

Italy's Franciacorta – the other sparkling wine

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Pour a glass of sparkling wine for friends and, more often than not, they'll want to know which French champagne house produced it.



Never mind that sparkling wine is an important part of Napa Valley's annual harvest, nor that other areas of the state create outstanding sparklers.

Are they aware there's a substantial sparkling wine effort in Spain's Penedes hills, as well as an ocean of bubbles emanating from Italy's winegrowing regions after every harvest?

Champagne remains the benchmark for top-class sparkling wines all over the world, be they California sparklers, Spanish cava, German sekt or Italian spumante. And, as we have been made well aware, only the sparkling wines produced in the Champagne region of France are permitted by international law — which the United States does not recognize — to call their product Champagne.

Undaunted by the second-rate reputation of low-priced Lambrusco, mediocre Asti and the all-purpose fizz of Venice, Prosecco, the winegrowers with vineyards on this scenic lake's shore are Italy's recent success story.

The potential for this area to produce outstanding classic method sparkling wines was initially realized during the 1960s. In 1967, the region was first recognized by the Italian government when laws establishing appellations of origin (termed DOC) were enacted.

Existing grapegrowers and newly arrived entrepreneurs were convinced Franciacorta could indeed produce exceptional spumante. Since that time, wine-making efforts here have made great strides — so much so that in September, 1995, the region earned recognition as DOCG, the guaranteed status reserved for an elite of Italy's wines of controlled origin.

Located between the industrial city of Brescia and mountain-ringed Lake Iseo, this hilly wine-producing region of Lombardy got its name from the religious communities that lived here from the 11th century onwards. These communities and their land were exempt from taxation and known as the Corti Franche, or free courts.

Attracted by the prospect of owning vineyards in a conducive microclimate that was also a duty-free haven, numerous wine producers settled in the area. Although the Franciacorta is no longer tax free, the region's extremely drinkable wine continues to flow.

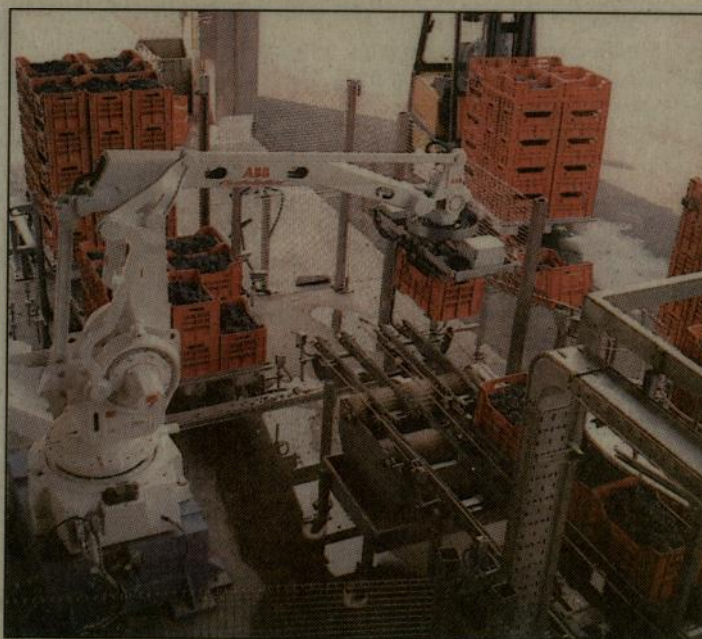
Its time has come

For thousands of years, these hills northeast of Milan have supported vines, but it is only in the last two decades that they have been producing exceptional sparkling wines. And it is only in the past few years that producers here have been aggressively marketing their products, that



L. PIERCE CARSON PHOTOS

Above: Maurizio Zanella, in the dark suit, is the man behind Ca' del Bosco, one of the most prominent producers of Franciacorta. His winegrowing team consists of, left to right, enologist Stefano Capelli, and vineyard managers Paolo Bonini and Luigi Reghenzi.



Left: State-of-the-art Ca' del Bosco Winery in Italy's Franciacorta region makes use of a new palletizer to move small baskets of hand-harvested grapes to various conveyor belts that lead to the destemmer and crusher in this ultra-modern winemaking facility near Brescia.

they have banded together in an association with the common goal of getting the world to taste Italian progress.

Today's average harvest brings in more than 5,000 tons reserved for Franciacorta, grapes grown on some 2,000 acres of historic vineyards, advises Giampietro Comolli, executive director of the Consorzio Per La Tutela Del Franciacorta.

There are 62 Franciacorta producers in the region, and 58 of them belong to the voluntary consorzio. Most of these vintners have small vineyard tracts scattered throughout the region — ideal for an industry that promotes blending of its best wines for various cuvées.

Franciacorta's production method requires the use of a pair of white grapes — chardonnay and pinot bianco (pinot blanc) — and one red variety — pinot nero (pinot noir), plus, as all classic method wines are made, secondary fermentation in the bottle.

A couple of production traits distinguish Franciacorta from Champagne. Producers here use a less alcoholic dosage for the secondary fermentation, and they tend to market younger wines.

by Scott Adams

The term "Franciacorta" has been applied to sparkling wines of the region only since 1995. Italian law permits producers to make two quality levels of sparkling wine. By comparison,

France and Spain allow but one quality level.

"We ask that the wines of Franciacorta be of the highest level," Comolli tells a group of journalists visiting the region.

Indicative of the consorzio's quest for recognition, it hosted a symposium last month that addressed both similarities and differences of sparkling wines produced in France, Spain and Italy. It was the second trade seminar in as many years attracting producers from all three European nations.

"We have a lot of points in common," Comolli maintains. "And our differences can be used to benefit all."

At this point, only eight of the Franciacorta producers export their wines to the United States.

Exceptional wines, producers

While Champagne still sets the quality standard, Franciacorta is, without question, in the same league. The region is home to such first-class methode champenoise producers as Bellavista, Ca' del Bosco and Il Mosnel. All three vintners produce a number of cuvées using the three approved grape varieties — chardonnay, pinot bianco and pinot nero. The result is complex, elegant and powerful wines whose style is adding to the region's prestige as well as bearing out the decision to ban the traditional Italian term for sparkling wine, spumante, from their labels.

Savvy, well-heeled businessman Vittorio Moretti is responsible for lining up substantial talent and the financing needed to keep Bellavista at the forefront of Franciacorta wine production. After achieving high levels in the building trade, in laminated woods, in regatta yachts, in golf, in tourism and in restaurants, this innovator

took a major step in the wine business, recognizing a natural vocation for fine wines.

In addition to a couple of cellars, the firm also owns and operates a hotel in lakeside Paratico; L'Albereta, a 19th century villa transformed into a hotel that also contains the restaurant of renowned Italian chef Gualtiero Marchesi; a spa; golf course; shopping center; and boatyard.

It is in these Erbusco hills that a passion for great wine drove Maurizio Zanella to establish Ca' del Bosco, a firm with some 300 acres of vines throughout the region, a firm that will next year produce 1 million bottles of both sparkling and still wines.

As a young man growing up in his mother's house in the nearby woods, Zanella often wondered why Italy did not produce first-rate sparkling wines. He dreamed of becoming the first Italian winemaker to compete with Champagne, founding his winemaking operation in 1968.

Years of intense effort, technological improvements and expertise devoted to both vineyards and cellar have paid off for Zanella. Today, Ca' del Bosco has gained a reputation as one of the most prominent sparkling wine producers outside France. In fact, some wine authorities rank Zanella's Franciacorta bottlings right up there with the best produced in Epemay and Reims.

Examining styles

Ideally matched with food, Franciacorta comes in a variety of styles, based on the variety of grapes used, the age of base wines in the blend, duration of bottle fermentation and the dosage that gives it the trademark taste.

The driest wine of the group is called Franciacorta Non Dosato, for it does not contain a dosage at the end to sweeten or soften the flavor of the young wine. Major component of the blend is chardonnay, with a bit of pinot bianco and pinot nero added in. Ca' del Bosco enologist Stefan Capelli says bottle aging brings out the best components of this cuvée and recommends serving it as an aperitif.

Franciacorta Extra Brut is nearly as dry as Non Dosato, while Franciacorta Brut and Millesimato are the two most popular offerings of the region. The Brut displays the distinctive style of each producer, while the Millesimato (or vintage-dated wine) provides the consumer with more depth and complexity due to extended aging.

Franciacorta Satén is pure chardonnay, the region's blanc de blancs. Bellavista enologist Mattia Vezzola feels a gentle approach in making this wine accounts for its elegance, freshness, delicacy, yet intense flavors. Satén is produced exclusively in Franciacorta.

Then there's Franciacorta Rosé, a salmon-colored sparkler that, at Bellavista, has a nose of rose petals and strawberries, is medium-bodied, crisp and wonderfully refreshing.

Il Mosnel is a smaller family-owned venture housed in a 16th century cellar on an estate that includes 100 acres of vines, mostly earmarked for sparkling wine. Production approaches 13,000 cases annually, compared to Bellavista's 42,000 cases. Resting in these ancient cellars is some half-a-million bottles of sparkling wine, just waiting for release.

The Franciacorta Satén of Il Mosnel, vintage '96, the winery's first, was aged for 40 months on the lees. It is elegant, fruity, has an exceptionally long finish and should appeal to the American market.

Il Mosnel is unique among the Franciacorta producers in that it does not use any pinot noir in its cuvées. The family prefers elegance and finesse to structure.

All of the wines from Bellavista, Ca' del Bosco and Il Mosnel are in the \$25 to \$50 price range and, for the most part, are available in the best California wine shops.

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