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# Decanter

## NEW CLASSIC SPARKLING

RICHARD BAUDAINS brings to light a new pocket of sophistication in Italy, the DOCG Franciacorta, home to classic-method sparkling wines we are sure to be seeing more of

Above: The impressive vaulted cellars at Ca' del Bosco, one of the leading edge producers which have helped bolster the region's reputation. Right: Dégorgement à la volée at Ca' del Bosco.

Ever since the French announced that they were going to reclaim the term *methode champenoise* for their own exclusive use, Italian producers have been grappling with the problem of finding an alternative name for bottle fermented sparkling wines. In the DOC system they are classed as *spumante*, but this is a huge catch-all category which many producers of prestige Champagne-style wines are reluctant to be associated with. Every corner of Italy makes bubbly wines of one kind or another and they are all called *spumante*, be they sweet or dry, vat or bottle fermented, red, white or pink. The European Union has given recognition to the more specific *metodo classico* and *metodo tradizionale* but although the phrases are widely used they lack the marketing impact of *champenoise*. You might also want to argue about their appropriateness. The tank fermentation method devised by Martinotti at the end of the nineteenth century is at least as 'classic' and 'traditional' in Italy as bottle fermentation.

What the industry has been looking for is a collective brand name for wines of the same style made in different DOCs in northern Italy. Various representative bodies have come up with proposals. *Classimo* (which has the unfortunate handicap of apparently meaning 'fart' in modern Greek) has come and gone. The most recent appellation is 'Talento', the registered trade mark of a new association of Champagne method producers presided over by Etile Carpenò from the historic firm of Carpenò-Malvolti. Since its launch last year the Istituto del Talento Metodo Classico, to give it its full title, has attracted a sizeable membership, particularly in the Trentino-Alto Adige and the Oltrepò. The only of the one top production areas which is standing back to watch developments as they proceed is Franciacorta.

The reason is that since the early 1990s producers in this corner of Lombardy have taken an independent and fundamentally different line on the whole rose-by-any-other-name issue. Rather than subscribe to attempts to market the wines of the whole of the sub-Alpine chain from Piemonte to Friuli-Venezia Giulia under a collective name, they have concentrated on cultivating the identity of their own terroir. The outcome has been the creation of a new DOCG - the only one for bottle fermented wines in the country - called simply 'Franciacorta'. New DOCGs are sometimes viewed with a degree of scepticism. There is a suspicion perhaps that satisfying the formal requirements of DOCG status does not necessarily attest to superior quality. This is not the case with Franciacorta. The denomination is the brainchild of an enterprising and dynamic producers' *Consorzio* which was founded in 1990 with a self-assigned brief to rewrite the wine legislation for the area. The new canons for the production of sparkling wine included a ban on the traditional *syvoz* in favour of *guyot* and *cordon* training, increased density of planting and reduction of yields. The *cépage* was



limited to Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco and Pinot Nero. The Charmat method was outlawed. Bottle age was fixed at a minimum of 25 months (longer than Champagne) for non-vintage and 37 months for vintage wines. In addition the members of the *Consorzio*, the vast majority of producers, follow a very detailed code of practice which covers everything in the winemaking process from clones to capsules.

Unlike the Trentino or the Oltrepò, Franciacorta does not have a long history of champenoise production. Berlucchi were the first to release a Spumante Brut in 1960. Ca' del Bosco, founded in 1968, and Bellavista were in the vanguard of the modern Italian wine renaissance throughout the 1980s, but the area as a whole has only started to take off in the last five to 10 years. Recent development however has been spectacular. In the period between the foundation of the *Consorzio* in 1990 and the approval of the DOCG in 1995 over 250 ha of vines have been planted, vineyard prices have soared to two and even three times the national average and production has increased by more than one third.

The reasons for the boom are several. One of the most significant has been huge financial investment. In the past the patrician families of Lombardy built luxurious villas in Franciacorta. Today wealthy industrialists pour capital into serious wine estates. Another factor is the early leadership of estates like Ca' del Bosco and Bellavista who have created a reputation for the highest levels of quality.

Franciacorta makes relatively limited quantities - there is more than one cellar in the Trentino which could house the annual production of around 3 million bottles - but nearly all of it is handmade, estate-grown wine of real quality.

In style Franciacorta is quite distinct from the *spumanti* of the Trentino or the Pinot Nero dominated wines of the Oltrepò. Positive straw shades and buttered toast aromas give an impression of character which is confirmed by the structure, the fullness of flavour and often the touch of oak on the palate. Character may predominate over balance in the wines of some of the smaller and less experienced estates, but the top wines are capable of combining personality with splendid elegance. There is also a lot of nuance on show. The hills of the Franciacorta consist for the most part of stony glacial moraine, but the geological map of the area is complex and soil type is a significant variable. Microclimates vary considerably in this area where cool air from Lake Iseo to the north meets the full blast of summer heat from the plain of the Po. Research by the *Consorzio* and the University of

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## ITALY

### RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS

**Barone Pizzini:** Property in the same family since the 1870s; top Franciacorta is the limited production Extra Brut Bagnadora.

**Bellavista:** Boutique winery founded in 1976, large range of highly polished wines with the accent on elegance and aroma. Top selection is the Gran Cuvée Pas Operé Millesimato.

**Ca' del Bosco:** Massive investment and fanatical attention to detail combine with pure talent to produce wines of outstanding character. Superb Franciacorta Cuvée Annamaria Clementi Millesimato.

**Capoferri:** Low profile estate with excellent long ageing wines.

**Cavalleri:** Long established producers, modernised in the 1980s and now producing top class millesimato and satén.

**Faccoli:** 4 ha of vineyard give a small production of intense dry wines, full of personality.

**Gatti:** Recently founded estate and hot tip for the future with big muscular wines.

**Guarischì:** Historic estate with extensive vineyards. Chardonnay specialists. Top wine Brut Selezione Millesimato.

**Monte Rossa:** Family run estate with slightly austere style wines. Top wine Millesimato Cabochon.

**Uberti:** Big and highly dependable range with high point the 100% Chardonnay Magnificenta.



Young vines in Franciacorta.

Milan has identified six sub-zones with markedly different characteristics. These differences often appear in the wines of the many smaller producers who in effect tend to make single vintage, mono-crus simply because they lack the resources to blend elaborate cuvées. Larger estates like Cavalleri, Ca' del Bosco and Bellavista on the other hand can blend for balance and complexity as well as house style, along the lines of a Champagne firm. Maurizio Zanella, for instance, juggles with vineyard selections (his 96 ha are spread over nine different communes) with varieties, malolactic fermentation, oak conditioning and on average three or four vintages to create the cuvées at Ca' del Bosco. In 1996 one third of the production was put aside to age in oak to form a reserve which will serve for the next six to eight years.

Brut is the most popular style although it is sometimes hard to distinguish from extra brut in terms of dosage. All but the smallest of estates bottle *millesimato* (vintage) wines. Pas Dosé wines are niche specialities of a limited number of producers and are worth looking out for. Another very interesting style is the category created by the DOCG to correspond roughly to the French *crémant* called *satén*. These are wines made from only white grape varieties, generally picked later and riper and made with lower carbon dioxide. The result is a very attractive, soft, slightly aromatic style which is particularly suited to the wines of Franciacorta.

It is the base wines that are the real force of Franciacorta, and the area in which the strict controls of the DOCG have had most impact. Confirmation of the quality produced in these hills lies in the still wines now grouped under the DOC Terre di Franciacorta, top class Chardonnay-Pinot Bianco wines in their own right, deliciously round and complex and less like the searingly tart Coteaux Champenois than anything you could imagine.

As for the Talento issue, Franciacorta's position appears unlikely to change in the immediate future. The producers believe they have put their money on a winner with a denomination that, like Champagne, is exclusive to the region and is becoming identified with the best in Italian dry

sparkling wine. For its part the *Consorzio* is wary of the complications which could emerge from participation in a larger voluntary association. 'How could we ask our members to join a commercial consortium which allows yields of 150 quintals/ha when we have imposed a limit of 100 q/ha on our own growers?' asks director Giampietro Comolli - a question which seems to suggest not a lot of space for negotiation. (Note: one quintal = 100kg). 