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Bottoms up: on the prosecco trail in the Veneto

Our writer toasts the sparkling makers of Britain's favourite bubbly on a sophisticated vineyard road trip

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Drink it in: prosecco vineyards in Valdobbiadene GETTY

Fifty million litres — that's how much prosecco we drank in the UK last year. It amounts to one heck of a hangover, and makes us the largest consumers outside Italy. But how much do we really know about the country's finest fizz, and about the Veneto, the intoxicating landscape where it's produced?

The Strada del Prosecco (Prosecco Route) follows a 30-mile loop through the hills behind Venice. Italy's tiddliest road, it weaves from Conegliano to Valdobbiadene and back again, through patchwork vineyards, past medieval villages and snowy Alpine crests. And while the Brits don't think twice about popping over to northeastern France for a few days on the champers, this route promises a rather different adventure.

“We’re making a high-end product in a beautiful landscape, and we want to show off those qualities,” says the producer Pietro De Conti, of Pdc. “Think of it this way — if ordinary prosecco is a Fiat, then the DOCG we make locally is an Alfa Romeo, and our top-end Cartizze is a Ferrari.”

These peaks are little more than an hour’s drive from Venice, but their appeal is worlds away. On a spring morning, the vineyards are perfectly still. The hilltop villages, ancient castles and bell towers on the terraced slopes bask in the early sunshine. It’s the ideal time for a tasting.



Last of the summer vines: Farra di Soligo ALAMY

My first stop is Marchiori, in pretty Farra di Soligo. Producing 40,000 bottles a year, this family business is small in prosecco terms. Sara is its third generation, and at 10am she has me drinking eight-week-old wine (it will go on sale in spring) from gigantic steel vats and identifying scents in a blind nose test. It’s not as easy as you might think: I fail on honey, sage and apple, almost get mandarin and ID the lemon first time.

One tasting and I’m already — well, let’s call it cheery. Not a problem: I have a driver-guide, provided by a company that has handily packaged up the circuit. As we dip in and out of fairytale forests, and stop to admire the frescoes in the 11th-century church of San Pietro di Feletto, my guide outlines the science part. How, to qualify as prosecco, the wine must be made up of at least 85% glera grapes; how the superior DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) only comes from the Strada del Prosecco; and how the gold standard, Cartizze, which sells for £25 a bottle, is grown on a single hill, where a hectare of land will cost you £1.75m. It’s the most expensive wine real estate in Europe.

Lunch isn't in a restaurant, but in the hilltop home of Giancarlo Adorno, a Venetian lawyer who produces 10,000 bottles of DOCG on the side. "Passion doesn't pay," he says. "Prosecco isn't the way to get rich." The increased yield and, as he sees it, falling standards are making him angry — so angry that he keeps on topping up my glass, to better appreciate the quality of his product. His partner brings out a hearty pumpkin risotto. "You could drink a bottle of my wine on an empty stomach, with no headache," Adorno says. But I eat two helpings, just in case.



Drinking fountain: the Cistercian abbey of Santa Maria, in Follina ALAMY

The sun is setting on the big-bucks Cartizze hill as I climb up to Osteria Senz'Oste. This is a hostelry without a host — the owner, Cesare De Stefani, is rarely seen — a tiny hut where you help yourself to bread, salami and, of course, prosecco, putting your money in the tin. This I do, then sit out at one of three ramshackle tables and watch the mist come down over the vineyards. *Aperitividon't* come much lovelier than this.

My base for the night is the Relais Monaco hotel, south of the route. After dinner at its La Vigna restaurant — a langoustine gratin with, yes, another bottle of wine — I stumble to bed in the full expectation of a pounding head. But in the morning, something marvellous occurs: I feel fine. So I have to believe what they've been telling me: quality prosecco doesn't give you a hangover.

The next day begins with a stiff espresso regardless, at buzzy Bar Fontana, in medieval Conegliano, followed by a swerve through Follina, where the 12th-century Cistercian abbey of Santa Maria is as gorgeous as anything I have seen. But my priority is the Bisol estate, in Valdobbiadene, run by a family known as prosecco royalty who produce 5m bottles a year. The

oenologist here, Desiderio Bisol, has a theory about the popularity of prosecco that's refreshingly unscientific: "It's not a formal wine, it's a drink for friends. And there's never the fear that a bottle has gone bad, like there is with champagne. You can be sure of prosecco — and you can't say that about many things."

A tour of the winery reveals a hi-tech production plant built over vaulted cellars that hold bottles from as far back as 1875. Ancient wine presses retain the scent of 100-year-old grapes. As we taste, Bisol explains the way we perceive flavours on the tongue, pick apart the elements of sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami. After two days of sniffing, swirling and slurping, identifying the Cartizze is child's play.



With the remains of a bottle bagged up, I head to Salis, on the side of the Cartizze hill, for a last dinner of mozzarella and radicchio tortelli. My final night is at Villa Abbazia, back in Follina, a deliciously eccentric hotel in an 18th-century villa whose excellent restaurant is a popular hangout for local prosecco producers.

Here, they tell me the story of when Cesare De Stefani, of Osteria Senz'Oste, was landed with a huge tax bill a couple of years back. He couldn't afford to pay, so instead he took Onesta, one of his cows, to the tax office in town. "I don't have the cash, so I'm leaving her here," he told the bemused official.

That's the kind of guy I want making my prosecco.

Mia Aimaro Ogden was a guest of Grape Escapes, which has Essential Prosecco tours from £329pp, including two nights at Relais Monaco (relaismonaco.it) and/or Villa Abbazia (hotelabbazia.com), tastings, breakfast, one lunch and one dinner (01920 468666, grapeescapes.net). Fly to Venice with BA or to Treviso with Ryanair. Marchiori (marchioriwines.com) and Bisol (bisol.it) have tastings from £10pp. Mains at Salis start at £12 (salisristorante.it)