



WINE

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Style, money and pace are certainly the hallmarks of Italy's richest region but even the Milanese can no longer ignore the quality on their doorstep now that a 'G' added to Franciacorta's DOC *spumante* guarantees an extra sparkle. In fact, hidden amid high Alps and spectacular lakes, the immense Po Valley and the Appenines are such diverse culinary traditions and varied styles of wine that it is not surprising that many go unnoticed in the image-conscious city and are not even heard of abroad.

Today Lombardy's dynamic and industrial face disguises the very persistent gastronomic traditions which are still guarded jealously over fires or in microwaves in all its provinces. Unlike France's 'top down' tradition, in which the French Revolution removed the nobility from deluxe dining rooms, leaving court chefs with ordinary people to pamper, Italy's cuisine derives from the bottom and goes upwards - that is, from the land.

In a country where *vini da tavola* are often far superior in quality to DOCGs it is encouraging to see that, with Franciacorta, the Garantita has actually evolved to highlight a quality wine from a specific area rather than impose a wine making tradition over an entire region as diverse as Lombardy. To qualify for this classification all Franciacorta *spumante* must be made by the *metodo classico* (the method by which Champagne is made), using only Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay and Pinot Nero grapes



Rich PICKINGS

Lombardy's capital, Milan, is renowned for its sophistication and elegance but, as JULIAN COWAN-HILL discovers, the region is producing stylish wines which are going unnoticed by the image-conscious city

and the resulting wine must have a minimum alcohol level of 11.5%.

The Ca' del Bosco estate reminded me of a James Bond set with its helicopter pad and extraordinary Pomodoro designed remote-controlled golden gate. As for 007 himself, an enchanting guide appeared who gave a fascinating tour through immaculate state-of-the-art cellars, explaining with in-depth knowledge how the dim yellow light would not damage the French oak barrels and how the gravel beneath them allowed humidity to rise from carefully hidden pipelines. A laboratory on the premises ensured a striking precision throughout the entire process (providing pH and volatile acidity levels for each variety with figures in imperial units).

In the superb local restaurant of Il Priore, a glass of vintage white *spumante* Dosage Zero Millesimato 1992 was the overture to an unforgettable meal. An intense nose of greengages and wild flowers with an inner aroma of apple sauce and fresh white bread washed down delights such as snails wrapped in radicchio leaves and bacon. The *spumante* helped the mouth water with shrimp and potato salad, and blended spectacularly well with smoked cod and ham.

A custard-like voluptuousness with a complex nose of both summer and tropical fruits - notably juicy peaches, pineapple and kiwi - complemented buttery ravioli stuffed with spinach and ricotta. The grand finale was wild boar in a mustard and cream sauce and polenta whose flavours were highlighted by the dense and powerful Bordeaux blend Maurizio Zanella 1988 Ca' del Bosco, with its exuberant red jam, herbs, tar, vanilla and great persistence. Rumour has it that three of the best restaurants in Italy are in Lombardy, and I, for one, don't doubt it.

Lombardy means quality. Even at large estates such as Berlucchi, whose vast cellars turn out more than four million bottles a year, resorting to other regions to make up the grapes. (It was here, when a vintage car rally ran out of Champagne, that *spumante* production was first inspired). Franciacorta is to Italy what Cava is to Spain and, dare I say it, Champagne to France. But it is for the wines from regions such as Valltellina, which have so much to offer and are so little known outside Italy's borders, that Lombardy is at its most shamefully unappreciated. ■

• JULIAN COWAN-HILL is a freelance writer based in Italy.

STOCKISTS

Guido Berlucchi (£13.90-£15.95)
Roberson tel: 0171 371 2121,
Giacobazzi Delicatessen tel: 0171
267 7222, Angelo Delicatessen
tel: 0181 296 0606, Italian Place
Delicatessen tel: 0181 943 9200.
Ca' del Bosco (£8.99-£42.00)
Valvona & Crolla tel: 0131 556
6066, Direct Wine Shipments tel:
01232 238700. **Sertoli Salis** from
the vineyard tel: (00 39) 342 704533.