

West Coast

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CELLAR RESTAURANT



WINE

moonlighting Paul Murray



IF YOU still equate Italian sparkling wine with sickly sweet 21st birthday party Asti Spumante, you need to be told that things have moved forward a bit.

Spumante was just given a bad name by its Australian lookalikes.

The muscato varieties when grown in the cool Piemonte region of Italy's north-west makes delicious spumante with a low alcohol content around 10 per cent. This gives delicacy to the mousse and an acid cut to match the sweet grappiness of the fruit.

Muscat grapes grown on the Riverland in Australia can never make sparkling wines like that.

With those sumptuous custardy Italian celebration cakes or just a simple canoli, there is nothing better than an icy Asti Spumante. It remains one of the great wines of Italy.

The more serious Italian sparkling wine has been the Prosecco which comes from high country in north-eastern Italy, above the town of Treviso in the Veneto region.

And in between Asti Spumante and Prosecco is huge volumes of sparkling wine from the area known as Oltrepoo in the Lombardia region.

means home in the woods. Remember the name because even though the wines are hard to get in Australia, you will hear a lot more of it in the years to come.

Zanella's spending on Ca' del Bosco makes Denis Horgan's investment in Leeuwin Estate look miserly. The winery is simply spectacular, but it's a work in progress and they will not allow any photographs to be taken until it is finished some time next year.

Technically it is a modern marvel, something that isn't always attached to Italian winemaking.

All the fruit is transferred to individual refrigeration chambers controlled from the winemaker's laboratory, temperature calibrated depending on what is wanted from each variety.

As the grapes go from the chillers to the crusher, they are manually sorted to remove any imperfect berries.

But given that sparkling wines are very much about delicate base wines, the most spectacular innovation is what they call the "flying tanks."

No wine is ever pumped at Ca' del Bosco. All the base wines are made in small temperature-controlled fermenters attached to rails.

When the assemblage is to be put together, the tanks are



The gateway to Ca' del Bosco: No photos inside until the winery's finished.

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The Italians love their sparkling wines, especially as an aperitif, but it's fair to say that the rest of the wine world has not been as impressed.

But now there's a new kid on the block. And he's so good that even the Champenoise are taking notice.

The wine is known as Franciacorta and it's very much the brainchild of one man, Maurizio Zanella.

In 1995, Zanella almost single-handedly won the highest wine appellation in Italy's system — the DOCG — for the methode champenoise wines of Franciacorta. DOCG stands for denominazione di origine controllata e garantita and there are only 15 wines with the appellation in Italy.

Back in the 1950s, a winemaker called Franco Ziliani started making sparkling wines using the Champagne method in Franciacorta, which was then a small collection of fairly ordinary vineyards rising from the shores of Lake Iseo.

But it wasn't until Zanella convinced his mother — at the age of 18 in 1968 — to bankroll him into a winery that things really started to happen. Zanella apparently had been a "naughty boy" at school in Milan who needed something to divert him.

"I was a communist one year when everyone else was a fascist," he said.

"The next year when everyone was a communist, I became a fascist."

Now, many tens of millions of Euro later, the diversion has well and truly paid off. And there are now more than 30 producers in the region.

But the DOCG was created on the back of the wines from Zanella's spectacular winery, Ca' del Bosco, which

moved to a pneumatic lift which pushes the tank up to the heavens. Its contents are then gravity drained in the massive holding tank which is seeded for the secondary fermentation.

Ca' del Bosco say their flying tanks are the only ones in the world.

The sparkling wines are made from various blends of chardonnay, pinot blanc and pinot noir.

To prove what a small wine world this is, we were shown around Ca' del Bosco by a young local woman called Barbara Ziliani.

Barbara had a soft spot for West Australians: she had spent her year 11 as an exchange student at Belmont Senior High School.

She showed us Ca' del Bosco Franciacorta brut from 1998 and 1999. Both are tight, steely aperitif wines of enormous finesse.

As you move up the sparkling range to some of the more expensive luxury blends, they become more supple and complex. These are very serious wines to match the best of France.

Ca' del Bosco also has a terrific range of still wines under the Curtefranca appellation. A white from chardonnay and pinot blanc and a red from cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, nebbiolo and barbera were standouts.

But at this time, it's the DOCG bubbles that are causing the sensation.

(Ca' del Bosco does not yet have an agent in Australia, but is seeking one. Inquiries to West Coast Magazine 9221 1344 — Editor.)



PAUL MURRAY

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Page 21

