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La Dolce Franciacorta

A visit to Lombardy's corner of fashionable bubbles



Franciacorta is worth a trip from Lake Como for a tour of Bellavista, producer of one of Italy's best sparklers. The vineyards are adjacent to the winery's magnificent hotel and spa.

TRAVELERS TO NORTHERN ITALY ARE SURE TO DISCOVER Franciacorta, Italy's family of sparkling wines, fashionably quaffed everywhere from Milan to Lake Como. Franciacorta is also the name of the region of rolling hills and vineyards on the southern shore of the largely wild Lake Iseo, about 45 miles northeast of Milan. It is worth a daytrip for the top producers that offer detailed tours and impressive settings in which to enjoy some of Italy's best sparklers. A good reason to prolong the stay is L'Albereta, the magnificent wine country hotel and spa owned by the producer Bellavista, with a restaurant overseen by venerable chef Gualtiero Marchesi.

Franciacorta is unique in Italy—it's the only appellation to require the classic, Champagne-style method of secondary fermentation in the bottle. An appellation since 1967, Franciacorta sparkling wine, dominated by Chardonnay blended with Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir, was awarded DCOG status 13 years ago. The area also makes still whites and reds labeled as Terre di Franciacorta or Cartefranca.

The wine region stretches from the southern shore of the lake down to the autoroute from Milan. The principal town of the region, Erbusco, feels like a sprawling suburb, and the lake is less dramatic than Lake Como, but the natural scenery is gorgeous and the region is quieter and more down to earth. In the small town of Iseo, on the southern shore, a long promenade hugs the waterfront. Moving out into the vineyards and forests of the countryside, you'll find wineries that offer a warm and personal welcome.

Bellavista

Via Bellavista, 5, Erbusco Telephone (39) 030-77-62-000 Web site www.bellavistawine.it Open Monday to Friday, tours by appointment only Cost Tour and tasting free

Bellavista is the name of a prominent hillside perch with views of

rolling vineyards and Lake Iseo, about 4 miles away. It's home to Italian construction magnate Vittorio Moretti, and it's also the name of the winery that sprouted here in the '70s behind Moretti's house. (His lavish resort, L'Albereta, is on another end of the Bellavista hill.) The winery, overseen by one of Italy's top enologists, Mattia Vezzola, is modern but subtle and natural. Tours, by appointment, last two hours and include detailed explanations of Franciacorta wine making, from single-vineyard vinification to barrel aging, *remuage* and bottling. The tour ends with a glass of Franciacorta in a modern tasting bar, under wineglass chandeliers. Bellavista makes five Franciacortas and three white still wines; there are no direct sales.

Ca' del Bosco

Via Albergo Zenella, 13, Erbusco Telephone (39) 030-77-66-136 Web site www.cadelbosco.com Open Monday to Friday, tours at 10:30 a.m. and 3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, tours at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. Cost Tour and tasting \$22

Ca' del Bosco is the brainchild of Maurizio Zanella, who has spent his adult life and a fortune turning the family farm and "house in the woods" into a thriving, ultramodern wine estate. Zanella's bold statement starts at the winery's bronze gate, which is also a sculptural work entitled "Hymn to the Sun," the first of many monumental sculptures scattered through the site. The dramatic stone *remuage* cellars (where you learn that the bottles are turned daily by female hands only) are buried more than 200 feet under a manmade hill topped by Zanella's helicopter pad. Constructed with plenty of glass, steel and Milan nightclub-inspired lighting, the winery is proud to show off state-of-the-art machines such as nitrogen-bottling chambers that guarantee oxygen-free bottling. The one-hour tour ends with a glass of Franciacorta in the attractive wine-tasting boutique, which sells the estate's six Franciacortas, as well as four red table wines and two whites.

—Robert Camuto

stay at the hotel isn't in your budget, soak up the ambience at lunch or dinner, either in the main dining room overlooking the lake and garden or on the shaded lakeside terrace. The bow-tie-and-white-jacket service is as smooth as an Italian soccer team; the cuisine is refined Italian and international. The entrées, which feature lake fish as well as other seafood, venison and beef, are lightly sauced and subtly spiced so as not to offend picky palates. For the octopus salad, the cephalopods are marinated in milk and then shaved into thin, melt-in-your-mouth slices. Risotto with pumpkin flowers and *provola* cheese was perfectly al dente. The wine list, while not long, solidly represents Italy as well as France's major regions. At lunchtime, a popular choice is the Conti Sertoli Salis Torre della Sirena 2006 (\$53). A selection of 10 Barolos tops out with Vietti Villero Riserva 2001 (\$463).



The palatial Villa d'Este in Cernobbio spares no luxury, from the grand suites (pictured here) to the antique art in the guestrooms. Its La Veranca restaurant offers a similar ambience and is open to the public as well as to hotel guests.

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hotel Tremezzo Palace

Via Regina, 8, Tremezzo Telephone (39) 034-44-24-91 Web site www.tremezzopalace.com Rooms 92 Suites 2 Rates \$333-\$2,059

The most modern feeling of Lake Como's Grand Hotels, the Tremezzo Palace recently added a spa with massage pools overlooking the lake and a wine bar with more than 200 selections. The sole physical defect of this century-old hotel is the two-lane road separating it from its attractive swimming pool and deck, which float on the lake. The hotel backs onto an elaborate period garden with another swimming pool and pizza bar. The generously sized rooms include some of the area's nicest updated styles: parquet floors and tastefully sponged walls with brocaded bedding and gold-framed artwork. Classic doubles face the garden and have newly renovated marble bathrooms with separate tubs and showers—luxuries missing from the superior rooms. The service at the main restaurant, La Terrazza, can be scattered and the food pricey and bland; take the nearby ferry to Bellagio for dinner.

Hotel Florence

Piazza Mazzini, 46, Bellagio Telephone (39) 031-95-03-42 Web site www.hotelflorencebellagio.it Rooms 27 Suites 3 Rates \$206-\$382

If you prefer the atmosphere of an intimate boutique hotel, this is your place for a getaway in Bellagio. Run by the same family for more than a century and located between the shops and cafés of the lakefront, Hotel Florence sets the mood with gracious common rooms, plush velvet chairs in bold colors and a roof garden that inspires leisurely breakfasts. Rooms boast parquet floors and canopied beds and are decorated with bold, designer fabrics. The best have lake views and terraces. There is neither a pool nor air conditioning at this hotel, but there is a small spa.

Villa d'Este

Villa Regina, 40, Cernobbio Telephone (39) 031-34-81 Web site www.villadeste.it Rooms 84 Suites 68 Rates \$720-\$4,529

An address as famous as Lake Como itself, Villa d'Este isn't so much a hotel as a storybook cocoon that has inspired hyperbole and



Even though it's a century old, Tremezzo Palace is the most modern feeling of Lake Como's Grand Hotels. The attractive swimming pool and deck float atop the lake itself.

drawn celebrities through the years, from Greta Garbo to Madonna Clark Gable to Woody Allen. Palatial in scale, the villa shelters a collection of grand salons, monumental oil paintings and jewelry boutiques. The sprawling gardens boast Renaissance marble mosaics, a spring-fed fountain that drips water down 130 granite basins, and a series of replica fortifications built for the Napoleonic general who once lived here. There's a modern health center, a beauty spa, tennis courts, extensive walking and jogging trails and a small port next to the pool, which floats atop the lake. Rooms are painted in pastels and appointed with antiques, reproductions and antique art. Bathrooms are done in marble, and some have separate showers. The two-bedroom, three-bath Cardinal suite has a terrace big enough to host a cocktail party for 50. It's a short walk to the village of Cernobbio, but many guests prefer to take their Ferraris.

France-based writer Robert Camuto is the author of *Corkscrewed: Adventures in the New French Wine Country*, which will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in November.

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