

THE PASSWORD IS LAMBRUSCO

Writer **Maggie Hennessy** learns the right order to bond with bartenders.



S ometime last year, I stumbled upon two words that made me seem cool to bartenders for the first time ever: “Lambrusco, please.”

I discovered this at one of the many unpretentiously serious neighborhood cocktail bars that have popped up all over my hometown of Chicago. I’m not much of a cocktail person, save for the occasional Negroni, so I was delighted to see a dry Lambrusco from Modena among the list’s half-dozen easy-drinking wines. The owner himself sidled up and cascaded the ruby liquid into a pert little highball glass.

“I love Lambrusco,” he said with a sigh. “I want to get everyone drinking it this summer.”

I nodded, knowingly. Internally, I cheered my newfound early-adopter status.

Dry, crisp and a bit savory, with just enough fizz to create a tinkling applause on my taste buds, Lambrusco is indeed a

delicious no-brainer of an order—not to mention affordable. It got a reputation in the 1980s as being industrially made and cloyingly sweet. But now it’s back, like the tasteful acid-wash jean, and it, too, wears its acid well.

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A few weeks later, my husband and I met for dinner, this time at a self-consciously chill watering hole where the wine comes in tumblers. It all but assured that a Lambrusco lurked on the beverage list.

“Lambrusco, please,” I said, as I suppressed a sudden urge to wink.

“Yes!” the bartender replied. “Whenever someone orders it, I pour a tiny splash

for myself.” We clinked glasses while my husband looked on and sipped his locally brewed lager.

After I charmed a third bartender at a dog-friendly, Lambrusco-sanctioned bar in my neighborhood, I converted a friend who, until then, had been sipping rosé. Unfortunately, when she was ready for a glass, a new bartender’s shift had started. He seemed unimpressed when I called self-assuredly, “two Lambruscos, please.”

Maybe he didn’t know the code.

I can’t order Lambrusco everywhere, of course—a bitter reminder of my coolness’s fragility. At a trendy, red-lit lounge where there was no Lambrusco in sight, I settled for a glass of Prosecco. It arrived in a garishly bulbous flute.

“Who orders Champagne at a cocktail bar?” asked the lumberjack-shirted patron next to me as he sipped a Gin Fizz.

If only this bar served pét-nat...