

VINCENZO TOFFOLI

As one travels up route A27 from Venice, nearly thirty-seven miles of plains pass before reaching the town of Conegliano and the beginning of the foothills to the Alps. About fourteen miles due west of Conegliano sits the town of Valdobbiadene. Between the two towns, the land is mostly flat where the Soligo River joins the Piave, and the Alpine foothills circumvent this plain, curling around it to the north, to form the DOC Prosecco di Conegliano-Valdobbiadene. Producers usually shorten this to either Prosecco di Conegliano or Valdobbiadene, depending on which town they are closer to. At the northern limit to the plain, just into the hills, sits the town of Refrontolo, a tiny town of scarcely 2,000 people. Refrontolo is a very close-knit community surrounded by vineyards and woods.

Around Refrontolo, Gabriele Toffoli is a well-respected man. It is not just because his brother was the mayor, nor is it because of his fire-fighting profession, though these attributes don't hurt. It is mostly because, since 1964, the Toffoli family has been producing the finest wines of their neighborhood. It all began with Gabriele's father Vincenzo, who was a gifted grafter of vines in the 1950's. Times were tough, and when he and his wife Maria received an offer to move to England to work as a private gardener, it was hard to turn down. After twelve years he finally returned to his hometown of Refrontolo with his family and bought five hectares of land, which he planted to vines. Today, most of the operations around the winery fall into Gabriele's hands, but his two brothers Sante (the former mayor) and Luciano also help in the vineyard. An additional five hectares are now leased from a neighbor due to demand for their Prosecco, which is soft, refreshing, and an utter joy to drink.

Prosecco di Conegliano-Valdobbiadene is finally getting some well-deserved recognition as something more than a less expensive alternative to Champagne. Perhaps the most important difference between the two is that not all Prosecco is sparkling. It can be *fermo* (still), *frizzante* (slightly effervescent), or *spumante* (which only means sparkling in Italian, and has nothing to do with sweet). It is also mono-varietal, and while Champagne is usually a blend of grapes. Last, but certainly not least, Prosecco undergoes the bulk-charmat process, which is faster (and less expensive) than the *Méthode Champenoise*, in which the wine undergoes its second fermentation in the bottle. The Charmat process is preferred for Prosecco specifically because it is faster, enabling the wine to get to the market with all its wonderful freshness.

A classic use for Prosecco is in the Bellini cocktail, invented by Harry Cipriani at his famous bar in Venice. In a sparkling wine glass, mix one part white peach purée and two or three parts Prosecco. Pour carefully, as the marriage of the two ingredients is quite tempestuous, and the glass will quickly foam over. If possible, set a comfortable rocking chair on a shady porch overlooking a sun-splashed yard, sip and enjoy!



Gabriele Toffoli with his top assistant, his son Matteo, the next generation of the Toffoli family.