



The Franco family

*"So what is it that makes your Prosecco special?" I asked. After a theatrical pause, Primo smiled mischievously and then delivered his answer: "Me," he said*

**D**rive northwest from Venice on the fast and empty A27 motorway over the flat plains around the lagoon, and in no time you reach the foothills of the Alps, where the views become more spectacular at every turn. A hilltop castle here, a mountain pass there, and then you are in the lush green heart of Prosecco country.

Thus on this clear summer's day, having left London not many hours before, I found myself sitting in the rose-filled garden of an immaculate 18th-century villa outside the small town of Valdobbiadene. Vineyards covered the surrounding slopes, and as a cuckoo called in the distance, my host, the youthful 65-year-old Primo Franco, launched into an explanation of one of the more technical aspects of the winemaker's trade; at which point I felt the need to bring the conversation back to my own amateur level.

"So what is it that makes your own Prosecco special?" I asked. What I expected, of course, was a routine answer to a routine question. But that was not what was coming. After a theatrical pause, Primo looked me in the eye, smiled mischievously, prolonged the silence until he had my full attention, and then delivered his answer. "Me," he said. Coming from anyone else, this might have taken me aback; but such is Franco's charm, and such is his reputation as a major luminary of the Prosecco world, that I was more than happy to believe him.

Founded after the First World War in 1919, Nino Franco is one of the oldest and most prestigious Prosecco producers in Italy. Having reluctantly studied oenology (he wanted to be an architect), and after a spell as a kitchen porter in the Café Royal in London, Primo joined the



family firm in 1971, and took over from his father – by all accounts a big personality – after his death in 1982. The company now employs 15 people, including Primo's wife and daughter, and produces well over a million bottles a year, two thirds of which are exported all over the world.

However, the 2.4 hectares of vines around his villa provide grapes for only about 2 per cent of his output; all the rest are bought in from independent growers with whom he works closely. "We are proud to be *négociants*," he says. And clearly, what grapes he buys, and from whom, is a critical issue. "You see that vineyard over there?" he asks, pointing to a steep hill only a few hundred yards away. "Well, it produces grapes that are completely different from my own ones, and it's all due to *terroir* – the soil, the microclimate, the lay of the land, the vines, and also human input." Being very much a beginner where Prosecco is concerned, I am keen to master the basics, and Primo patiently talks me through them.

Firstly, like Champagne, Prosecco is now an appellation that is protected under EU law (specifically, by a PDO – a Protected Designation of Origin). Again under EU law, it has to be made in a certain way and with certain grapes – predominantly the Glera grape, which was formerly called the Prosecco grape. Furthermore, these grapes must come from a certain defined area in the northeast of Italy, and all the Prosecco they produce is then classified as DOC or DOCG. The former acronym, which stands for *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*, is for standard Prosecco, typically made by high-volume wineries from grapes from the low-lying vineyards on the plains; whereas the latter acronym, which stands for

# Raise a glass with Primo!

Sebastian Cresswell-Turner flies to the Veneto region to meet the charming Primo Franco, who heads up his family's Prosecco producers, Nino Franco



Villa Barberina



Grave Di Stecca vineyard



Trattoria fireplace



The outside of Osteria Al Castelletto in Treviso

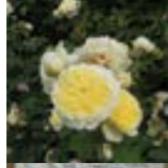
*Is Villa Barberina the grandest B&B in Italy? A light and airy hall with a double staircase; an elegant dining room; a library with a thousand volumes. . .*

► *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*, is for the very best Prosecco, made from grapes from the smaller hilly vineyards between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene.

And finally, before any Prosecco from anywhere can be marketed as such, it has to be tasted and approved by the local *consorzio*. Since Primo is something of a maverick who likes to do things his way, he doesn't even submit his very best wine, the Grave di Stecca, for their approval. "It is an act of civil disobedience," he says, smiling proudly.

I have, for the time being, absorbed quite enough information; and in any case, Primo's daughter Silvia now appears – a striking Italian beauty who speaks fluent English and German and will one day take over from her father. After a stroll round the gardens, where I admire the ultra-modern swimming-pool on two levels, his wife Annalisa takes me into the villa, which she runs as a B&B.

Is the Villa Barberina the grandest B&B in Italy? A light and airy hall with a double staircase; an elegant dining room; a series of drawing rooms with early 20th-century family photographs; a library with a thousand volumes; good original furniture everywhere; a drinks tray from which guests can help themselves at will. I've never come across anything like it. "We sometimes have groups who take the entire villa," explains Annalisa, "and some come back every year." I am shown up to my room. On a 19th-century chest of drawers is a half-bottle of Primo's Prosecco, chilled in a bucket, and a bowl of ripe cherries. On the walls, a number of high-quality gouaches with early views of Naples and Vesuvius. And in my bathroom, a huge old-fashioned bathtub with – blessed simplicity – a hot tap and a cold tap. So this isn't really a B&B. It's a



grand old-fashioned family home where you are welcomed as a friend; the other guests I run across are ecstatic about it.

Early the next morning, after a dreamless sleep, I am woken up by a cock crowing in the distance, and I listen to the dawn chorus before drifting back to sleep, to be woken up again by the church bells ringing for morning mass. While insects buzz around the rose bushes, my breakfast is brought to me at a table under a tree in the garden by the ever-attentive house manager Vladimir. More cherries; home-made fig jam; freshly cut kiwis and pineapple; a delicious Spanish omelette; good strong espresso... perfect.

**PROSECCO WITH PRIMO**

For all guests at the villa, Primo Franco throws in a free wine tasting session (for non-guests the cost is €10-€18, by appointment), and later that morning I am in the boardroom of the family's winery near the centre of Valdobbiadene. In front of me are not slender flutes, but tall wine glasses. "They capture the aromas better," says Primo, as he pours me a glass of what he refers to as his "premium entry-level" Prosecco, which retails in the UK at about £15. It is fresh, sharp and clean; and if I cannot detect every aroma in this and the wines that follow, Primo puts me at my ease. "Basically, a wine must be clean, consistent, persistent, and pleasant. All the rest is superfluous," he explains, reverting to a demotic Italian expression that my chaste pen hesitates to translate. Apart from Primo and his family's enchanting villa, though, what are the attractions of this area? As I discovered, they are numerous, with wine and food featuring largely. First of all, there is the famous Strada del Prosecco, a wine



*The approach to Villa Barberina*

**TOP THREE RESTAURANTS**

► **OSTERIA AL CASTELLETO**

Via Castelletto 3, 31051 Pedeguarda di Follina  
☎ +39 0438 842 484, [www.alcastelletto.com](http://www.alcastelletto.com)

The best sort of Italian food: simple, unpretentious and delicious. Their fritto misto was perfect; their scrambled eggs with asparagus the lightest I have ever had; their cotoletta alla milanese wafer-thin. Closed Tuesdays

► **OSTERIA BELLA VISTA**

Via Provega 30, 31017 Paderno del Grappa  
☎ +39 0423 949 329

A local secret where, among other delicacies, I for the first time tasted schie – tiny baby shrimps from the Venice lagoon, fried and eaten whole. Closed Wednesdays.

► **RISTORANTE DA GIGETTO**

Via Alcide de Gaspari 4, 31050 Miane  
☎ +39 0438 960020, [www.ristorantedagigetto.it](http://www.ristorantedagigetto.it)

This restaurant, unassuming from the outside, attracts a devoted clientèle, often from far away. Famous for their extensive wine list. Closed Tuesdays.

*Tasting wines with Primo*



*Sign for Osteria Al Castelletto*



*Outside the Osteria senz'Oste*



*Primo Franco in his rose garden*



*The attractions of this area are numerous, with wine and food featuring largely. There is the famous Strada del Prosecco, and the local food festivals...*

► tasting route in the heart of the scenic DOCG area. Come here at the right time of year, and you can also go to the local food festivals. Most notable is CocoFungo, an autumn mushroom-fest in which various restaurants throughout the area offer a coordinated series of all-mushroom menus, so that a mushroom fanatic could, in theory, go from one place to another, eating nothing but mushrooms. There is also an equivalent festival for *radicchio*, called CocoRadicchio, which takes place in early spring. (For both, go to [www.cocofungoradicchio.it](http://www.cocofungoradicchio.it))

Furthermore, the beauty of the rolling green countryside hereabouts, combined with the excellent quality of the roads, on the whole pretty empty, means that it attracts groups of cycling enthusiasts from all over the world. You see them everywhere – terrifyingly fit men, many of them middle-aged, and all with the latest lycra gear. Most of them, one imagines, will work up a thirst, and will want to look in at the cult destination Osteria senz'Oste outside Santo Stefano – an unstaffed bar with an honesty box and stunning views over DOCG country. And then there's the walking in the nearby mountains.

So yes, there is lots to do. Indeed, so enjoyable was my 24-hour stay with the Franco family at the Villa Barberina, that as I drove back to Venice airport, after a delicious traditional Italian lunch at the Osteria al Castelletto on the way, I had just one thought in mind: returning.

Nino Franco wines are for sale online at [www.sommelierschoice.co.uk](http://www.sommelierschoice.co.uk). Receive an extra 10 per cent off Nino Franco wines until 30 December 2013 by entering the code 'italia10' at the checkout. ▼



**THE PERFECT BELLINI**  
According to Primo Franco

► Primo's take on the famous Bellini cocktail from Harry's Bar in Venice is as follows:

**INGREDIENTS**  
Ripe nectarines, or ripe white peaches  
Nino Franco Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG (not too sweet, therefore good for Bellinis, says Primo)  
Strawberry juice

**METHOD**  
Peel and purée the nectarines.  
Mix two parts purée to one part Prosecco.  
Add a drop of strawberry juice for colour.  
Serve chilled.

*Want to learn more about Harry's Bar, the home of the iconic Bellini cocktail? Turn to page 31 for our interview with co-owner Arrigo Cipriani.*

**CONTACT DETAILS**

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Via Garibaldi 147, 31049 Valdobbiadene  
☎ +39 0423 972 051, [www.ninofranco.it](http://www.ninofranco.it)



Osteria senz'Oste



Bedroom at Villa Barberina



Gardens at Primo Franco's estate