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# Decanter

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- Franciacorta travel

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THE *DECANTER* TRAVEL GUIDE TO

# Franciacorta

This is prime Lombardy sparkling wine territory that blends rural charm and tradition with Italian sophistication, says Alessandra Piubello

Soft hills carpeted with rows of vines and dotted with stone hamlets, medieval castles and abbeys, farmsteads, and battlemented towers. Villas of 18th-century nobles set amid the lush greenery of secular parks. This is Franciacorta territory, a sunny amphitheatre that extends south of Lake Iseo, just a few kilometres from Brescia – itself a city of unique beauty. This is also Italy's choicest area for the production of sparkling wines (made with Chardonnay, Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco grapes), which were the first brut styles in Italy to obtain DOCG recognition, back in 1995. The name comes from the old *curtae* (courts) *francae* (free) in the area, settlements governed by religious orders that were exempt from paying taxes. Because of its strategic position, Franciacorta was a trading borderland, much contested among the powerful and the nobility.

The best way to discover the subtle charm of the region is to explore the villages and hills on foot or by bicycle. There are five food-cycle-tourist itineraries along the Strada del Vino wine route (see [www.franciacorta.net](http://www.franciacorta.net), *Wine Tourism*). Or take a mountain bike ([www.iseobike.com](http://www.iseobike.com) for rental), or even a horse from Al Burnec, near Adro (<http://circoloippico.burnec.it>) along the many winding paths. The less energetic can drive, enjoying the picturesque colours of the vineyards. Choose from the Franciacorta consorzio itineraries or follow the Strada del Franciacorta route, either independently or as part of a guided tour.

There's plenty to admire architecturally, too. The region's historical importance is conveyed through its aristocratic castles – don't miss the medieval castle at **Passirano**, one of the best preserved, and the castle at **Bornato**, famous for having hosted Dante Alighieri – and its 17th- and 18th-century palaces, including Villa Lechi at Erbusco, Palazzo Torri at Nigoline, Villa Soncini at Provezze and Villa Fenaroli at Fantecolo.

For a change of pace and scene, take a stroll through the peat marshes, a nature reserve abounding with birdlife and aquatic vegetation – the variety of flowering lilies is beautiful. These marshes can be viewed from the ➤



## FACT FILE

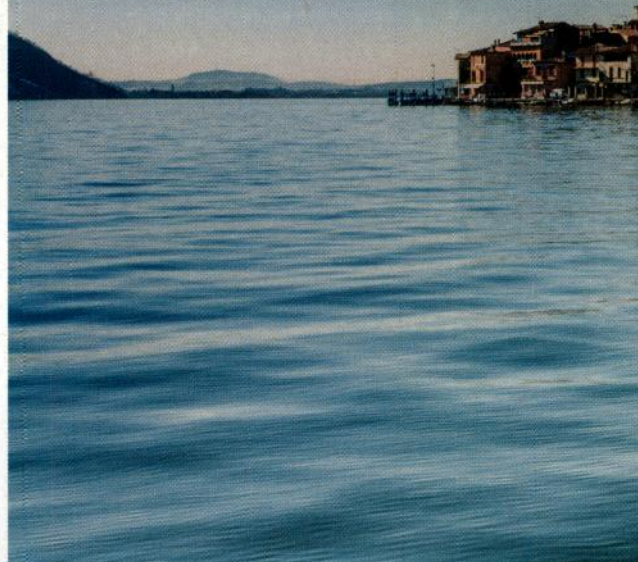
**Production area**  
18 municipalities in the province of Brescia

**Planted area** 2,500ha

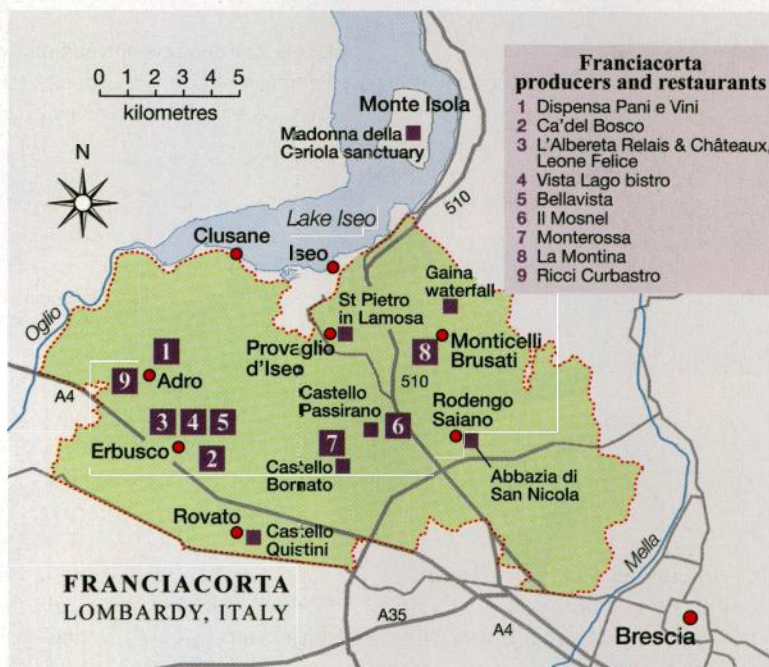
**Main grapes** 80% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Nero, 5% Pinot Bianco

**Soil types** Sand, silt; calcareous gravel

*'This was a trading borderland, much contested among the powerful and the nobility'*



**R ight: Monte Isola island on Lake Iseo makes a scenic day out**



Maps: Maggie Nelson



# Blandford Comptoir London

Reviewed by Fiona Beckett

The UK hasn't succumbed to the cult of the super-sommelier but if it had, Master Sommelier Xavier Rousset would lead the charge. From the time he spent under chef Raymond Blanc at le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, through his early adoption of new Nordic cuisine at Texture to revitalising the wine-bar genre with the stylish 28°-50° chain, he's been ahead of the game. He's due to open a new Burgundy-themed restaurant in the City this autumn called Cabotte.

But at the minute there's Blandford Comptoir, a wine bar in Marylebone village. I say wine bar but it's a bit more than that: more of a modern bistro with a very good wine list and a bar with – hallelujah! – comfortable stools, which makes sitting there a pleasure rather than a penance.

The Italian-influenced menu offers the option of small and bigger-sized plates. We went largely for small (but not ungenerous) ones, which I suggest you order in tranches. Some dishes such as the Italian summer truffle risotto (£8) and an umami-rich dish

of quail with truffle boudin (£7) are clearly designed to show off the Burgundy list. Others such as hake with artichoke barigoule (£15) could have fought the wines but fortunately Rousset was at hand to suggest a match: a crisp 2015 Roter Veltliner from Weingut Eichinger. The standout dishes were Sicilian red prawns and an octopus dish so tender it must have been subjected to some mysterious molecular treatment.

The wines by the glass are part of a model wine list pitched at every price point to encourage you to experiment. The house Champagne, Pierre Moncuit's impeccable Blanc de Blancs is a very reasonable £10 a glass. Bottles are imaginatively priced in tiers starting with six wines at £23, nine at £28, then upwards through £35, £42, £49 and £60. There's a mouthwatering list of 'older and wiser' wines including, at the time of writing, Patrick Jasmin's Côte-Rôtie 2005 for £79 but that will almost certainly change from week to week. The 'celebrity' guest list (from

Rousset's mentor Gerard Basset OBE MW MS on the day I visited) isn't quite as good a bargain.

I'm also not convinced by the grape variety-inspired cocktail list which is ingenious but doesn't quite come off. The 'Riesling' (an elderflowerly G&T with St-Germain) was more akin to Sauvignon Blanc. Much better to drink the real thing. And the service is a bit 'French', leaving us standing for few minutes in the entrance until they deigned to notice us.

With a wine list of gems like this, I doubt that will deter many. The problem will be getting a table. Your best bet would be to swing by on your own for a late lunch and perch on one of those well-padded stools.



Blandford Comptoir, Blandford St, London W1U 3DA . Tel: +44 (0) 207 935 4626 [www.blandford-comptoir.co.uk](http://www.blandford-comptoir.co.uk). Open Monday-Sunday, 12-10pm.

*Fiona Beckett is a Decanter contributing editor and chief restaurant reviewer*



## HINE COGNAC

### A taste of terroir

It is a well-known fact that terroir is key to fine wine, but little known that it's equally important for fine Cognac. In great harvests Hine makes a single-vineyard, single-vintage Cognac: Domaines de Bonneuil. Located in the picturesque Colinaud Valley, it is made from grapes grown in the deep, chalky soil of the undulating slopes of the Grande Champagne, the 'first growth' area of Cognac. The wine is distilled on its lees to enhance the fruit and flavours in the new spirit. The young eau-de-vie is then transferred into fine-grain, second-fill, French oak casks to gently age for about 10 years in the estate's cellar before release.







## MY PERFECT DAY IN FRANCIACORTA

### MORNING

Start the day where Franciacorta was first re-fermented in the bottle in 1961 at the **Guido Berlucchi** winery in Borgonato ([www.berlucchi.it](http://www.berlucchi.it)). The Ziliani family has dedicated a special label to that first vintage, while another label is named after stately home Palazzo Lana. **Barone Pizzini** ([www.baronepizzini.it](http://www.baronepizzini.it)) in Provaglio d'Iseo also holds a record: that of being the first winery to produce DOCG Franciacorta from organic grapes. The winery offers two tasting opportunities via the Animante tour or the Edizione tour with vintage-focused tasting.

### LUNCH

A trip to **Dispensa Pani e Vini in Adro** ([www.dispensafranciacorta.com](http://www.dispensafranciacorta.com)) is highly recommended. At this inn-bistro, surrounded by hundreds of Franciacorta

labels, one can savour traditional dishes reinterpreted with intelligence, ranging from baked tench to beef in oil (see p119).

### AFTERNOON

Less than 1km away in Erbusco is the splendid and striking bronze 'Hymn to the Sun' gate by sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro at the entrance to **Ca'del Bosco** ([www.cadelbosco.com](http://www.cadelbosco.com)), a company that deserves a lengthy visit. The avenue that crosses well-kept vineyards and gardens leads to a cellar where advanced technology and refined hospitality come together like almost nowhere else in the world. Its series of Franciacorta Millesimati, Dosage Zéro, Brut and Satèn wines culminates in Riserva Annamaria Clementi. Time permitting, pop in to the Polastri local artisan butcher ([www.polastrimaceler.it](http://www.polastrimaceler.it)) in Torbiato for the



area's most typical cold cut, the Ret, made purely from knife-cut leg of pork.

### EVENING

To end the day with flair, stay in Erbusco at the **L'Albereta Relais & Châteaux** ([www.albereta.it](http://www.albereta.it)) for excellent modern Italian gourmet cuisine at LeoneFelice. Or, staying at the same hotel, go to the Vista Lago bistro version (the summer terrace is a real find) for a less exacting but tasty meal. The hotel rooms are atmospheric, as is the wellness centre.





Jeannie Cho Lee MW

# My Hong Kong

For wine and food lovers, this city never stops, offering unforgettable gourmet experiences from Michelin-starred dining rooms and BYO bistros to street stall noodles

HONG KONG IS a city that understands the value of time. I arrived 22 years ago from Manhattan – but it was here in Hong Kong that I learned the meaning of ‘fast-paced’. Manhattanites may rush, but Hong Kongers run. In Cantonese restaurants, food arrives almost as soon as you’ve ordered; escalators move at double speed; elevator buttons are so sensitive that the doors close as soon as you press them; setting up a limited company takes just a day and any location more than 15 minutes away by car is considered ‘too far’.

Over the past decade, Hong Kong’s dining scene has become a mecca for top talent. Besides the famous French brigade, such as Alain Ducasse, Joël Robuchon and Pierre Gagnaire, the younger generation with star power – Gordon Ramsay, Jamie Oliver, Tom Aikens, Jason Atherton – have also opened up restaurants in the city. The trendiest areas now for smart, innovative cuisine are found west of Central in areas like Sai Ying Pun and Kennedy Town. These are attracting venues reminiscent of bistros in the Marais in Paris, or Hell’s Kitchen in Manhattan.

Local Cantonese food is going through its own modern revolution. New restaurants such as Duddell’s and Mott 32 are upgrading tried and true recipes, injecting a twist or coming up with innovative flavour combinations. This is a city of contrasts and extremes, where a Cantonese meal can cost you more than £200 per person, if you dine on abalone or live garoupa fish for example, but where you can also enjoy a hearty, delicious bowl of noodles from a street stall (*dai pai dong*) for less than £5.

The good news for wine lovers is that even in the best Cantonese restaurants, bringing your own wine is not a problem. Expect to pay a modest corkage fee (between £13 to £27), while hotels and European restaurants charge double this amount.

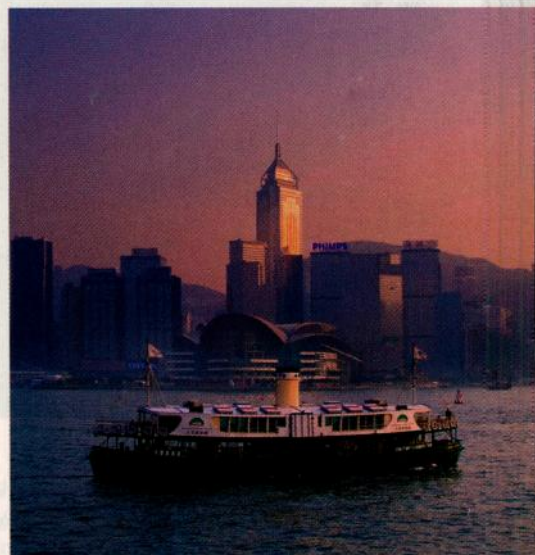
Buying wine is easy, too – supermarkets like ParkNShop and Wellcome scattered across Hong Kong offer a good range at competitive prices. Specialty outlets for fine wines are everywhere, the dominant player being Watson’s Wine with 14 shops in major shopping areas.

Since February 2008 when wine duty was scrapped, Hong Kong has risen to become a wine hub for Asia. Auctions are held nearly every weekend, tastings are conducted weekly by hundreds of active wine importers and retailers, and growing numbers of educational centres hold classes every day. Currently there are 30 wine schools offering Wine & Spirit Education Trust courses and more than double that offer non-certified wine classes.

While you can easily allow yourself to be absorbed by Hong Kong’s dynamic wine and dining scene, there is another, slower side to the city that deserves to be discovered. I recommend taking advantage of the tram, ferry and efficient underground metro. Take the Star Ferry, which runs every 10 minutes, and absorb the sights and smells of the ‘fragrant harbour’ (which is the meaning of the Chinese characters for Hong Kong). Have a glass of wine at Felix (Peninsula Hotel), Spoon (Intercontinental Hotel) or the Ozone Bar (Ritz Carlton) and enjoy the panoramic view of Hong Kong island.

For those with a little more time, and if the weather permits, venture to the south side of Hong Kong island. Go through the Aberdeen tunnel and you are in a different world – this is the suburb of Hong Kong where nearly every apartment and house enjoys proximity to the water and the beach. Deepwater Bay and Repulse Bay are for the tourists, while locals head to South Bay and Chung Hum Kok beach to avoid the crowds. And if you opt for Repulse Bay, do check out the seafood at The Ocean restaurant or have tea at The Verandah.

Or to get a sense of what Hong Kong was like when it was just a fishing village under British rule 100 years ago, take the 30-minute ferry to Cheung Chau or Lamma islands. Order live seafood from the tanks, and remember to bring your favourite wine with you. **D**



**Above: Hong Kong’s Star Ferry allows you to take in all the sights and smells of the ‘fragrant harbour’**

*Jeannie Cho Lee MW is a writer, broadcaster, wine judge and educator, and the awarded author of books Asian Palate and Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate*