



IN THE ZONE

Known for its range of Proseccos, Zonin1821 is experimenting with various grapes to add depth and new flavours to the popular Italian fizz. Winemaker Stefano Ferrante came to London to show off the results. *Patrick Schmitt MW* reports

IF THERE were ever an event designed to address the commercial needs of the UK wine trade, it was a masterclass and tasting hosted by Zonin1821 in London last month. Focused on Italian sparkling wines, it dealt with the one major category in Britain's stalling wine market that is actually in growth. Not only that, but the driver of such expansion was at the core of the event: Prosecco, a speciality of Zonin1821.

Despite the sales increases, Prosecco is only just getting started in the UK, as the

market starts to explore new styles and more premium products – with Prosecco producers keen to promote the fact that this popular Italian fizz is not a generic product, but a category with different expressions and quality levels.

Not only that, but the great companies making high-class Prosecco are able to take their sparkling winemaking expertise throughout Italy and beyond. This is the approach of Zonin1821, a major Prosecco player that crafts some of Italy's best sparkling wines, but is also willing to

explore the nation's rich potential, with its myriad native grapes, while also, and this is notable, going beyond its home country with such endeavours.

At the helm of such projects is Stefano Ferrante, a winemaker who has risen rapidly up the ranks at Zonin1821. He now oversees the company's full annual output, which amounts to as much as 50 million bottles. Having flown in from Italy to present the wines, and give attendees the background on Zonin1821's projects, he was also interested in the UK



Patrick Schmitt MW, *db* editor-in-chief, with Zonin1821's Stefano Ferrante

The masterclass

The masterclass was held on 1 October 2018 at London's Asia House and moderated by Patrick Schmitt MW, editor-in-chief of *the drinks business*.

Presenting the wines was Stefano Ferrante, who is the technical director of winemaking at Zonin1821.

Ferrante hails from Milan and had planned to go into fruit production, having studied at agricultural college in Italy, but, after falling in love with wine, worked at Ornellaia and in Chianti Classico with winemaker Pierre Seillan before joining Zonin1821. Today he oversees the production of around 60m bottles each year for the producer.

trade's reaction to his latest blends. To do this, Ferrante was adamant that the professional audience sample the sparkling wines without prejudice as to source or variety – so the masterclass began with a blind tasting. This wasn't designed to be a test, but simply the most effective way to assess the wines without giving in to preconceptions, while focusing on the style and quality of what's in the glass.

INTEREST AND COMPLEXITY

It was then up to Ferrante to find out what the audience thought. Notably, in the line-up were three new Proseccos – each adding interest and complexity to the category by blending Glera – the base grape of Prosecco – with a different variety. This is possible with the rules of the DOC, which stipulate that Prosecco must be made with at least 75% Glera, leaving a remaining 15% for certain other varieties, including all types from the Pinot family. And it is these that Zonin1821 has used to create a triumvirate of Proseccos called 'Black', 'Grey' and 'White', created by the producer through the blending of Glera with 15% Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio and Pinot Bianco respectively. For many, the 'Black' was the best, although I liked the slightly richer, more textured 'Grey' the most – which was also a touch sweeter.

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The Black is made in an extra brut style, thanks to the fruitiness of the Pinot Noir, while the Grey has a brut sugar level.

Nevertheless, having tasted these new Proseccos blind alongside the 100% Glera 'Cuvée 1821', it was clear that the addition of Pinot varieties had brought some added interest and structure to the sparkling wines. It also offered a clever way to augment the diversity of Prosecco without resorting to a complex message based on specific sites.

Certainly, for Ferrante, although the production of these new Proseccos was small, he said they offered something distinctive, that demonstrates that you can do different things with Prosecco. Such a message is important because "some people think of Prosecco as a commodity, and that is not good for the reputation of the wine", he said.

He also agreed that the union of Glera and Pinot Grigio was a particularly successful one. "I like the combination very much because it gives quite a dense Prosecco, with some apricot, orange and chestnut honey, so it is quite complex and fruity." He also revealed that the White cuvée was the sweetest, made in an extra dry style (with 15g/l), because "the floral flavours of the Pinot Bianco are exalted with a higher sugar level", according to Ferrante.

Overall, he said he was pleased that the attendees had sensed the differences between the Proseccos, including the introductory pure Glera sample. "These are four different Proseccos, and it is important that you feel the differences between them," he said.

Also, commenting further on sugar levels, he pointed out that the best-selling Cuvée 1821, which the tasting had kicked off with, was – unusually for big brand Prosecco – made in a brut style (with 11g/l). Using a high proportion of Glera from Friuli (rather than the Veneto) he said he was looking to make a Prosecco

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Taste sensation: attendees enjoyed sampling the expressions

that is fruity and aromatic, but also fresh. “We don’t want to be too sweet and boring,” he said.

But it wasn’t just Prosecco in the blind tasting, and the attendees were surprised to learn that fizz number five was made with Falanghina grown in Puglia. Like the Proseccos before it, this was a Charmat method sparkling wine, but unlike the White Cuvée that preceded it, the Puglian fizz, called Saliente, was an extra brut, with just 5g/l. “It is very dry, and

particularly good with raw fish, which is one of the excellent dishes in Puglia.” Having spoken more about his motivation to make such a wine, he said that he chose Falanghina because of its naturally high level of acidity, even in the warm climate of Puglia, while noting that it is part of a wider aim to experiment, as well as take Zonin1821’s fizz making know-how to a range of Italian regions. Indeed, he said that creating such a sparkling wine is difficult, requiring

“technology and experience”. Using the Charmat method of Prosecco, he added, may be viewed “as a way to produce easy sparkling wines, but it is not an easy way”.

Commenting further on the urge to trial such products, he observed that each area of Italy wants their own emblematic fizz, such is the regional pride in the country, along with demand for sparkling wine.

And such an explanation

also justified the existence of the next sparkling wine. Sourced from Sicily and made with Nero d’Avola, he said it was a first, and one that was booming in Italy. He also said that he had been surprised by the red grape’s suitability for fizz – having used it for this tank method white sparkling, but also a traditional method version that will be released next year.

FANTASTIC CHARACTER

He also said: “Nero d’Avola is a very acid grape that ripens late and has a fantastic character for sparkling wines because even if you pick the grapes early there is no green flavour, unlike Merlot, Cabernet or Sangiovese.” As a result of the former grape’s nature, he said: “We are very confident with this product.”

But if it was surprising to have tasted fizz from Falanghina and Nero d’Avola, it was an even greater revelation to then see that the next sparkling wine made by Ferrante was not from Italy, but Chile. Called Dos Almas, the wine translates as ‘Two Souls’, referring to the union of Zonin1821 and Viña Ventisquero for this wine project in South America. Using Chardonnay and a touch of Moscatel, both sourced from Casablanca, and, like the previous sparkling wines, made using the Charmat method, this was a fresh and slightly floral fizz that Ferrante was proud of, although he said that he was still learning a lot about winemaking in Chile. “I like Chile very much, but it is a big challenge, and we are learning a lot, which means that I’m improving my skills, so I am very happy about the project.” He also said that he hopes to bring some Italian grapes to Chile to bring something different to the Chilean wine scene, while connecting the future offer from Dos Almas more closely to Zonin1821’s roots.

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The wines

1. Zonin1821, Prosecco DOC, Cuvèe 1821, North East Italy, NV

Grape variety: 100% Glera
ABV: 11%, Sugar: 13.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

2. Zonin1821, Prosecco DOC, Black Cuvèe, Extra Brut, North East Italy, NV

Grape varieties: Glera and Pinot Noir
ABV: 11%, Sugar: 5.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

3. Zonin1821, Prosecco DOC, Grey Cuvèe, North East Italy, NV

Grape varieties: Glera and Pinot Grigio
ABV: 11%, Sugar: 13.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

4. Zonin 1821, Prosecco DOC, White Cuvèe, NV

Grape varieties: Glera and Pinot Bianco
ABV: 11%, Sugar: 16.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

5. Altemura, Saliente, Brut, Puglia, Italy, NV

Grape variety: Falanghina
ABV: 11.5%, Sugar: 13.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

6. Feudo Principi di Butera, Neroluce Brut, Sicilia, Italy, NV

Grape variety: Nero d'Avola
ABV: 12.5%, Sugar: 13.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

7. Dos Almas, Brut, Casablanca Valley, Chile, NV

Grape varieties: 90% Chardonnay and 10% Moscatel
ABV: 12%, Sugar: 8.5g/l
Winemaking: Charmat method

8. Oltrenero, Brut Nature, Oltrepo Pavese, Italy, NV

Grape varieties: 100% Pinot Noir
ABV: 12%, Sugar: <1g/l
Winemaking: Traditional method

9. Oltrenero, Cruasé, Oltrepo Pavese, Italy, NV

Grape variety: Pinot Noir
ABV: 12%, Sugar: 6.0g/l
Winemaking: Traditional method

10. Tenuta Il Bosco, Bonarda, Oltrepo Pavese, Italy, 2017

Grape varieties: 100% Croatina
ABV: 12%, Sugar: 18g/l

Before the masterclass ended, it was time to reveal the next two sparkling wines, which differed in two respects: both were from Oltrepo Pavese (using 100% Pinot Noir), and both were made using the traditional method. They had been chosen by Ferrante to show both the quality of Pinot-based fizz from this more

With masses of bright red cherry fruit and a hint of sweetness, Ferrante said the wine paired perfectly with local salamis – but would be ideal with any fatty foods

obscure Italian sparkling wine region – that is compared with Prosecco, Franciacorta or Trentodoc – as well as the impact of long lees contact times in the bottle, with as much as 48 months spent resting in the cellar before disgorgement. “You can really feel the yeast, with flavours of bread, along with the fruit of the Pinot Nero,” he said, adding that the structure of such wines was totally different to the previous tank-method sparklers.

Finally, we had a red wine in our hands, and this was a very lightly fizzy wine from the same region, using 100% Croatina. With masses of bright red cherry fruit, and a hint of sweetness (the wine contained 17g/l of residual sugar), Ferrante said that the

wine paired perfectly with the local salamis of Oltrepo Pavese – but would be ideal with any fatty foods.

Notably, every wine shown that day had elicited comments from the attendees, and each one had been a favourite of someone in the audience. But most importantly, together, the masterclass had shown two things. First, that there is great diversity within Prosecco – and in this case, thanks to the influence of different grape varieties allowed within the DOC rules. And second, that the expertise learnt from making Prosecco is being used across Italy and elsewhere to craft a range of sparkling wines with different personalities, but always with a high level of quality.