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Prosecco surpasses champagne in global sales as Italian sparkling wine dominates international markets

Affordable prices, fresh flavors, and efficient production methods drive prosecco’s rise as Italy’s top wine export worldwide

Saturday, May 10, 2025



Prosecco has become one of Italy’s most recognized sparkling wines, gaining ground in international markets and even surpassing Champagne in global sales in 2014. Produced mainly in the northeastern regions of Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia, Prosecco is now Italy’s leading wine export. Its rise in popularity is closely linked to its approachable style, affordability, and versatility.

The name Prosecco comes from a small village near Trieste, which is also close to the historic Castle of Pucinum. In ancient times, the wine was known as Pucinum, but by the 16th century, it was renamed Prosecco to distinguish it from other local wines with similar names. The first written reference to Prosecco dates back to 1593, when English traveler Fynes Moryson listed it among Italy’s best wines.

Prosecco is made primarily from the Glera grape. Its color is a bright straw yellow, and it is known for its fine and persistent bubbles. On the palate, Prosecco is fresh and light, with crisp acidity and fruity aromas that often include citrus notes. The alcohol content typically ranges from 11% to 12%, making it lighter than many other sparkling wines.

Until the 1960s, Prosecco was mostly a sweet wine with little distinction from other Italian sparkling wines like Asti. Advances in winemaking techniques during the latter half of the 20th century improved its quality significantly. By the early 2000s, Prosecco had entered the North American market, where it quickly found favor. Today, the United States is the largest importer of Prosecco, followed by strong demand in the United Kingdom. In 2010, Prosecco received controlled designation of origin status (DOC), further cementing its reputation for quality.

There are two main categories of Prosecco: Conegliano Valdobbiadene DOCG Prosecco Superiore and Prosecco DOC. Additional terms such as Rive and Cartizze indicate specific vineyard origins within these regions. Depending on its level of effervescence, Prosecco can be classified as Spumante (fully sparkling), Frizzante (semi-sparkling), or Tranquillo (still). The still version represents only about 5% of production and is rarely found outside Italy.

Prosecco also varies by sweetness level: Brut contains less than 12 grams of residual sugar per liter; Extra Dry ranges from 12 to 17 grams; Dry has between 17 and 32 grams; and Demi-Sec contains between 32 and 50 grams per liter.

A key factor that sets Prosecco apart from Champagne and Cava is its production method. While Champagne and Cava use the traditional method with secondary fermentation in the bottle—a process that requires significant labor and time—Prosecco is made using the Charmat method. In this process, secondary fermentation occurs in large stainless steel tanks rather than individual bottles. After an initial dry base wine is produced from pressed grapes, it is transferred to a sealed tank along with sugar, clarifying agents, and yeast nutrients. The secondary fermentation takes place under controlled conditions until the desired level of carbonation is achieved. The wine is then filtered to remove yeast cells and bottled under pressure.

The Charmat method allows for faster production at lower cost compared to traditional methods. This efficiency makes Prosecco more affordable while preserving its fresh fruit character.

Prosecco’s success can be attributed to its refreshing taste profile and accessible price point. It works well as an aperitif or paired with light dishes. Sweeter styles are often enjoyed with desserts. Beyond being served on its own, Prosecco is a popular ingredient in cocktails such as the spritz and bellini.

Today, Prosecco continues to grow in popularity worldwide due to its easy-drinking style and adaptability for various occasions. Its story reflects both tradition and innovation in Italian winemaking, making it a staple on tables across continents.