

Bold And Bubbly

The relatively small sparkling red wine segment is making inroads with U.S. consumers

The sparkling red wine Lambrusco has long been a beloved varietal among wine drinkers in its native Italy, but the trend has been slower to catch fire in the United States, where awareness and availability of these wines has been lacking. But thanks to the efforts of wine producers and marketers and the increasingly adventurous palates of U.S. wine drinkers, bubbly reds—from Italy, Australia and even the United States—are growing in prominence and popularity.

“There’s been an expanding interest in sparkling wines in general, so I see sparkling reds trending upward in the near future,” says Mark Lyle, group marketing and communications director for Banfi Vintners. The company imports three Italian sparkling reds to the U.S. market, ranging from the light and berry-forward Rosa Regale Brachetto d’Acqui (\$21 a 750-ml. bottle) and Riunite Lambrusco (\$6) to the bone-dry Albinea Canali Ottocentonero Lambrusco (\$16). “Sparkling wine has been shedding its image of being only for special occasions,” Lyle adds. “In the past, wine drinkers mainly chose sparklers for holidays and celebrations, but now people are enjoying them on a more regular basis—especially in pairing with food.”

That’s certainly the case at Franny’s pizzeria and wine bar in Brooklyn, New York, which features two rotating Italian sparkling reds—usually Lambrusco—by the glass. “Sparkling reds go very well with our food,” explains Franny’s co-owner Francine Stevens. The restaurant’s recent autumn menu included the Lini 910 “Labrusca” Lambrusco Rosé (\$11 a glass) and the 2012 Vigneto Saetti Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce (\$13). In the past the restaurant has also offered



Banfi Vintners imports several sparkling red wines from Italy (vineyards above), including Lambrusco and Brachetto d’Acqui. The category is seeing increasing success in the United States.

the 2012 Paola Rinaldini Pronto Lambrusco (\$11). Sparkling red wines have been longtime staples on the Franny’s wine list. “We’ve had Lambrusco on our wine list since we opened in 2003,” Stevens says. “But I’ve noticed interest growing among our consumers. It’s a lot easier to sell Lambrusco now than it was 10 years ago.”

Enore Ceola, managing director at Mionetto USA, which produces Mionetto Il Lambrusco, sees wine consumers today as being more adventurous and open-minded. “People now understand sparkling wine and how to pair it with food, so I think that’s why sparkling reds are gaining sales,” he explains. “The category is still small and we have a long way to go, but when people taste the wine, they love it.”

Exposure and education have proved key to getting U.S. wine drinkers interested in fizzy red wine. “Sparkling red is limited by consumers’ exposure to it,” explains Tom Tiburzi, winemaker at Napa Valley’s Domaine Chandon, which markets the Chandon Classic Sparkling Red (\$30 a 750-ml. bottle) as a winery exclusive. “The more people taste it, the more it sells.” First released in 2002, Chandon’s wine was inspired by the sparkling reds popular in Australia. “We use Pinot Noir and Zinfandel in the blend for an American twist, as opposed to the Shiraz they use down under,” Tiburzi says. He notes that promoting the wine through tastings at the winery helps educate consumers about the wine and even turns many into fans. “Those who like it often leave the winery with many bottles,” Tiburzi adds.

While on-premise sales are on the rise, the majority of sparkling red wine is sold in the off-premise. Astor Wine & Spirits in New York City currently carries 15 sparkling reds, ranging from the Cantina di Sorbara Lambrusco Amabile (\$8.96 a 750-ml. bottle) to the 2011 Banfi Rosa Regale Brachetto d’Acqui (\$19.99). The store also stocks Australian labels like The Chook Sparkling Shiraz (\$18.99), as well as Portugal’s Aliança Metodo Classico Reserva Tinto Bruto (\$11.99). Retailer Total Wine & More offers 10 sparkling red wines from Italy and Australia, ranging from the Sei Amici Lambrusco Rosso (\$6.99) to Rinaldi Brachetto d’Acqui (\$24.99).

While Italy and Australia remain the most notable sparkling red wine producers, U.S. wineries are catching on to the trend. Sonoma County vineyards Wattle Creek and Geyser Peak each produce a Sparkling Shiraz (\$35 a 750-ml. bottle for Wattle Creek; \$34 for Geyser Peak), and across the country in Himrod, New York, Miles Wine Cellars produces the 2007 sparkling Cabernet Franc Medallion (\$37.95). As more consumers learn about the different styles and varietals available, the category is sure to grow.

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