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FANTASTIC FRANCI





FRANCIACORTA

Discover Italy's classy and charismatic bottle-fermented sparklers.

BY KERIN O'KEEFE

If there's a wine gem that's just waiting to be widely discovered, it's Franciacorta. A world-class *metodo classico*, or bottle-fermented, sparkler, it boasts pedigree and style, yet remains largely unknown outside of Italy.

Only 11% of Franciacorta's annual production of 174 million bottles is exported around the globe. That percentage is poised to increase, however, as the denomination continues to distinguish itself from other traditionally crafted sparkling wines.

For years, Franciacorta has been compared to Champagne, because the two wines use the same bottle-fermentation method and primary grape varieties—but the comparisons end there. The best Franciacortas have their own identity.

A combination of avant-garde winemakers, a growing focus on organic viticulture, the reduction (or elimination) of dosage and promising experiments with a recently revived native grape has yielded stunning, terroir-driven sparklers that should be on every wine lover's radar.

Unique Growing Area

The small area historically known as Franciacorta lies in the Lombardy region of northern Italy. The name is a derivation of *Curtes Franciae*, which refers to the zone's 13th-century tax-free trade status, and the locale encompasses 19 townships in the Brescia province.

Franciacorta's amphitheater-shaped growing zone was created by retreating glaciers, which left behind mineral-rich soils of morainic origin. Bordered by Lake Iseo to the north, the rolling hills here benefit from a warm microclimate, tempered by cooling breezes that descend from foothills of the Rhaetian Alps farther to the northeast.

"More than the vicinity of the lake, our unique microclimate is a result of the winds from the nearby mountains that bring fresh air at night, generating strong day and night temperature changes that encourage optimal grape ripening," says Silvano Brescianini, co-owner and managing director of Barone Pizzini. "The winds help keep grapes healthy, which assists producers who practice organic viticulture."

Barone Pizzini, whose vibrant, savory wines boast a classic combination of structure and elegance, was the first Franciacorta estate to switch to organic viticulture in 1993. For many years it was the lone pioneer, but other estates have since adopted the philosophy.

Today, nearly 70% of the denomination's 117 cellars are either certified organic or in the conversion process, which gives Franciacorta the highest percentage of organic producers of any denomination in the country.

Franciacorta boasts rich fruit flavors, a result of the overall balmy climate, but the area's soils keep the wines in check.

As Mattia Vezzola, winemaker at the Bellavista estate owned by Vittorio Moretti, says, "loose morainic soils [formed from

glacial debris] ensure Franciacorta is never too high in alcohol." Bellavista strives to make wines with longevity, body and finesse that have a uniquely Italian persona.

"Franciacorta is more digestible than sparklers made in cooler climates," says Vezzola. "They offer great freshness in the mouth, but without the aggressive acidity that goes right to the stomach."

Like producers across the globe, Franciacorta's winemakers have noticed the effects of climate change, as warmer, drier summers push acidity levels lower. Vineyard management is crucial, especially to work the soil and encourage roots to reach farther down for water and nutrients deep below the surface. Managing the leaf canopy to protect grapes from sunburn and encourage optimal photosynthesis is also fundamental.

Grapes and Styles

Chardonnay is the undisputed leader of Franciacorta, accounting for more than 80% of the around 7,000 acres of the denomination's vineyards, followed by Pinot Nero (approximately 15%) and Pinot Bianco (approximately 5%). A number of producers have recently begun investing in Erbamato, a rare grape native to the Brescia area that's shown promising results in raising acidity levels.

"Chardonnay imparts fruit, richness and elegance to the wines," says Pia Donata Berlucchi, president of the family-run Azienda Agricola Fratelli Berlucchi, which only uses estate grapes for its refined, mineral-driven sparklers.

Thanks to the growing zone's microclimate, Chardonnay delivers juicy, yellow stone-fruit flavors that turn tropical in warmer years. It's the main grape found in most Franciacortas, but it plays the major role in Satèn, the soft, creamy sparkler made exclusively from white grapes and lower bottle pressure. A registered trademark of Franciacorta, most producers use only



Get To Know Erbamato

As part of a campaign to forge its own identity and combat the effects of climate change, the Franciacorta consorzio (regional wine organization) and several producers—Barone Pizzini, Ca' del Bosco, Castello Bonomi, Ferghettina, Guido Berlucchi and Ronco Calino—have been experimenting with the native grape Erbamato.

Unlike Chardonnay, Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco, Erbamato ripens late and delivers higher acidity levels. A recent tasting of several experimental sparklers made with varying amounts of Erbamato revealed added vibrancy as well as intriguing and focused mineral sensations in the final wines.

Up to 10% Erbamato was a lowed in the blend starting with the 2017 harvest, but devastating frosts in April 2017 damaged many of the young plants. Producers haven't been deterred, though, and more plantings and clonal research are underway.

Chardonnay for Satèn, although a few also blend in a little Pinot Bianco.

Pinot Nero, on the other hand, “gives the wines structure and soul,” says Laura Catti, the enologist along with her brother Matteo at their family-owned Ferghettina firm, one of the rising stars of the denomination. “We’re increasing our plantings of Pinot Nero, but it’s a sensitive grape, so it’s essential you plant it only in select areas.” Ferghettina’s Rosé, made with 100% Pinot Nero, is vibrant and versatile, making for an easy accompaniment to an entire meal.

Most producers have eliminated Pinot Bianco. Some claim that it’s too difficult to cultivate, while others maintain it’s too neutral. However, a few of my top-scoring Franciacortas have Pinot Bianco in their blend, most notably Ca’ del Bosco’s Annamaria Clementi Riserva. It’s one of the most celebrated wines in the denomination and, starting with the latest 2008 vintage, is made without dosage.

“Pinot Bianco lends floral aromas and citrusy notes that further enhance Franciacorta’s elegance,” says Stefano Capelli, winemaker at Ca’ del Bosco.

Co-owned by founder Maurizio Zanella and the Marzotto family-owned Gruppo Zignago, Ca’ del Bosco is on the cutting edge of innovation. Its “grape spa” is incredibly cool, incorporating an automated series of three consecutive whirlpool-style baths and showers, followed by gentle drying designed to clean the grapes to pristine perfection.

“Once we switched to organic viticulture, we realized that unless there was a timely rainfall before the harvest, treatments, namely copper, stayed on the skins, unlike systemic treatments in conventional agriculture that are largely absorbed by the berries,” says Capelli. “After we started washing the grapes to rid them of impurities, we noticed that fermentation was also better and easier.”

Franciacorta comes in several categories. Satèn is made with only white grapes, while rosé must have a minimum of 35%

Pinot Nero. But the different versions are also determined by how much time the wine stays on its lees during secondary bottle fermentation. Nonvintage Franciacorta must spend a minimum of 18 months

on the lees, Satèn and rosé at least 24 months, vintage bottlings a minimum of 30 months and riservas at least 60 months. Vibrant nonvintage Franciacorta is the quintessential bottling, perfect for an aperitivo, while vintage selections and riservas boast complexity and longevity.

One of the most compelling movements in the denomination is the rising number of zero-dosage bottlings.

Dosage

Franciacorta’s different styles also depend on dosage, the mix of base wine and sugar added after disgorging. Zero dosage is the driest, while demi-sec is the sweetest. Brut, the most common and versatile of the range, allows for up to 12 grams per liter (g/L) of residual sugar, though most producers keep levels far below that threshold, typically around 7 g/L. Some drop even lower.

One of the most compelling movements in the denomination is the rising number of zero-dosage bottlings. The array of names used, which include Pas Dosé, Dosaggio Zero, Dosage Zéro and Brut Nature, may be confusing, but the best examples are fantastic. Loaded with energy, finesse and character, these focused bottlings express the purity of fruit and savory mineral notes that make Franciacorta and its growing zone unique.

This zero-dosage momentum excites Arturo Ziliani, the enologist, CEO and co-owner along with his brother and sister of the Guido Berlucchi winery, the largest producer in the denomination. In 1955, his father, enologist Franco Ziliani, made a bold proposition to nobleman and wine producer Guido Berlucchi to make bottle-fermented wines. The pair’s 1961 sparkler forever changed the destiny of Franciacorta.

Today, Arturo shares the goal of other top producers that would like to see the entire denomination certified organic. “Organic viticulture and dosage-zero bottlings are the future of Franciacorta,” he says.





Recommended Wines

96 **Ca'cel Bosco 2008**
Annamaria Clementi
Dosaggio Zero Riserva. Starting with the 2008 vintage, the firm's flagship bottling is now made without added dosage. It opens with enticing aromas of spring flower, yellow stone fruit, brioche and a mineral, crushed-stone tone that all carry over to the elegantly structured palate, along with tangy nectarine and bright acidity. A refined perlage gives it a weightless concentration, while a savory mineral note lingers on the bone-dry finish. In a word, it's gorgeous. Santa Margherita USA.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$100

95 **Barone Pizzini 2013**
Naturaè. This dazzling sparkler hits all the right marks. It opens with heady aromas of citrus, bread crust and lemon pastry, while the vibrant palate delivers juicy tangerine, Rennet apple and an energizing mineral note alongside an elegant, continuous perlage. Made from 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Nero with no added dosage, it boasts a pristine quality and a pure, crisp finish. Leonardo Le Cascio Selections—The Winetow Group.
abv: 12% **Price:** \$45

95 **Barlucchi 2010 '51**
Nature. Balanced and fragrant, this impressive sparkler offers alluring scents of yellow stone fruit and an inviting whiff of brioche. A blend of 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Nero, it's elegantly structured and focused, delivering flavors of yellow apple, white peach, bread crust and crushed stone framed in bright acidity and elegant perlage. A vanilla note lingers on the bone-dry finish. It's extremely well balanced and refined. Terlato Wines International.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$70

94 **Fratelli Barlucchi 2010**
Casa della Colonne
Brut Riserva. This gorgeous, radiant sparkler opens with enticing aromas of ripe orchard fruit, pressed wild

flowers and cream-filled brioche. Elegantly sparkling, the bright palate delivers Golden Delicious apple, tangy lemon drop, Alpine herbs and minerals alongside tiny, continuous bubbles. Fresh acidity brightens the rich flavors and lends impeccable balance. Selected Estates of Europe Ltd.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$70

93 **Le Manesine 2009**
Sezole Novo Riserva
Dosage Zero. Enticing scents of yellow stone fruit, acacia and brioche show this wine's Chardonnay pedigree. A refined beading and tangy acidity lend elegance and balance to flavors of creamy yellow pear, apple and lemon. A hint of tenet graces the finish. L'ya Wine.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$66

93 **Villa Crespia NV**
Brolese Extra Brut
Rosé. Made with Chardonnay and Pinot Nero, this offers delicate scents of wildflowers, orchard fruit and a whiff of baking spice. Racy, linear and refreshing, the crisp, dry palate delivers Rennet apple, nectarine and a hint of ginger while a graphite note adds depth. It's elegant, with small, continuous bubbles. Vinicola Imports.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$33

92 **Ferghetta 2013 Brut**
Rosé. Savory and vibrant, this bright, polished sparkler delivers aromas and flavors of red cherry, crushed raspberry, Rennet apple, tangy nectarine and bread crust. Refreshing acidity and a lively, refined perlage lift the finish. Empson USA Ltd.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$63

91 **Bellavista 2013 Satèn.**
 Enticing scents of white spring blossoms and yellow stone fruit waft out of the glass. The bright, creamy palate delivers Golden Delicious apple, juicy citrus zest, white almond and white peach flavors alongside an elegant perlage. Terra Moretti Trading.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$54



A WINE LOVER'S GUIDE TO VENICE

Expertly dine your way
through Italy's iconic
floating city.

BY KERIN O'KEEFE
PHOTOS BY SUSAN WRIGHT

Rising out of the Adriatic Sea, romantic Venice is one of the most visited cities in the world, full of beautiful squares, lovely palaces and unforgettable gondola rides down enchanting canals. Many assume it would be difficult to dine well in such a tourist-packed place, but the city offers fantastic options with a clear focus on fresh, local ingredients—everything from simple eateries serving savory bites washed down with Prosecco to elegant restaurants that pair gourmet meals with some of Italy's top bottlings. Here's your guide to serenity: the best places to wine and dine in the city known as *La Serenissima*.