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The Lambrusco-Fueled Italian Holiday Party of Our Dreams

In the hills of Emilia-Romagna, a Lambrusco-making family uncorks the holiday season with a joyful meal—and plenty of great sparkling wine.

By **Ray Isle** | December 07, 2020

"Anyone makes a sarcastic comment about Santa Lucia tonight, I will have to kill them," Alicia Lini says cheerfully as she folds the pasta wrapper of a tortelli. This will come as a familiar sentiment to anyone with young children who's ever tried to keep loose-lipped relatives from inadvertently (or intentionally) revealing that Santa Claus is ... Well. You know. Here in Emilia-Romagna, instead of a fat fellow with a white beard, the tradition is that Santa Lucia, riding a donkey and accompanied by her escort Castaldo, visits homes the night before December 13, bringing presents for children to find the next morning.

One tortelli neatly folded around its filling—a mix of butternut squash, Parmigiano, crushed amaretti cookies, and nutmeg—she moves on to the next, and the next, and the next. Midstream, her daughters—Alba, 12, Azzurra, 10, and Atena, 8—show up to help: It takes a lot of tortelli to feed 12 people. And of course the tortelli have to be right. There’s no more critical an audience than one’s own family. “It’s all about the proportions of the ingredients in the filling,” Alicia explains, fingers moving deftly. “In Mantova, they are more aromatic, Correggio a bit sweeter, plus every family has their own recipe, too, from grandmother to mother on down.”



Credit: Cedric Angeles

Every year, the entire Lini family gets together on the night before Santa Lucia Day for a holiday feast. There is always butternut squash tortelli; there is always bollito misto with brisket, chicken, and cotechino sausage slowly simmered to tenderness; always erbazzone Reggiano, the crisp, savory spinach pie that’s typical of the region, always flaky fruit-and-nut-filled cookies to finish the meal. The world round, family holiday dinners are rituals as much as they are celebrations. To go with the Linis’ dinner, also as always, there will be plenty of their own Lini 910 Lambrusco. The dinner is held at their winery, just outside the Emilia-Romagna town of Correggio, where for over 100 years now the family has made some of the best Lambruscos there are.

Flavorful and filling with a light, almost cracker-like crust, this rustic spinach pie relies on simple ingredients for an impressive finish. Because the spinach gently steams within the crust, it retains its fresh, verdant flavor even after cooking.

Get the Recipe: [Erbazzone Reggiano \(Emilian Spinach and Cheese Pie\)](#)



CREDIT: CEDRIC ANGELES

To some people, it might come as a surprise that there is good Lambrusco. The wine's image has long battled against the impression that it's a slightly sweet, innocuous, fizzy pink drink. (Try googling "Riunite on ice, that's nice!" if you want to travel back in time to when this problem all started.) But traditional Lambrusco is dry and crisp, an excellent foil for the rich food of Emilia-Romagna. Alicia's father, Fabio, who makes the Lini wines, says, "If you drink a glass of 15% alcohol wine, you get drunk on one glass. With Lambrusco, you can drink more glasses—quality with quantity!—and not feel bad. Balance and drinkability is our goal. And that the day after, you feel good."



Cousins Alessio Pibe (right) and Alberto (left) enjoy Lini Lambrusco rosé | Credit: Cedric Angeles

Fabio Lini has also long been absolutely firm about making top-quality Lambrusco. He and his siblings, Massimo and Anita, bought out the rest of their family's interests in the winery years ago, at a time, Alicia Lini says, "when the entire Lambrusco market was for 'red Coke.'" The first years were tough. "My dad and uncle and aunt were always reaching into their pockets," the three of them trying to sustain a belief in quality Lambrusco against what was essentially a tidal wave of industrially produced sugary fizz. Alicia, who had finished a business school degree and gone into the family trade, confronted her father at one point. "After three or four years trying to sell our wine, I came back to my dad and said, 'No one understands your quality. You have to make something easier for the market. Our competitors are killing us.'" She laughs. "He said, 'OK, you can go work for Prada or Max Mara then if you don't understand what we're doing.' And my brother's joke is that I applied, but no one hired me, so I stayed at the winery!"



Butternut squash, roasted until tender and golden brown, offers a sweet and earthy balance to the creamy butter sauce draping the pasta. Crushed amaretti cookies add a welcome almond flavor and a lightly crunchy texture to the creamy filling. This generous recipe is easily halved. For a shortcut, substitute wonton wrappers for the fresh pasta and reduce cook time as needed for al dente results.

Get the Recipe: [Butternut Squash Tortelli](#)

CREDIT: CEDRIC ANGELES

Brothers are like that. When her brother, Alessio, arrives that evening, he greets her with, "Alicia! You look so beautiful for 50!" She is, in fact, 41. It's clear they're used to giving each other a hard time, in an affectionate way. Soon, the rest of the family arrives, everyone gathering in a bottle-lined room off the main winery, drinking glasses of rosé Lambrusco poured from magnums, chilled down in a punch bowl full of ice cubes into which holly berries and leaves have been frozen. The talk is of the mundane—the kids' schools, how traffic has changed, whether a new painting of Alicia's great-grandmother looks too stern—and the less so; COVID has cast a pall over much of the year, as Emilia-Romagna was one of the regions hardest hit in Italy. But no one in the family got the virus, and because the Italian government considers winemaking a vital industry, production never stopped. ("Our team was already working meters away from each other even before the pandemic," Alicia says, "so even after having adopted every safety measure, everything we do was still viable.")

A mix of brisket, short ribs, and chicken cook in simmering water until perfectly tender, creating a deeply flavored and easily skimmed broth, or brodo. Keeping the cote- chino separate allows it to cook more gently, preserving its consistency and keeping the final broth clear. Serve with [Potato-Parmesan Puree](#) and [Caper-Cornichon Salsa Verde](#).

Get the Recipe: [Bollito Misto \(Italian Mixed Boiled Meats\)](#)



CREDIT: CEDRIC ANGELES

Soon it's time for dinner. Alicia's brother and her cousin Alberto pop the corks on bottles of the winery's nonvintage Labrusca rosé and its 2006 Metodo Classico Rosso, the family's top wine. There will be the nutty-creamy, lightly sweet butternut squash tortelli; falling-apart brisket; succulent chicken; savory, fatty rounds of cotechino sausage, each bite accompanied by a salsa verde tangy with cornichons and capers; and more. But first, at each place, there lies a fir twig and holly leaf tied to a little paper tag. On one side it says in red pen, "Santa Lucia ti porterà ..." and on the other, what the saint will bring each guest this year: union, harmony, money, perseverance, ambition, love, satisfaction, truth, creativity, energy. Alicia gets truth. Her cousin Alberto gets creativity, which provokes laughter; he works with logistics and sales for the winery. Her mother, money. "I will?" she says, archly. "Well, where is it?"

And her father, Fabio, gets perseverance. "So sad," Alicia says, giving him a hug. "When all you want is to relax and have a holiday." But, hardworking winemaker to the core, he just shrugs and pours himself another glass of the family's wine.

Not to be confused with the pasta of the same name, these classic Emilian Christmas cookies are made from a tender, flaky dough filled with a sweet-tart trio of fruit: cherry preserves, rich saba (cooked-down grape must), and candied citron.

Get the Recipe: [Tortellini Dolci al Forno \(Emilian Fruit-Stuffed Christmas Cookies\)](#)



The Lini Family's Wines



Credit: Cedric Angeles

Nv Lini 910 Labrusca Lambrusco Bianco (\$18)

Fabio Lini uses 100% Salamino for this apple-scented white Lambrusco. The Salamino grape itself is red, but by crushing the fruit and then removing the skins before they have time to affect the hue of the wine, it stays a pale gold color.

Nv Lini 910 Labrusca Lambrusco Rosé (\$18)

Rosé Lambruscos are becoming more and more popular, and Lini's version is one of the best: full of red cherry and strawberry notes, with a faint floral hint in the aroma and fine, persistent bubbles.

Nv Lini 910 Labrusca Lambrusco Rosso (\$18)

Deep purply-red and full of lively effervescence, this earthy red Lambrusco makes a fantastic dinner- party-main-course wine, whether for the holidays or any other time of year—it's equal parts surprising and delicious.

2006 Lini 910 Metodo Classico Rosso (\$40)

Fabio Lini employs the same process as Champagne for his top bottling, allowing the wine to gain its sparkle by means of a second fermentation in the bottle. Its wild blueberry and dried herb notes are surprisingly vivid for a 14-year-old wine: proof that top-notch Lambrusco ages brilliantly.