

The world's best wine magazine

Decanter

ITALY 2011

From north to south - the names to know this year

**Italian whites:
a land of discovery**

**Why the country's diverse
array is better than ever**

Meet the mavericks

**The personalities behind
Italy's most daring wines**





Cristina Ziliani's father, Franco Ziliani, was instrumental in bringing sparkling wine to Franciacorta at Guido Berlucchi

The boom began in the 1980s, as industrialists from the prosperous Lombardy region began to buy up sleepy farms in the idyllic countryside between Brescia and Lake Iseo to turn into high-powered wine estates. The investment power, ambition and managerial ability they brought to Franciacorta were the stimulus for the 1995 DOCG, the first granted to an Italian sparkling wine. If the aim of the first producers had been limited to unashamed emulation, the objective now was to create a top-end *metodo classico* with its own distinctive identity, differentiated by its methods from all other wines in its category.

As the Consorzio's President, Maurizio Zanella, likes to point out, Franciacorta's production norms are the most stringent of their type in the world. Yields are 30% lower than those in Champagne and all harvesting must be done manually. Non-vintage wines are required to age on the lees for a minimum of 18 months (the equivalent in Champagne is 15 months) and vintage riservas for at least five years.

The product of all this is a distinctive Franciacorta character, hallmarked by rich straw shades, mature, yeasty-bread crust aromas and notable intensity of flavour – in short a serious bottle of wine that repays attentive sipping rather than casual drinking. Styles range from brut to the bone-dry 'pas dosé'. A typical producer will make a range that includes a non-vintage wine, a vintage and a high-priced riserva or luxury cuvée. The current vogue for rosé has brought an increase in the amount of pink fizz being made, but the classic Chardonnay-based cuvée remains by far the most representative. Slightly outside the usual *metodo classico* parameters, on the other hand, is the food-friendly Franciacorta Satèn, a blanc de blancs in the crémant style that has proved to be one of the most inspired provisions of the DOCG and offers the ideal starting point for anyone coming to Franciacorta wines for the first time. **D**

Richard Baudains is DWWA co-Regional Chair for Italy

A mixed case of Italy's top sparklers

Prosecco

Silvano Follador, Valdobbiadene Superiore di Cartizze Brut 2009

★★★★★ 18.5pts/20

N/A UK www.silvanofollador.it

Nose of great naturalness and purity, notes of white fruit, hawthorn and accacia. Intense palate, with rare structure and concentration of flavours. Long, soft, grapey finish with lovely fruit-mineral balance. **Drink:** 2011.



Casa Coste Piane, Prosecco dei Colli Trevigiani NV ★★★★★ 17.5

£14.49 **Caves de Pyrene**

Delicate floral-citrus fruit nose. Beautifully balanced palate with delicate 'frizzante' prickle and refreshing character. Long and tangy finish. Irresistible. **Drink:** 2011.

Ruggeri, Giustino B, Valdobbiadene Superiore Extra Dry 2009 ★★★★★ 17.5
£20 **Swig**

Orange blossom and peachy fruit on the palate. Starts round and soft with notes of ripe yellow fruit and finishes off-dry with attractive, tangy mineral quality. Very well crafted. **Drink:** 2011.

Adami, Vigneto Giardino Rive di Colteraldo Valdobbiadene Superiore Dry 2009 ★★★★★ 17

£16 **Astrum**

Light, fresh and delicate on the nose with notes of almond blossom and apricot fruit. Smooth, creamy texture with good length and a hint of bitter peach kernels. Subtle and stylish. **Drink:** 2011.

Bisol, Vigneti del Fol, Valdobbiadene Extra Dry 2009 ★★★★★ 17

PoA **Swig**

Complex and upfront on the nose, with dark flowers and lemongrass and a vaguely resinous character. Long, complex, off-dry finish with hints of tropical fruit and almonds. **Drink:** 2011.

Trento

Cavit, Altemasi Graal Brut Riserva 2003 ★★★★★ 18.5

£29 **Noel Young, Polygon Wines**

Fresh green apple, jasmine and lemon rind interweave with buttery toast on the nose. Very fine perlage, great consistency and length. Dry, tangy finish with hints of white currants. Great finesse. **Drink:** 2011-2013.



Ferrari, Riserva Giulio Ferrari, Brut 2001

★★★★★ 18.5

£95 **Harrods**

Rich, buttery, mature nose with bags of concentration. Crisp salty-mineral attack and an intriguing array of nuances including green apple, white currants and almonds. **Drink:** 2011-2015

Franciacorta

Bellavista, Vittorio Moretti, Extra Brut 2002 ★★★★★ 19.5

N/A UK www.bellavistawine.it

Broad, mature nose with underlying vanilla, peaches, dried apricot and toasted hazelnut. Creamy expansion on the palate, great structure and splendid mineral intensity. Long, concentrated finish. Magnificent. **Drink:** 2011-2020.

Ca' del Bosco, Cuvée Brut Annamaria Clementi 2002 ★★★★★ 19.5

£46.66-60.06 (2001) **Bordeaux Index, Everywine, Nickolls & Perks**

Refined, complex nose ranging from fresh and citrusy to ripe peach and apricot, even a nuance of pineapple. Among the top all-time vintages of this super-elegant cuvée. **Drink:** 2011-2020.

Cavalleri, Collezione Grandi Cru Brut 2005 (pre-release) ★★★★★ 19

£31.04 **Everywine**

Very fine, long perlage. Stylish, delicate nose of bread crust with touches of jasmine, almond milk and lemongrass. Very fine, creamy texture and crisp, tight mineral finish. **Drink:** 2011-2020.

Monte Rossa, Cabochon Brut Millesimato 2005 ★★★★★ 19

N/A UK www.monterossa.com

Fresh hazelnut, touches of vanilla and brioche and a whiff of Turkish Delight on the nose. Finish of bone-dry intensity. **Drink:** 2011-2020.

Bersi Serlini, Brut Cuvée 4 2005 (pre-release) ★★★★★ 18.5

N/A UK www.bersiserlini.it

Rich, complex, meaty nose with underlying hints of mushroom and savoury herbs. Good mineral bite and very long, ripe fruit finish with grapey concentration. **Drink:** 2011-2015.

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number of years. New wines are being released; Ruggeri has issued new and classy vintage selections – notably the Vecchie Viti Brut – and the highly dynamic Bisol has started to produce zero-sulphite Prosecco, no less. Without abandoning a character based on balance and the delicate contrast of aromas, the wines are starting to have more structure and length.

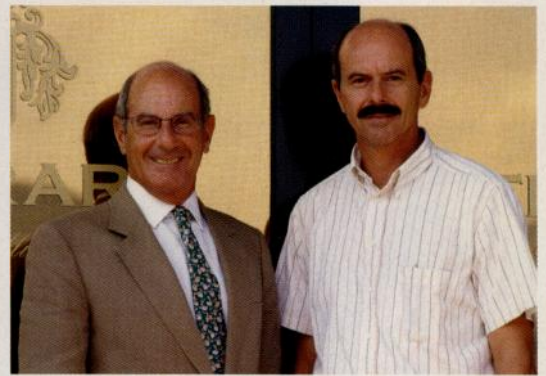
The default setting for Prosecco used to be non vintage, but now there is a growing trend towards vintage releases – a feature which is obligatory for the new category of single-cru *Rive* wines and which implies longer ageing on the lees and a more savoury style. In its Venetian Osteria manifestations, Prosecco still comes with the 15–20 g/l of sugar of the Extra Dry style which many regard as the most authentic, but nowadays there is increasing interest in brut versions aimed at an international audience. Also, in an area associated with highly technical winemaking, small-scale growers with more artisan approaches are starting to get themselves noticed. Silvano Follador has taught himself biodynamics – his Cartizze Brut is now available only on allocation, booked a year in advance. Loris Follador struggled for a decade to get recognition for his pre-oenological system of bottle refermentation but his wines now have a cult following in northern Italy. The next few years in Prosecco promise to be very interesting.

Trento DOC

Trentino was the first region in Italy to begin the commercial production of a sparkling wine modelled on Champagne. Its creator was a nurseryman with a head for business called Giulio Ferrari. Ferrari studied at the famous school of oenology at Geisenheim, was responsible for the introduction of Chardonnay into the region, and learned the art of bottle refermentation at Epernay. He turned out his first bottles of 'Champagne', as it was called at that time, in 1902, and went on to build up what was to become one of the iconic brands of Italian wine.

Trentino is Italy's biggest grower of Chardonnay, which is destined almost exclusively for the highly prized production of raw material for sparkling wines. Not all of this remains in the region,

Above, right: Gino (left) and Mauro Lunelli from Ferrari, Trento's most well-known *metodo classico* producer and historically responsible for the creation of the region's first *metodo classico* sparkling wines



however. Trentino vinifies 40% of the base wines used for spumante in Italy, but its own share of the national production of *metodo classico* under the official Trento DOC label is nearer one third.

Trento DOC has a recognisable style that sets it apart from the other sparkling wine-producing regions of Italy. Thanks to the temperature excursions typical of sub-alpine zones, the pergola-trained vineyards on the high slopes of the Adige valley produce Chardonnay with the firm acid structure that is the prerequisite for quality sparkling wines. The traditional handling of this raw material puts the emphasis on relatively young, non-vintage cuvées which deliver a crisp, lighter type of spumante with notes of citrus and green apple. Recent years have seen the diversification of styles, as producers introduce percentages of oak-conditioned wines into their cuvées and move towards longer periods on the lees and single vintage releases. The prototype here is Ferrari's classic 10-year-old Riserva Giulio Ferrari, which demonstrates the outstanding potential of the region for a much more complex and demanding style of wine, and the ability to compete at international level with the very best.

A significant proportion of Trento DOC wine is bottled by Ferrari, the house that is synonymous with *metodo classico* at national level and whose name inevitably dominates the region. Among other producers, the Cavit cooperative has established a reputation for the consistently high quality and value for money of its prestige riserva, Altemasi Graal, while at boutique level Dorigati, Letrari, Maso Martis and Poyer & Sandri all make excellent wines with a personal stamp. Alas they have little visibility outside the Trentino.

Franciacorta

Sparkling wine production at Franciacorta is a relatively recent phenomenon – the first bottles of Guido Berlucchi's pioneering 'Champenoise' only came out in the late 1950s – but it has experienced extraordinary growth. The first Producers' Consorzio was founded by a group of 29 enterprising growers in 1990. Today the Consorzio has 100 producers and the highest concentration of quality *metodo classico* estates in the country, on whom the national wine guides shower their annual awards. As for the commercial performance, sales of Franciacorta have doubled since 2003 and are currently increasing at the recession-defying rate of around 16% a year.

'Franciacorta has yields 30% lower than those in Champagne, and all harvesting must be done manually'

Prosecco now has a DOCG for its top wines in the hill zones of Valdobbiadene (left) and Conegliano. But quality Italian fizz can be found beyond the famous region

typically Chardonnay based and refermented in the bottle. Prosecco is young and grapey. *Metodo classico* offers firm, dry structure and the yeasty complexity which comes from long ageing on the lees. Both styles are capable of excellence, but of very different kinds.

What the rock star anecdote illustrates is the extent to which Prosecco has come to monopolise the common perception of Italian sparkling wine: if it is Italian, white and bubbly, it must be Prosecco. As the President of the Producers' Consortium, Franco Adami, says, 'Prosecco has come to mean Italian sparkling wine to the outside world.'

And the world can't get enough of it. With a production of over 120 million bottles a year and rising, Prosecco is Italy's undisputed export leader. Accessible pricing allied to an uncomplicated style with huge popular appeal have made the Veneto's traditional mid-morning tippie a global brand.

Metodo classico wines, on the other hand, fall into the category of 'best-kept secrets'. The two leading *metodo classico* denominations, Trento and Franciacorta, turn out fewer than 20 million bottles between them, and the majority of their corks are popped in Italy. As Maurizio Zanella, President of the Franciacorta producers' Consorzio and owner of Ca' del Bosco, frankly admits, 'Franciacorta, above all abroad, does not have brand recognition'. The problem is that of getting a message across. *Metodo classico* wines struggle to get the recognition they deserve. As Marcello Lunelli from the Trento house of Ferrari confesses, 'Our Perlé (Ferrari's mid-range Brut) does well abroad but it is very difficult to get the top wines into international markets. At this level there is a lot of diffidence towards anything that is not French' – which is a shame, because Franciacorta and Trento are anything but ersatz Champagne.

Prosecco

Prosecco remains Italian sparkling wine's locomotive, however. Indeed it witnessed a major legislative shake-up last year intended to quell speculation in the runaway commercial success of Italy's biggest selling spumante and create a new quality pyramid. The reorganisation established the Prosecco Superiore DOCG category for wines from the traditional hill zones of Valdobbiadene and Conegliano, set up the mechanism for single cru bottlings, and brought the very interesting but little known hillside area of Asolo into the DOCG fold. In addition, a new DOC production zone was established, which stretches across the plains of the Veneto to the province of Trieste in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. You have to wonder about the quality potential of these flat agricultural lands, but other aspects of the package – for example, the reduction in yields – are positive. The challenge now for producers in the hill areas is to demonstrate that the Superiore category lives up to its billing. The DOCG, theoretically Italy's top denomination, raises expectations. Can producers meet them?

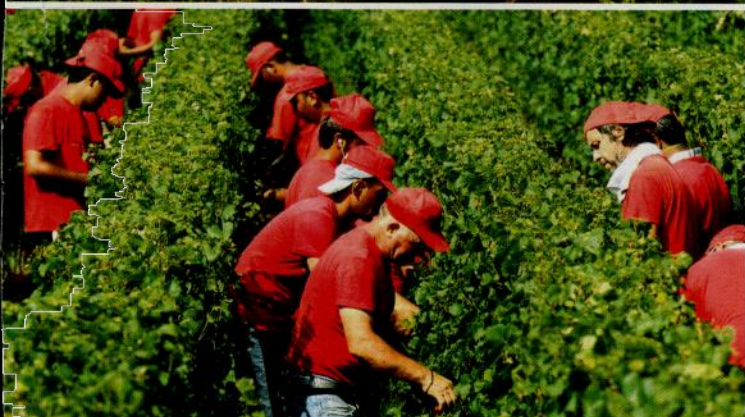
The answer is that leading producers have already been re-grouping around the issue of quality for a ➤

THERE IS A story currently doing the rounds among wine producers in the Veneto about a *very* famous Irish rock star. Our celebrity was guest of honour at a recent gala event in Milan where an Italian sparkling wine was being served. Enthused by what he was sipping, he asked to be introduced to the producer, to whom he is reported as saying, 'Man, this is the greatest Prosecco I've ever tasted'. What he was drinking in fact was the luxury cuvée from one of Italy's top producers of *metodo classico* wines.

If our rock star had been more up on his Italian wines, he'd have known that Prosecco is made by the Charmat method of vat refermentation, which preserves the light, fresh, delicately fruity-floral character of the native Prosecco grape (think pears and lemon rind with a touch of spring hedgerows). *Metodo classico* wines, on the other hand, are

'Prosecco has come to mean Italian sparkling wine to the outside world'

Franco Adami, President, Prosecco Producers' Consorzio



Pictures: Berlucchi company owners, the Ziliani family in relaxed mood: Arturo, Paolo, Cristina and company chairman Franco Ziliani. Harvesting in Franciacorta with the castle of Borgonato in the background (top) and typical Franciacorta vineyard landscapes. Cellars under the castle used for prestige Franciacorta production.

and to determine optimum harvesting periods. The company also now uses the "sloping plate" Coquard press for the soft pressing of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes for Franciacorta DOCG.

The company chairman now is Franco Ziliani, who is ably assisted by his children, Cristina, Arturo and Paolo, who look after the communications, production and sales departments respectively. 50 years on, Berlucchi can be found on export markets all over the world, particularly in UK, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, as well as the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and soon in USA, of course, where an ambitious expansion programme is planned under the expert guidance of Export Director, Alessandro Vella.

Berlucchi's new top-of-the-range almost-unfindable Franciacorta range is called Palazzo Lana and consists of three vintage Franciacorta sparkling wines named after the Palazzo where it all began. This range and the prestigious '61 range of Franciacorta wines described alongside here are a fitting tribute to history and a pledge for the years to come.

The '61 Range of Franciacorta DOCG

One of the latest Berlucchi creations is the '61 range, consisting of three Franciacorta DOCG wines made in the Brut, Satèn and Rosé styles, and named in celebration of the year that the company made its first Franciacorta wines. These are three wines with distinctly different characteristics, designed to be very drinkable and packaged with an attractive Sixties style presentation.

- **'61 Brut**, mostly Chardonnay, is fresh and zesty and a perfect aperitif wine that will also go well with lightly flavoured first courses. Kept on the lees in bottle for almost 18 months before dégorgement.
- **'61 Satèn** is 100% Chardonnay and stays 24 months on the lees in bottle. Soft and velvety thanks to the reduced bottle pressure of the Satèn style. Ideal with first courses based on rice; excellent with the best quality Parma ham.
- **'61 Rosé** has a good percentage of Pinot Noir in its blend, which gives it a lively pink colour and marked hints of red fruit with classic breadcrumb aromas. On the lees for almost two years. Excellent with salami and cheeses, young or mature.





Photographs: Freddie Jones/Alamy; The Advertising Archive(2)