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TASTING ARTICLES

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## Chiaretto di Bardolino – the lake of pink



*Revel in these distinctive, food-friendly rosés, both still and sparkling, from north-east Italy.*

Perhaps I'm being controversial in saying this, but I believe that the most terroir-driven rosé is not, as one would assume, from Provence. It's from the ancient glacial soils on the south-east side of Lake Garda. The winds off the lake, the gentle hills, the complex morainic soils of the vineyards, the moderate climate and the blend of Corvina (spice and ripe citrus), Rondinella (fruity red berries) and Molinara (acidity and texture) result in rosés with a distinctive character, salinity, wet-stone minerality, firm structure and elegant fruit. Despite, in most cases, simple, temperature-controlled, stainless-steel winemaking and no ambitious oak or lees work, these wines also age well.



Chiaretto di Bardolino

I've been a huge fan of [Chiaretto di Bardolino](#) since my first [lockdown tasting in 2020](#), and the anteprema tasting they hold of the new releases every year is the perfect chance to have a heap of fun with food-pairing, because that is yet another defining characteristic of wines from this DOC – they're brilliant with food. But not only in the pairings we traditionally associate with rosé (such as fish, goat's cheese, spicy food). Chiaretto di Bardolino can work with some surprisingly hefty dishes (grilled red meat), as well as ingredients that are usually considered to be 'difficult', such as eggs, asparagus, garlic and (for dry wines) very sweet elements. What was even more fun was that this year I got to play with spumante Chiaretto, adding another dimension to what this idiosyncratic wine can offer.

I put this to the test, pairing several Chiaretto with dishes that would have probably made pretty unpleasant unions with most dry, mineral rosés. But the salinity, minerality and 3D-ripe, layered acidity as well as the fresh (as opposed to confectioned) fruit of the Chiaretto triumphed.



Asparagus, boiled eggs and pumpkin seed oil

First up was a plate of steamed asparagus with chopped boiled egg, very simply seasoned with salt and pepper, drizzled in [Slovenian pumpkin seed oil](#). Asparagus has a reputation for making most wines taste metallic and flat, and usually needs to be paired with an equally pungent 'green' wine, preferably with podded-pea or grassy notes. Eggs, especially plain boiled, are notorious for not going brilliantly with wine of any kind. Chiaretto, however, took this double whammy of belligerence without a hint of trepidation, holding on to its fruit, saltiness and three-dimensional flavours. The combination was perfect.



Watermelon, feta and herb salad

I wanted to then see if Chiaretto would cope with red meat, light fruity sweetness, intense syrupy sweetness, pungent herbs, strong garlic and something very salty. To tackle the first, we barbecued (over open fire) lamb steaks topped with feta, pepper and Aleppo chilli flakes. To test the 'light fruity sweetness' and very aromatic herbs, we made a watermelon salad with feta, pan-grilled pistachio nuts, fresh mint and dill, dressed with pomegranate molasses and olive oil.



Grilled lamb steaks topped with feta

To test the wines with garlic, we grilled white fish with a crispy garlic topping, and a dressing of maple syrup and lemon. The maple syrup also (along with the pomegranate molasses) addresses the question of whether Chiaretto can handle more intense sweetness.



Hake grilled with crispy garlic topping

We also tried the sparkling Chiaretto with a baby-broad-bean omelette served with a yogurt, tarragon and dill dressing.



Baby-broad-bean omelette with Chiaretto spumante

Finally, we played with fried halloumi drizzled with honey – salt and sweetness.



Fried halloumi and honey

The Chiaretto sailed through, retaining their integrity of fruit and their brightness. Nothing managed to overwhelm the wines, quash or flatten their flavours or mouthfeel. The lamb, the feta and chilli seemed to accentuate the sweetness and ripeness of fruit. The watermelon and herbs sharpened the minerality of the wines, accentuating their salinity. The rich, garlicky sweetness of the fish dish brought out the pepper and spice in the wines and made them feel cooler and more linear. The sparkling Chiaretto were wonderful with the omelette, uplifting the sweet little broad beans and eggy richness with their briny pepper notes and soothing the tangy herbaceousness of the dressing with their ripe-raspberry sweetness.

The only time the wines wobbled were with the halloumi and honey – too much uncut sweetness. But here are two things worth noting: the sparkling Chiarettos proved to be the 'cut' that the halloumi and honey needed, bringing a blood-orange zestiness and freshness to the halloumi; and once we squeezed a bit of fresh lemon over the halloumi, the still Chiarettos were back in the game.

What makes Chiaretto di Bardolino so good with 'tricky' food? It's impossible to say. It's definitely not the winemaking. Perhaps it's the intersection of those morainic soils, the grape varieties and the benign, wind-and-lake-modulated climate resulting in a meridian of fruit, acidity, texture and minerality – especially the saltiness.

The 65 wine reviews below are in two groups, sparkling and still. Within each group the tasting notes are in alphabetical order by producer (sur)name but you may reorder them by score if you prefer.

### Monte del Frà, La Picia Chiaretto Spumante Extra Dry NV Bardolino

16

Pale, silvery pink. Smells of shells and sea shore and guavas. The fruit is a little simple – more guava jam than guava – but, like so many of these Chiarettos, the shape and length of this wine comes from a sherbet-chalk kick of minerality with a nip of elderflower bitterness. And this is what sets these Chiarettos apart. (TC) 12%

Drink 2023 – 2024

### Monte del Frà, Chiaretto 2022 Bardolino

17

*Full bottle 1,357 g. Corvina, Molinara and a very small percentage of Rondinella. 24-hour skin contact then 20% of the juice is separated. Long fermentation in steel tanks at controlled temperatures. Screwcap.*

Strawberries and sea shells and very pretty on the nose, but it's like a flash mob in the mouth. Nothing merely 'pretty' about the way this wine tastes; the way it's spitting salt-and-grapefruit tactics, spinning on one heel while juggling peaches in one hand and playing a fast fiddle on silver strings with the other. Yes, it's a mouth-watering compilation of fruit streaked with Lake Garda's long, bone-biting minerality, but this is a rosé that is so much more than the sum of its flavours. It's strumming with energy, wit and sass – a glass of electric boogaloo. Is it possible to sit still while drinking this? **GV** (TC) 12.5%

Drink 2023 – 2025

£14 RRP