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ON WINE

Lesser-known wines from Italy's Franciacorta zone add sparkle to area

When you think about classic sparkling wine, Champagne from France comes to mind, of course, and perhaps Cava from Spain. The European Union recognizes the importance of those wines by allowing them to be labeled without the customary terms indicating their appellations of origin — AOC for France, and DO for Spain. In short,

Champagne and Cava are so well known that their names can stand on their own. Now the EU has allowed another sparkling wine the same privilege: Franciacorta. The sparkling wines of Italy's Franciacorta zone no longer need to be labeled as DOCG.

The EU's resolution is a stunning recognition for the wineries of the Franciacorta zone, in the Lombardy region in north central Italy. Although Franciacorta has a centuries-old tradition of red and white wine, sparkling-wine production is fairly new there. But it is sparkling wine that has gained Franciacorta an international reputation.

About 40 years ago a young Italian oenologist, Franco Ziliani, became convinced that Franciacorta was ideally suited for sparkling wines. He persuaded Berlucchi, a large wine-producing estate in the area, to make metodo classico sparkling wines — in which the second fermentation takes place in the bottle, just as in Champagne. Berlucchi became

so huge that the winery today sources most of its grapes outside the Franciacorta zone. Meanwhile, other, smaller wineries in Franciacorta turned their attention to producing estate-bottled sparkling wines.

Today about 70 wineries make Franciacorta. The still wines of the Franciacorta zone carry the DOC Curtefranca Bianco or Curtefranca Rosso, a new name for the DOC that previously had been called Terre di Franciacorta.

What did Ziliani see in Franciacorta to convince him that this zone was ideally suited to sparkling wines? First of all, there's the stony, well-drained soil. Then there's Lake Iseo.

In the words of Maurizio Zanella, owner of the respected Ca'del Bosco winery in the Franciacorta zone, Lake Iseo acts as "a giant lung" which breathes in the cool air from the Alps, 30 miles to the north — and prevents the area from getting too warm in the summer, allowing the grapes to retain the acidity necessary for sparkling-wine production.

Franciacorta primarily is composed of two white grapes, Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc, with a maximum of 15-percent Pinot Noir allowed. The predominance of white grapes accounts for Franciacorta's elegant, finesseful style, closest perhaps to a Blanc de Blancs Champagne. Franciacorta Rosé, on the other hand, must contain a minimum of 15 percent Pinot Noir. A cremant style, called Satèn, which has gentler, lower

CO₂ pressure, is another popular type of Franciacorta; Satèn usually contains only white grapes.

Aging requirements are strict for Franciacorta; nonvintage wines age a minimum of 18 months — 3 months longer than the minimum requirement for Champagne — and vintage wines must age at least 30 months. Franciacorta that is labeled brut can contain up to 20 grams per liter of sugar, a bit higher than brut Champagne, where the maximum dosage is 15 grams per liter.

Although the United States is the third-largest export market for Franciacorta, the wines are still relatively unknown in the United States; in fact, only around 10 of the 70 Franciacorta brands currently are available here. But the producers of Franciacorta are convinced that the quality of their wines eventually will earn them the prestige in the U.S. market.

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WINE OF THE WEEK

Ca'del Bosco Franciacorta NV Brut (Lombardy, Italy)

Ca'del Bosco is one of the best Franciacorta bruts available. The basic nonvintage brut, which has delicate floral and fruity aromas but is rich and complex, is the most available bottling. It is ideal as an apéritif but also full-bodied enough to have with first courses. Wholesale price per six-bottle case: \$164