

The international Prosecco boom was only easy to predict in retrospect: while it was happening it appeared to be something of a five-minute wonder, with most commentators expecting it to run out of fizz as suddenly as it appeared on the scene. However, now that the category has become large enough in its own right to be self-sustaining, at least in Europe, the reasons for its success have become abundantly clear.

For a start Champagne sales had been on the increase, and only the 2008 financial crisis had taken the steam out of their year-on-year growth. With more people enjoying fizz - either as an aperitif or as a beverage - another cheaper option was always going to emerge. Given the credibility of Italy as a source of good wine at reasonable prices, as well as the country's image among fashionistas, Prosecco was poised to take the gap.

In fairness, even its producers had failed to anticipate what was about to happen - otherwise they would have acted sooner to protect their appellation. Prosecco used to be simply the name of a grape, and although it is recorded as a kind of a wine associated with the castle of Pucinum, near the village of Prosecco, not much turned on this until it became clear that the appellation could not be protected as long as there was a grape type bearing the same name.

Accordingly the Italians decided to use the name Glera for the grape and applied to the European Commission for protection of Prosecco as a geographical indication (GI). The reason for this is that, in the world of wines and spirits, areas of origin always enjoy preferential protection over all other forms of intellectual property. Unfortunately for those involved in this sleight of hand, prosecco grapes had already been planted in a number of countries, including Australia. The effect of the IP protection that the EC sought would have been to deprive the Australian growers of their right to use the name "prosecco" on wines made with prosecco grapes.

Unsurprisingly, the Winemakers Federation of Australia successfully brought an action against the European Commission which - at least insofar as Australia is concerned - has stopped this strategy in its tracks. This doesn't simplify things for consumers in the Antipodes, since they can now (confusingly) buy a bottle of still Australian wine made from prosecco grapes and bearing the name "Prosecco" on the label, while at the same time and in the same shop pick up a can (not even a bottle) of Italian sparkling wine produced somewhere in the Veneto region of Italy and labelled "Prosecco."

The same problems won't afflict South African consumers. I don't think there is any prosecco planted in the Cape. Even if there was, it's extremely unlikely that our authorities would offer any opposition to the Italian claims, given the ease with which they rolled over when it came to the much bigger issue of port and sherry. This means that the locally available proseccos will have been produced in Italy, either in the wider generic area (Prosecco DOC) or from the more premium appellations such as Prosecco Conegliano Valdobbiadene Superiore DOCG - which can only be made in the Treviso province of Veneto.

Insofar as buying prosecco in South African stores is concerned, the choice appears to grow daily. The Villa Sandi selection ranges in price from about R140 for the DOC Brut to the DOCG extra Dry at R180 (with small quantities of vintage 2015 at R190). Sommariva is more expensive: the Treviso Extra Dry is R160, while the 2015 DOCG from the small Rive di San Michele appellation is R220. Valdo - which is more widely distributed, starts at R150 per bottle of the DOC Extra Dry and continues upwards through the DOCG at about R200, the Fondatore Brut at R325, the Cartizze at R395 and the Millennium Edition

at a heart-stopping R1000. The prettily packaged Rose Floral is, by comparison, a give-away at R250