

QUARTERLY REVIEW OF
WINES



Dr. Champagne

Nothing enlivens the moment like a good bottle of bubbly.

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Greatest non-Champagne sparkler drunk this year—Maurizio Zanella's mind-blowing Ca' del Bosco Dosage Zéro 1994—a dream.

As yet, I have no idea what I shall drink as the clock strikes midnight and 1999 turns into 2000. But, I do know that it will be a Champagne I shall always remember—especially if it is corked! ☺

WINE QUIP

"Champagne is one of the elegant extras of life."

Charles Dickens



LOMBARDY

Lombardy is second only to Trentino-Alto Adige in Chardonnay production in Italy, the grape representing some 3.5 per cent of total regional plantings. Most of it is destined for use in sparkling wines of various descriptions, but there is a growing number of classic wines along burgundian lines coming mainly out of the Franciacorta zone.

The denomination Terre di Franciacorta Bianco, created in the mid-1990s to distinguish the sparkling wine of the zone (Franciacorta DOCG) from the still stuff, has actually created new confusion. What was traditionally called Franciacorta Bianco, generally a blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco in varying proportions, can now cover that blend (with Pinot Nero *in bianco*, if you like) or any of the three at 100% – *in purezza*. So with Terre di Franciacorta Bianco you're never too sure what you're getting, although if it's pure Chardonnay it will probably say so somewhere on the bottle.

The archetype for what is now called Terre di Franciacorta Chardonnay in the classic mode is indisputably that of Cà del Bosco. Others in the immediate area who are capable of wines of good to excellent character include: Bellavista (Uccellanda); Tenuta Castellino (Solicano), Coccaglio; Cavalleri (Rampaneto); Enrico Gatti (Gatti Bianco); Guarischi (Le Solcaie); (Favento), Erbusco; Mirabella (Bianco *Barrique*), R. Monzio Compagnoni (Ronco della Seta), Cortef. Banfi (Pio IX), Erbusco; Uberti (Maria dei Medici); Priori); Villa (Riserva Marengo).

LOMBARDY

Sauvignon Blanc is a rare phenomenon in Lombardy. The only well-known example is Cà del Bosco's Elfo, a *vino da tavola* unable to print a place name, variety name or even vintage date on the label, as Sauvignon is not an authorized variety for the region and as such is not covered by any DOC or even IGT. The vintage problem is overcome by slipping the last number of the year in question after the name, hence for example Elfo 8 (for Elfo 1998). Elfo is not technically a varietal, being 70% Sauvignon Blanc – clones from France, of course – and 30% Invernenga and Erbamatta, two obscure local grapes. The wine is clean and sharp with penetrating acidity coming apparently from the Erbamatta (or crazy grass) input, while the aromas, be they due to the supplementary grapes or the provenance, are not typically French even though recognizably Sauvignon, i.e. herbaceous. An intriguing wine, if somewhat more so intellectually than organoleptically.

Cà del Bosco, Erbusco. Maurizio Zanella is one of the giants of the Italian wine scene, and I don't mean physically, although in that respect he is no midget. Since the early 1970s, when he first began developing his determination to produce Italian versions of the classic French wines, champagne, bordeaux and burgundy, he has



poured money and passion into what is indisputably one of the world's most impressive private wineries, complete with all the hi-tech equipment necessary to quality production. This without sacrifice of those traditional principles which also contribute to quality, such as barrel fermentation for the base wines of his best *cuvées*; he even purchases the wood for his *barriques* in France, leaving it there to season for up to three years before having the barrels built by French craftsmen. To such extent, indeed, has he travelled the road of spare-no-expense that he was obliged in 1994 to sell a 60 per cent share to Santa Margherita of Pinot Grigio fame, although he is happy to report that they let him get on with business as before.

Cà del Bosco own nearly 100 hectares of vineyard in various parts of the zone, feeding a production of some 900,000 bottles of which just under half is *metodo classico*. His Franciacorta wines divide into three categories: Brut, the non-vintage blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco with 15% Pinot Nero; Vintage, which sub-divides into Brut, Dosage Zero, Rosé (40% Pinot Nero) and Satèn (Franciacorta's word for *crémant*, 4.5 atmospheres pressure as against 6 for the fully sparkling wines); and Annamaria Clementi, the *tête de cuvée* wine, one-third Pinot Nero, two-thirds Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco, which after six months in *barrique* spends five and a half years in bottle on the yeasts, developing in the process an amazing

complexity on the nose together with a tremendous wealth of flavour on the palate, plus a creaminess of texture, thanks to the fineness of the bubbles, remarkable for a sparkling wine.

It is important, I think, to note that the *metodo classico* wines of Cà del Bosco, while inspired by champagne, are by no means carbon-copies. I mentioned above that what differentiates them more than anything is this element of ripeness, a quality which the wines of Cà del Bosco possess in spades.

LOMBARDY

As Darmagi reigns supreme among Piemontese 'clarets', so in Lombardy does Maurizio Zanella (the wine) of Cà del Bosco in Erbusco, though by a lesser margin. Now classified as IGT Rosso del Sebino, this wine is deliberately intended as a Bordeaux *Premier Cru Classé* type blend, the producer being well aware that Cabernet Sauvignon needs a bit of softening. Maurizio Zanella is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon at 45%, Cabernet Franc at 25%, and Merlot at 30%, with all procedures in vineyard and cellar following the French line, from the 9,000 plus plants per hectare, through the punching-down of the cap during fermentation, through the use of new *barriques* exclusively, right down to the fining with egg whites. Maurizio Zanella (the man) began planting his vineyards in the mid-1970s, so that today they have achieved a nice level of ripeness, capable of putting out some very soft and voluptuous wines at prices which also remind one of Beaujeu (I mean).