

Franciacorta: Sparklers with style

Just northwest of the city of Brescia lies the greatest sparkling wine zone of Italy, and one of the best anywhere outside of Champagne — Franciacorta (*frahn cha COR tah*). It's the home of Italy's largest *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine house, Guido Berlucchi, (see *Wine For Dummies* or *Champagne For Dummies*, both published by Hungry Minds, Inc., for an explanation of *méthode champenoise*) as well as the two most prestigious sparkling wine houses in Italy, Ca' del Bosco and Bellavista.

Unlike Oltrepó Pavese, where Pinot Nero is the primary variety for sparkling wines, Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco are the main grapes of Franciacorta sparklers, with a maximum of 15 percent Pinot Nero. A rosé style, however, requires a *minimum* of 15 percent Pinot Nero in its blend. A *crémant* style (a gentler wine, with lower CO2 pressure) may contain no Pinot Nero. This last style is a specialty of Franciacorta; the wines carry the trademarked name, *Satèn*. Some of the district's very best sparklers, such as Ca' del Bosco's *Satèn*, are this style.

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Franciacorta non-vintage wines must age 18 months in the bottle (vintage-dated wines, 30 months) — an unusually strict requirement that speaks to the seriousness of the producers. Vintage-dated wines must be only 85 percent from the vintage indicated, however, and *brut* (dry) wines may contain up to 20 grams per liter of sugar, compared to only 15 for *brut* Champagnes.

Then and now in Franciacorta

Conditions are ideal for grape growing in the Franciacorta zone, thanks to the area's stony, well-drained soil, and to nearby Lake Iseo, which has a moderating effect on the climate. Local growers have produced red and white still wines for centuries. But Franciacorta has emerged as a major wine zone only in the last 40 years, since a young enologist named Franco Ziliani convinced the Berlucchi estate to plant Pinot Nero and make *méthode champenoise* sparkling wines.

Bellucchi released its first 3,000 bottles of *champenoise* sparkling wines in the early 1960s; by 1975, Berlucchi Cuvée Imperiale had become Italy's best-selling *champenoise* sparkling wine; by 1990 Berlucchi was producing 5 million bottles of sparkling wine a year — about one-third of Italy's total. To sustain this large volume, however, the company has had to source about 75 percent of its grapes outside Franciacorta.

Now, the producers of Franciacorta are firmly committed to sparkling wine. In 1995, when Franciacorta was elevated to DOCG status, they "spun off" their still wine production into a separate DOC appellation, **Terre di Franciacorta**. These white wines are made from the same varieties as the sparkling wine — Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Noir — together or singly, but not varietally labeled. A creative formula for Terre di Franciacorta Rosso allows plenty of stylistic freedom to individual producers: a minimum of 25 percent Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, with a minimum of 10 percent each of Barbera, Nebbiolo, and Merlot. Time will tell which variation of this formula ultimately works best.

Italian Wine

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✓ **Ca' del Bosco:** Maurizio Zanella, who founded this estate about 30 years ago, is Lombardy's most respected wine producer. His winery is state-of-the-art, and all of his wines, both still and sparkling, are superb. The basic Brut NV goes for \$40, the Vintage Brut Zero is in the \$52 to \$55 range, the classic Vintage Satèn is \$60, and the premium Cuvée Annamaria Clementi Vintage Brut is \$65 to \$70. Ca' del Bosco's Chardonnays and its Bordeaux-style red, Maurizio Zanella, are all first-rate.