

Guess who's coming to dinner: Caesar and Cleopatra

Get the spumante ready

Romans invented spumante. They made it in terracotta amphorae, hermetically sealed and filled in so as to overcome inner pressure.

The irrefutable evidence of Latin texts. No country can boast such a classical bibliography.

Virgil (70-19 BC) wrote a well known passage that says: «Et ille impiger hausit, spumantem pateram et pleno se produit auro; post alii proceres» (Aen., I, 738-40). (And he came over with a sparkling bowl filled to the brim and without hesitating drank up the golden liquor; then the other noblemen drank). We might disclose here what will be maintained for Propertius, as Virgil himself defined the bowl contents as golden and sparkling. Virgil also wrote: “Spumat plenis vindemia labris”, so confirming the use of the term spumante (sparkling).

Propertius (47-15 BC) writes “Largius effuso madead tibi mensa Falerno, spumet et aurato mollius in calice” (El. II, 33, 39-40). (May your table be more plentifully sprinkled and may it sweetly sparkle with Falerno poured in the golden goblet).

By the way: Falerno is the most ancient origin denomination of Roman times, both because it was renowned all over the Roman empire for its quality and because Pliny delimited its production zone for the first time.

Lucan (39-65 AD) writes that “Indomitum Meroe cogens spumare Falernum” (Phars. X, 63). (Indomitable Falerno is compelled to sparkle by means of Meroe). At that time, a Falerno spumante was obtained by refermenting it through an addition of raisin must of a variety known as Meroe, from Aethiopia. As a matter of fact, a

spumante wine of the kind was served during a sumptuous banquet held in Caesar and Cleopatra's honour. This is a confirmation of the fact that Romans knew the technique of planned refermentation to create the bubbles ("bullulae") of spumante.

Pliny (dead 77 AD) maintains: "Here there is a wine which is really excellent, the "Aigleucos", naturally sweet with persistent effervescence...amphorae were immersed in the cold water of streams".

Columella (I cent. AD) describes the tradition of "defrutum" and "sapa" production, musts that were concentrated by boiling (through water evaporation) up to 50% or one third. These concentrated musts, among the first of antiquity, were added to fermenting must (after 2 days) to increase its alcohol content or to obtain refermentation.

In Roman times, sparkling wines were also called "aigleucos" and "acinatics". The former were made from must, whose fermentation, responsible for bubbles, was prevented or rather delayed by plunging the amphorae in cold water, in order to get a wine (then called spumante) that sparkled longer. At Pompei, a cellar was found with a tunnel constantly run through by cold water, where the doliums were placed with the must to be slowly turned into spumante.

Summing up, from these sacred texts it clearly appears that spumante was already produced in Roman times, albeit not with modern techniques, through the refermentation of sweet wines in the containers of the age (terracotta amphorae, etc), or by adding raisins or sweet must to base wines already fermented. To identify these wines the Romans used such terms as "spumans", "spumescens", "saliens", "titillans", which clearly refer to the froth of sparkles in spumante wines.

Bottle refermentation was made possible by the invention of glass resistant to carbon dioxide pressure (6 atm) and of corks. The first glass bottle strong enough to be fit for spumante making was made in England in 1632 by Sir Kenelm Digby.

Present classic (or traditional) spumante is obviously different from ancient spumante, in the varieties (Chardonnay, red Pinot, etc), in the kind of sugar (cane sugar) used for the secondary fermentation, and so on. Yet, the biologic principle of refermentation is the same; only the container has changed: from the amphora to the bottle. The term “spumante” is as old, since the most famous Latin georgics, Virgil, Pliny, etc, reported it. Their writings are still extant (in Latin), therefore Italy can be considered to be the real inventor of spumante wine.

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