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# Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

## Dignified Prosecco

Prosecco Road, Part I: Primo Franco's sparkling revolution



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Primo Franco with a bottle of his first solo Prosecco, from 1983

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Primo Franco, now a white-haired Prosecco statesman, recalls the moment the world changed for him.

More than 35 years ago, he was dining at legendary chef Gualtiero Marchesi's Milan restaurant. A customer had left an unfinished bottle of classic white Burgundy, and Marchesi offered it to Franco.

"Gualtiero said, 'Would you like a glass of Montrachet Marquis de Laguiche 1969?'"

"I said, 'Why not?'" Franco shrugs.

Today in his Nino Franco winery in Valdobbiadene, Franco doesn't even try to describe the complex sensations, flavors and feelings he experienced with that glass, though he says it changed his life. At the time, Italy's white wines didn't reach the quality levels they do today, and he had never tasted anything like it.

The Montrachet convinced Franco, a young Prosecco négociant and winemaker working for his father, that Prosecco deserved more. "I wanted to give Prosecco a different dignity," he says. "I decided that a great sparkling wine must first be a great still wine."

Franco went to Burgundy to learn white winemaking and then came home to revolutionize his family winery. In the decades since, Franco has become one of the leading quality pioneers of Prosecco Superiore-designated wines, with an annual production of 100,000 cases and a flagship wine that baffles appellation officials.

Franco's grandfather founded the winery as a négociant house, bottling red and white wines after the close of World War I. His father, Nino, expanded that business within Italy.

"We were selling calories," recalls Franco. "Wine was something that was drunk every day and every night."

As a teenager, Primo dreamed of being an architect. His father vetoed that idea and sent him to school in nearby Conegliano to become an enologist. "I decided to stay here fighting with my father," says Franco, who joined the business in 1972. "It was a positive battle."

Franco expanded the business with its first exports to other European countries and the United States. Then in 1982, his father died and took over. He immediately modernized the family winery, replacing old fermentation barrels with temperature-controlled steel tanks and eliminating red and white still wines from the family portfolio.

"I decided to do one thing—Prosecco," he says, "to put all the gas inside one car in order to go faster and further."

It was the time of Italian wine's quality revolution, which Franco fondly recalls. "We were a bunch of producers of the same age," he says. "We were coming from the business of calories and into the business of pleasure, hedonism, emotion."

Franco called his first bottling on his own Primo Franco. Inspired by a 1956 bottle of Prosecco he found in the family cellars, it aims to be "dry" (meaning slightly sweet in Prosecco parlance) but with finesse.

"It was the model of quality in my mind 30 years ago," Franco says of the wine, still in production.

Over those decades, Franco has focused much of his efforts on two passions. One was to not only modernize his winery, but to make it beautiful. He employed the celebrated postmodern architect and

designer Tobia Scarpa, who created an organic flow to the spaces and added touches such as a hardwood floor made from old barrel staves.

Franco's other obsession has been Grave di Stecca, an enclosed 6-acre vineyard just outside Valdobbiadene. He rented it and replanted with Prosecco's dominant Glera variety, then purchased it a decade ago. It is the only vineyard Franco owns.

On Grave di Stecca's rocky limestone soils, Franco experimented first with still white wines. Then, starting with the 2007 vintage, he set out to produce a complex, aged, brut Prosecco, managing the vineyard for low yields. It produces only about 1,000 cases per year.

All of Franco's wines use the charmat method of secondary fermentation in steel autoclaves. But Franco and his small winery team use the autoclaves like fine instruments: His Grave di Stecca bottlings stay six months on the lees before undergoing secondary fermentation. They're released two years after harvest.

In the bottling's first three vintages, Franco fought with local appellation officials who rejected the wine as too different to be labeled as Prosecco. With the 2009 vintage, he stopped fighting and began marketing the wine as non-appellation Spumante.

"The panel did not recognize it as Prosecco," Franco recalls. "I agreed with them, but this is what we got from this vineyard. There is a strong influence of *terroir*."

"The future," he adds, "is this: Giving Prosecco more dignity."

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