

The bubbly Italian

Max Allen explains why prosecco is the perfect great-value fizz



Max Allen gives you the inside track on wine without the guff. He left England for Melbourne 15 years ago and continues to win plaudits, home and away, for his straight-talking advice on how to enjoy wine to the full.

Sometimes you want to open a bottle of sparkling wine not because there's anything really special to celebrate, but just because you need cheering up. On a dreary Wednesday evening, perhaps, when Champagne would feel, well, not only too expensive but too indulgent.

And sometimes you need to cater for a big group of people for a celebration and want to provide some bubbly, but again, the posh French stuff is beyond your budget. At moments like these I reach for prosecco, because it offers flavoursome fizzy fun for not too much money.

The white prosecco grape is grown in the Veneto region, in north-east Italy, and is made into the sparkling white wine of

the same name, poured as a light and refreshing aperitif in every bar and restaurant in Venice and Verona. While you'll find prosecco at a wide spread of prices and in all manner of styles from very pale and dry to pink and sweet, the best wines come from the Conegliano and Valdobbiadene sub-regions.

WHAT DOES PROSECCO TASTE LIKE?

Most of the prosecco you'll find on wine shop and supermarket shelves is gently fizzy with an almost sherbet-like foam, is dry or off-dry (only slightly sweet) and has fresh flavours of green apples, hay, lemon zest and pear. There's something light, breezy and very moreish about these flavours – exactly the kind of sparkling wine you want when you're busy chatting. You can also find pink prosecco; this is usually off-dry, but not very different in flavour from the sparkling white version.

While some very good, everyday-value prosecco is made by big wineries – such as Carpenè Malvolti (£5.99, averys.com) – the very best, but pricier examples come from small, artisan producers such as Nino Franco, whose excellent, very dry Rustico Prosecco di Valdobbiadene costs about £11.

WHAT TO EAT WITH PROSECCO?

In Venice, the perfect time to drink prosecco is on your way home from work, standing in a bar and sipping it accompanied by a snack. The apotheosis of this ritual is found in the legendary Harry's Bar, where prosecco drinkers are offered sandwiches stuffed with salty boiled egg and anchovies; or prawns and

mayonnaise; or toasted ham and cheese. See what I mean? Prosecco is not a fancy drink. It's functional. And the best food matches are similarly down-to-earth.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO WITH PROSECCO?

As well as being a delicious, easy drink on its own, prosecco is the basis of two of the most wonderful Italian cocktails.

The first is the famous Bellini (also from Harry's Bar), which is a blend of prosecco and peach juice. Yes, you can make it yourself at home, if you have access to ripe peaches at this time of year – an expensive exercise, I'd have thought – or mix your prosecco with [Funkin](http://funkin.com) Peach Bellini Cocktail Mix (£1/125g, Waitrose, funkin.co.uk). Alternatively you can buy an acceptable ready-made version of the cocktail by Italian winery Canella – the 20cl bottles are hard to find, but if you're serious about trying it everywine.co.uk has it at £65/case of 24.

The second fabulous Venetian cocktail is the spritz, a deceptively simple combination of Campari or its close, orange-flavoured relation, Aperol, with prosecco and a splash of fizzy mineral water. The ideal mix (in a generously-proportioned tumbler, with ice and a strip of citrus peel) is about one part Campari (if you like the bitterness, Aperol if you want something a little softer), two-to-three parts prosecco, and just a slug of mineral water.

My preference is for an Aperol spritz – as beautiful as it is efficient. Be careful, though – one is enough. Laidback is good. Laid-out isn't.



10-SECOND GUIDE TO PROSECCO

- * Comes from the Veneto region of north-east Italy.
- * Usually dry or off-dry.
- * Tastes of fresh green apples and pears.
- * Perfect with snacks.
- * Great in a cocktail, especially the classic Venetian spritz.