

# Lambrusco strikes back

Having fallen from grace, Lambrusco is now making a comeback in its traditional form as a deep, dry, sparkling wine from Emilia Romagna. Zeren Wilson hails the return of this once-derided drop

Photography by Marius W Hansen

**L**ambrusco is having a moment. Yes, really. It's officially hip. Although the wine has a rich history – with archaeological evidence indicating that the Etruscans cultivated the vine and the Romans valued it highly for its large yields – from the late 1950s it had a steady fall from grace. Its decline began when the production of large quantities for export concentrated on a commercial, sweeter 'dolce' style, which bore almost no resemblance to its traditionally dry predecessor.

There have been false dawns since then, but today there is renewed vigour and excitement about the wine, driven chiefly by sommeliers at top restaurants, who parade it on wine lists as a badge of respect.

It was the wine list at Gramercy Tavern in New York City that first piqued my interest. What ever could be going on here? A little reading revealed enough to suggest that savvy restaurants might be wise to follow suit. Among the new wave of importers in the UK who took note are Kilgarriff and Kahan. Alice Kilgarriff, whose husband is from

Reggio Emilia, remembers her own Damascene moment: 'Its dry, deep red earthiness was like nothing I had ever tasted, particularly as it had this slightly sparkling quality to it. I have been a convert ever since.'

Originally from Emilia-Romagna, the old-school 'real' Lambrusco is a perfect foil for the area's traditional food: the rich and fatty cuisine that is heavy in pork and cheese. Its bracing acidity and its rousing freshness makes it ideal to cleanse the palate between mouthfuls of tagliatelle al ragù, for instance, or an antipasti plate lined with prosciutto, salami, coppa and mortadella.

What makes a 'proper' Lambrusco? Firstly, it must have a DOC (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*) and then go through a secondary fermentation in either a tank or bottle to create a gentle sparkle. The most traditional secondary fermentation method, *Rifermentazione Ancestrale*, takes place in the bottle in a method not dissimilar to that used to make Champagne. Today, a new generation of quality-conscious growers



**'In Correggio' Lambrusco  
Scuro Emilia, Lini 910, 2009**  
Authentically dry and beautifully  
balanced, with red fruits to the fore  
[kilgarriffandkahan.co.uk](http://kilgarriffandkahan.co.uk)



**Lambrusco Salamino  
di Santa Croce 2010,  
Vigneto Saetti**

Savoury, earthy,  
chock-full of minerals  
and dark fruit  
[aubertandmascoli.com](http://aubertandmascoli.com)

**Lambrusco di Sorbara  
2012, Paltrinieri**

Palest pink, ultra-dry,  
with aromas of  
raspberry and cranberry  
[passionevino.co.uk](http://passionevino.co.uk)

is re-adopting this method, and taking great care to grow small-production vines that produce wines of real character. Using a host of different Lambrusco grape varieties (the most common including Sorbara, Grasparossa and Salamino) is creating real depth and variety, particularly from vines grown in the foothills of the Apennines south of Modena.

I played my own vinous cards on the subject when asked to put an Italian wine list together for a new London restaurant, Bibo in Putney, south-west London. I tasted quality Lambrusco for the first time: the bottle spilt its almost impossibly deep purple contents into the glass, producing vivacious bubbles that quickly settled. The biggest surprise was that the deeply coloured red was bone-dry rather than fruit-driven, and both savoury and refreshing. I was suckered in from the first taste, a thrilling, utterly distinctive experience.

That wine, Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce from organic winemaker Luciano Saetti, is a favourite of importer Guillaume Subert. 'I love it because it is austere and earthy but vibrant and full

of energy,' Subert says. 'Also, it cuts through lardo like a knife.'

The pleasure of drinking Lambrusco comes partly from its bubbles. This is not a wine to get too cerebral about, to start chin-stroking and analysing as you sip. It's a wine to quaff and enjoy while crumbling chunks of Parmigiano Reggiano off the block. As Kilgarriff puts it: 'Lambrusco is not a serious wine, but that does not mean that it shouldn't be taken seriously.' It's an opinion with which I agree. One of the most glorious examples is a pale-pink style made with Lambrusco di Sorbara, a high-acid, thin-skinned grape that can produce a raspberry character and a laser-sharp, dry finish.

This year's World Lambrusco Day garnered a fair bit of press and buzz; the wine definitely had a moment. Next year, celebrations are on 21 June, with events from 19-25 June. Lambrusco is definitely back. Try it; your Parmigiano and prosciutto will love you for it. Promise.

*Zeren Wilson is the author of influential blog [bittenandwritten.com](http://bittenandwritten.com)*