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Your guide to what's new
and exciting in Italian wine

The fashionable fizz

Franciacorta may not be as talked-about as other sparkling wines, but Rebecca Gibb MW discovers it has real style and plenty of ambition

MILAN IS THE heart of Italian fashion design, and long after the catwalks have closed for another season glamour continues to ooze out of its streets and beyond the city limits.

Less than an hour's drive away, visitors at the Festival d'Estate Franciacorta effortlessly pull off a fashion miracle: looking stylish while wearing a glass on a string around the neck. On an unusually hot June day, dance music that sounds like it could have come straight from an Ibiza chill-out album provides the soundtrack. There are hundreds drinking Franciacorta under an unrelenting sun, yet the gorgeous young crowd is impeccably behaved: it's a tasting festival with taste.

Those attending the Lombardy Franciacorta festival are young, classy and elegant – not unlike the region's sparkling wines. Last year was the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Franciacorta DOC in 1967, the result of a collaboration between 11 producers in the region. Back then the designation also included red and white still wines, with the sparkling wines getting a DOCG in 1995. Its makers are keenly aware that they don't have a storied past, filled with tales of 17th-century monks tasting stars in their Champagne.

But that's not to say that wine production suddenly emerged from the deep blue waters of local Lake Iseo either. In 1570 a local doctor wrote a book which mentioned fizzy wines and, in a land registry of 1809, commercial vineyards covered nearly 1,000ha while another 6,000ha were devoted to growing fruit and grapes for personal consumption. Wine production has been here for centuries, but visionary individuals, including Franco

Ziliani, Guido Berlucchi and Maurizio Zanella, set Franciacorta on its sparkling course in the 1960s and 1970s.

Lay of the land

Despite its relatively short history in producing sparkling wine, the dramatic and beautiful scenery that shapes the Franciacorta denominazione owes its form to ancient glaciers advancing and retreating, carving the area's landscape. 'We are very young as a sparkling wine region – and have lots to learn to improve our product – but from a geological point of view we are very old,' says Stefano Capelli, winemaker Ca' del Bosco.

Vines converge at the southern tip of Lake Iseo, a 25km-long lake enclosed by peaks that ascend dramatically within metres of the shoreline. This sub-Alpine plateau gives visitors a taste of what's to come in the Alps proper, which come into view at the north end of the water. Not only did the glacial movements carve a lake that reaches depths of up to 250m, but it also left behind varied unfertile, stone-laced soils that provide the



'Visionary individuals including Franco Ziliani, Guido Berlucchi and Maurizio Zanella set Franciacorta on its sparkling course'



adapts to water stress and is not difficult to deal with. The grapes have a thick skin and unmistakable flavour and are also good to eat. After careful selection, the Consortium opted for nine specific clones suitable for enhancing the vine

Characteristics

Gavi has a tense, vertical, slender profile and a particular freshness reminiscent of juicy citrus fruits, Mediterranean herbs and even salt makes its occasional appearance. A truly inviting drink. To arrive at this, however, it must be Gavi at its best because this so very personal white wine, full of energy in its most intransigent and well-groomed form, runs the risk of falling into the most neutral banality in an instant, especially without the most painstaking care in the vineyard and winery. Its acidity is lively and peremptory: juicy, integral and tasty in the more inspired interpretations, seasoned with subtle, well-tuned spicing (more vegetable here, more herbal there), its energy is not density, its thickness is not strength. It is therefore an ideal white for both afternoon conversation and for the table.

The best selections are so clear, fresh and incisive that they can go from the wine bar to the table with rare nonchalance. And there is no doubt about Gavi's surprisingly long life. Time brings out salty hints of wet rocks and cyster's earth and spices, a splendid tasting tension, salty, iodized persistence, proving that this is a land of thoroughbred whites, something really special. The alcohol content, despite the recent rise in temperatures, is between 12° and 13° at the most. What makes Gavi even more attractive is its very affordable price range.

Alessandra Piubello's Top Wines

Bergaglio Nicola, Minaia, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont Italy 2016 91

£14 **Enotria & Coe**

Fresh hints of citrus fruit, hawthorn followed by sea and cliff aromas. Pulp and spirited to the palate, the length demonstrates incisiveness. Pronounced flavour and juicy drink. **Drink** 2017- 2023 **Alcohol** 12.5%

Brogli, La Meirana, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 88

£16 **Berkmann Winecellar**

A classic interpreted with skill and measure, conceived to give soft and elegant pleasantness. Suitable for an international public, its finesse and caressing approach makes it good to enjoy. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13.5%

La Ghibellina, Mainin, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 87

£18 **Winery Classic**

Slow olfactory opening, outlining a subtle and delicate profile. The tasty contrast of the steadfast and full structure and the sharp mineral freshness of the vibrant finale is very distinct. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 12.5%

La Mesma, Etichetta Nera, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 89

£20 **Raeburn Fine Wines**

Transparent aromatic spectrum. Composure is the key to interpreting this wine. Calibre, measure, subtleness, rigour in the gustatory tension with a salty hint that expands well. Refreshing at the end. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 13%

La Raia, Vigna della Madonna, Gavi DOCG Riserva, Piedmont, Italy 2015 90

£23/£25 **Passione Vino UK**

Complex and articulate olfactory range, a touch of acacia honey. The gustatory structure is soft with elegant finesse. Embracing, it flows with intense profoundness, closing with a persistent finale. **Drink** 2017- 2023 **Alc** 13%

La Zerba Terrarossa, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 89

£15 **Winetraders**

Agile, direct and subtle in the mouth with distinctive acidity traversed by an almost salty hint. Juicy and thirst quenching, it develops an incisive taste, tense as a bow. Highly drinkable finale. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13%

Lombardo Giordano, Vigne di San Martino, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 89

£18 **Winetraders**

Detail, intensity, definition. Peculiar style, structure brimming with rare finesse from its full and progressive development, able to nurture a persistence of surprising purity making the sip literally contagious. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 12.5%

Tenuta La Giustiniana, Montessoro, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 89

£23.99 **Liberty Wines Ltd**

Vertical tension in the aromas, reminiscent of Mediterranean herbs that return in an energetic and vibrant palate. The gustatory impulse is lively and continuous, urging further tasting. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13%

Valditerra Laura, Gavi, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2016 89

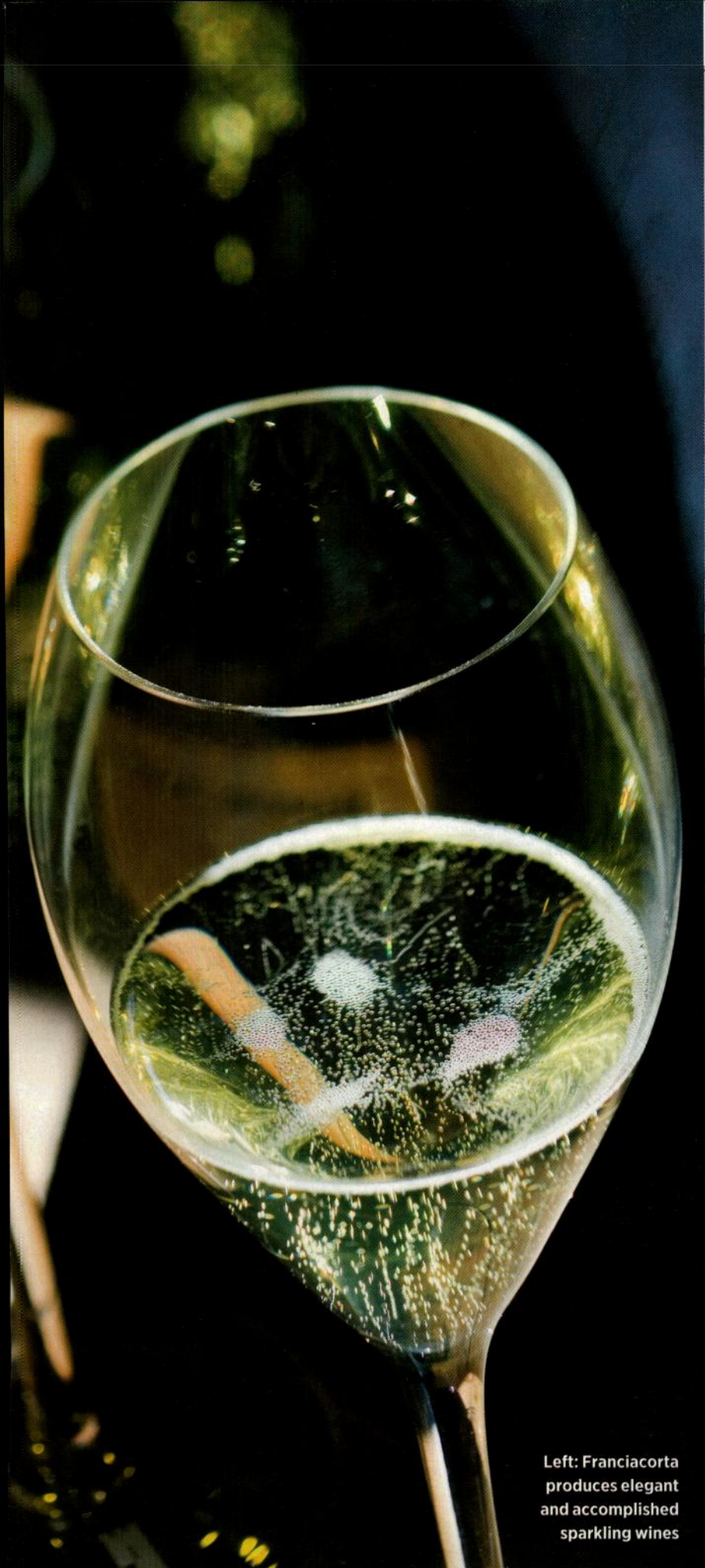
£14 **N/A UK**

Integral olfactory profile with floral, citrus and mineral notes. Its expressive purity is striking throughout the gustatory timeframe: tasty energy, typical sharp freshness, balanced until its lengthy finale. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13%

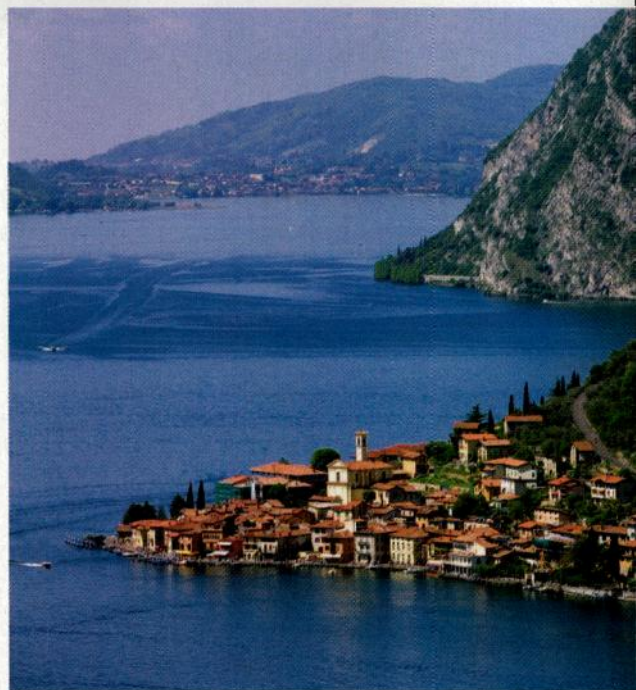
Villa Sparina, Monterotondo, Gavi DOCG, Piedmont, Italy 2015 90

£43.28 **FortyFive10**

Dense, spicy aromas, a woody hint that frames the sip without blocking, enriching it with subtleties to savour. Creamy and soft, the closure is revived by a tempting almond trace. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



Left: Franciacorta produces elegant and accomplished sparkling wines



Above: the dramatic skyline of Lake Iseo, relatively undiscovered by tourists and visitors



Left: Maurizio Zanella of Ca' del Bosco

setting for growing Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc vines.

This Italian lake, however, doesn't share the fame of Garda, and it doesn't have the celebrity residents of Como. Locals admit that many Italians struggle to point out where Franciacorta is located, beyond 'the north of Italy'. Camilla Alberti, vice-president of Strada del Franciacorta, the area's tourism association, explains: 'The fact is that no one outside Italy knows where Franciacorta is.'

The most common explanation of its whereabouts is in relation to other cities: about 45 minutes' drive from the shopping mecca of Milan or a similar distance to Verona; it's also only 30 minutes from both Bergamo and Brescia. The region is associated with industry: steel, iron and brick works.

The past and the present are embodied in the cellars of Contadi Castaldi. Built in 1880, the tunnels housing its slumbering wines and pupitres were the kilns for firing bricks >



Above: the late-ripening Erbatmat grape has a thick skin but is susceptible to botrytis

until 1965, largely abandoned until 1987 when the site became the present-day winery's cellars.

While the region might not have the vast network of underground cellars that Reims boasts, it's unlikely that the winemakers of Franciacorta will ever need such storage capacity. The wine region is small and, explains Vittorio Moretti, president of the Consorzio Franciacorta wine association, production is finite: 'We can never make more than 20 to 25 million bottles.' Compare that to Champagne with sales of more than 300 million bottles, and Cava at 245 million bottles and you can see that it isn't set to be a sparkling wine behemoth.

What it does have is the ability to make fine wines based on Chardonnay, with Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc in a supporting role. Located some 900km to the south of Champagne, the climate is clearly warmer than in northern France, with sparkling wine harvests normally taking place in August – inconvenient for wine producers who have children to look after during Italy's impossibly long school holidays. However with the introduction of a new (but old) indigenous variety in 2017, getting the kids back to the classroom before the harvest begins might be possible.

Return of the native

The new grape in question is Erbatmat. It ripens six to eight weeks later than Chardonnay, meaning the harvest will extend into the cooler temperatures of September – that's of interest to growers with one eye on global warming as well as school terms. It is not in the grape variety bible *Wine Grapes*, nor does it feature in Ian D'Agata's *Native Wine Grapes of*

'We are very young as a sparkling wine region, but from a geological point of view we are very old' **Stefano Capelli, Ca' del Bosco**

Seductive Satèn

Satèn, meaning 'silk' in Italian, is unique to the Franciacorta region, and its come-hither style gives it the opportunity to stand out in a crowded wine market. Always produced from Chardonnay, Satèn is unlike other sparkling wines made in Franciacorta – or Champagne for that matter – as it has less pressure in the bottle: five bars compared with six. In order to achieve this, producers add less sugar in the liqueur de tirage: 18-20grams/litre as opposed to 24g/l for fully sparkling wines. The lower level of sugar produces less alcohol and less carbon dioxide during the second fermentation, hence the lower level of pressure. The style is always brut (maximum of 15g/l). The resulting wine is gentle, creamy and – whether or not it is the power of suggestion – silky.



Above: Vittorio Moretti says Franciacorta will always be smaller-scale



Above: Silvano Brescianini, vice-president of the Consorzio Franciacorta

Italy – due to embryonic scientific data about the grape on deadline day, he laments – but watch out for Erbatmat in a future edition.

'Given climate change and the variety's intrinsic high acidity, it's bound to become more and more visible, if not downright popular,' says D'Agata. 'A number of Franciacorta producers have considerable faith in it, as it offers greater acidic backbone to their wines as well as providing a native, local alternative to another [non-indigenous] higher-acid variety. It's a little like Oseleta in Veneto's Valpolicella region, where it has gradually replaced the Cabernets and Merlots as a grape with which to add tannic spine to Valpolicella or Amarone.'

While Erbatmat might be a new entrant to the grape Filofax, it has been in Franciacorta since the 15th century, according to historical documents, says Silvano Brescianini, vice-president of the both the consorzio and Barone Pizzini, one of the founding members of the DOC in 1967. In 2017, the grape was handed a new lease of life: it is now a permitted variety in Franciacorta. There's been a lot of work on the variety since the 1990s at the University of Milan, and it has been reintroduced to the vineyards of some of the leading producers at Lake Iseo.

The variety has big bunches, thin skins and is susceptible to botrytis and oidium, according to Brescianini. However, it produces wines low in alcohol and has super-high acidity even at full ripeness, as well as delicate aromatics. All in all, that's a perfect package for producing sparkling base wines in a changing environment. While there are fewer than 10ha currently planted, according to the consorzio, that's set to grow: from the 2017 vintage on, the sparkling wines of Franciacorta may contain up to 10% Erbatmat in a blend.

The region makes no secret that it has export ambitions despite its bijou production. Since >

becoming a DOCG in 1995, there's a desire for the sparkling wines to gain international recognition. Moretti, of the Consorzio Franciacorta, explains: 'The national market is very big and we came to exports very late – we never needed to export, but we want to spread the word.' Currently exports account for just 10% of total sales, but Moretti says the region's ambition is to reach between 30% and 40%.

Situated close to popular international cities, producers believe that foreign tourism will be at the heart of the region's success. Luring international visitors away from Lakes Como and Garda to Iseo should be a no-brainer: you don't have to be a millionaire film star to enjoy the high life in Iseo and, not unlike the wines of the region, it remains something of an undiscovered gem. **D**

Rebecca Gibb MW is an awarded wine writer who also publishes www.rebeccagibb.com

Gibb's selection: fashionable fizz to try



Ferghettina, Riserva 33 Pas Dosé 2009 94
£37.50-£40 **Toscanaccio, WoodWinters**

The 33 in the name refers to this being a blend of three cuvées – Extra Brut, Milledì and Satèn – each making up a third of the final wine. Dry and savoury; richly aromatic and developed, giving complex almond and baked apple. Mouthfilling and vivacious. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alcohol** 12%

Ferghettina, Extra Brut 2011 93
£28-£32 **Ake & Humphris, Camber Wines, WoodWinters**

Having spent nearly six years on lees, this 80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Nero blend is mellow and suave, leaving you feeling relaxed. Full and round with great density, it offers up savoury, nutty and creamy flavours. **Drink** 2018-2021 **Alc** 12%



Ca' del Bosco, Annamaria Clementi 2007 92
£100 **FortyFive10°**

Named after the founder's mother and sourced from the winery's oldest vines, with eight years on lees. Richly aromatic, toast and nuts, red apple and bacon. Mid-weight style, lots of density, long. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 12%

Ferghettina, Milledì Brut 2013 92
£24.95-£30 **Ake & Humphris, Amps, Field & Fawcett, Houltts, Noble Green, WoodWinters**
Milledì means 1,000 days and is a nod to the time this Chardonnay-based sparkling spent on lees. Pure, precise with a lovely mineral/acid thread, white peach and apple. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 12%

Lantieri, Arcadia 2012 91
£43.85 **Mondial**

A rich and mouthfilling blend of 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Nero with a high level of intensity. Having spent 42 months on the lees, it has developed a toasty richness and a mid-palate mellowness combined with great texture. On the finish, there's firm and bracing acidity, along with a gripping textural sensation. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 12%



Mosnel, EBB Extra Brut 2012 91
£43.24 **Alivini**

A firm (no malolactic fermentation here) and ambitious wine with lots of fruit concentration. Fermented in the barrel and shows toast aromas with lime and nuts. A good level of fruit intensity, offering depth and mineral grip. Firm, bracing grapefruit-like acidity and a nutty finish. If you like low dosage levels in your sparkling wines, you'll enjoy this. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 12%

Berlucchi, Guido 61 Nature Dosaggio Zero 2010 90
N/A UK www.berlucchi.it

1961 was the first year a Franciacorta wine was ever produced, but the first vintage of this homage to that event was 2009. Fresh, pure, crisp and clean with crisp Granny Smith apple flavours, citrus and a taut finish due to 7.5g/l of total acidity. Vibrant and zesty, with red fruit and nuts on the long finish. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 12%

Ca' del Bosco, Vintage Collection Satèn 2012 90
£65 **FortyFive10°**

Richly aromatic with apple, vanilla and

pastry notes and a hint of oak-derived spice, showing its 48 months on the lees. Round and creamy texture, with fine bubbles. Fresh finish with long, apple-like length. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 12%

Contadi Castaldi, Zero 2012 90
£26.95 **Askew Wine, Eat 17, The Wine Tasting Shop, Truffles Delicatessen, Vinothentic**

A round yet delicate wine that offers a judiciously made non-dosage style. This half-and-half blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Nero grapes is rich on the nose with toast, apple and ripe fruit flavours acting as a counterpoint to the absence of dosage. Features a creamy, medium-long finish. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 12%

Marchese Antinori, Donna Cora Satèn 2011 90
£33.50 **A Tavola, Berkmann**

This is a wonderfully relaxing wine: round and rich on the mid-palate with lovely weight, built through the 40 months that it spent on the lees during maturation, and 10% barrel fermentation. You can expect to find notes of white flowers, hazelnuts and lanolin flavours with a lick of creaminess. It also boasts a silken texture on the palate, with a fine line of acidity to the finish. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 12%



Ricci Curbastro, Gualberto Dosaggio Zero 2008 90
£42 **Vini Italiani**

Mellow and slightly oxidative in style, offering bruised apple, nuts and dried fruit flavours. While light in body, it offers a richness of flavour, having spent eight years on the lees. An intriguing example of partially barrel fermented, mature Franciacorta. **Drink** 2018 **Alc** 12%