survive. Lambruschi that carry the DOC quality label are produced in the provinces of Reggio Emilia, Modena and Mantova with the denominations of Lambrusco di Sorbara, Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro, Lambrusco Salamino di Santacroce, Lambrusco reggiano, Lambrusco Grasparossa Colli di Scandiano and Canossa, and Lambrusco Mantovano.

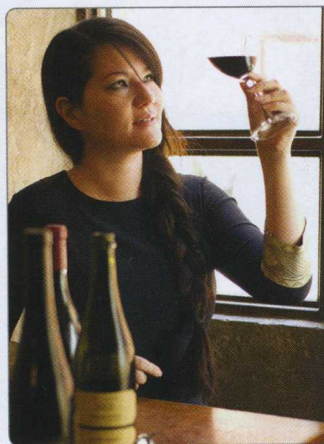
Lambrusco reflects the area where it is made; it's proletarian,



Above: Lambrusco makes a great wine for a light meal. Below: Benson testing some bottles at her restaurant, Peasant.

genuine and direct. It should be fizzy enough that it forms a little froth when poured into a glass. Benson suggests pairing it with lighter foods. "It was originally described as a pizza wine," she says. "It's really a snack wine and not for serious dinners." In my family, we drank the red variety during the winter, when the menus included heavier dishes. During the summer, we added it to our water to create a refreshing drink. Remember to avoid bottles with residual sugars, because real Lambrusco is made without them. Beyond that, I recommend trying several, to take advantage of the fine, moderately priced bottles that are now available.

by Paolo Becarelli



recommended bottles

DULCINEA BENSON, a wine connoisseur, is selective about which bottles she drinks. Among her favorite bottles of Lambrusco are:

MEDICI ERMETE Assolo.

This fourth-generation family producer is based in Emilia-Romagna. Their traditional-style Solo, says Benson, is "a huge crowd pleaser." \$14

CLETO CHIARLI Pruno Nero.

The Chiarli estate claims to be the oldest lambrusco producer in Emilia. The medium-bodied Pruno Nero is aromatic and easily drinkable. \$10

LA STOPPA Gutternio Frizzante.

Although not classified as a lambrusco, Benson recommends this bonarda-barbera blend for emulating lambrusco with different grape varietals. \$17