

WINES OF ITALY

# BUBBLES *alla* MODA

Get onboard with Franciacorta, the favorite sparkler of Italian fashionistas, sommeliers, and Milan Expo

*Story and photos by Patricia Thomson*



**INSIDE THE RENAISSANCE** palazzo of Montenisa, a partnership with Antinori.



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It's magic hour in Lombardy's lake country. Pink and violet reflections glance off the ripples of Lake Iseo as our motorboat lazily arcs around a tiny island that seems a veritable mirage in the fading light, its umbrella pines and spruce protectively encircling a turreted limestone mansion. "It once belonged to Sophia Loren," a sommelier later tells me.

Before this trip, I'd never heard of Lake Iseo. Like its bigger, better-known neighbors Lake Como, Maggiore, and Garda, it was carved out by an alpine glacier. Like them, it's flanked by craggy peaks and is spectacularly beautiful. It's long been a summer playground for the wealthy—a Hamptons for the industrialists of Brescia and beyond. But this lake has something the others don't: Italy's famous *metodo classico* wine, Franciacorta.

Never heard of that either? In Italy, it's on every serious restaurant wine list and is very much *alla moda*—embraced by the fashion world as the official wine of Milan Fashion Week, and likewise by Milan Expo 2015. For the hoi polloi, it's the bubbly of choice to dress up any occasion. But U.S. consumers have yet to catch on. Brands like Berlucchi, Bellavista, and Ca' del Bosco are known to American sommeliers and cognoscenti, but not much beyond, and only now are smaller wineries and newer upstarts making a concerted effort to get on the radar here.

It pays to pay attention. Pricewise, Franciacorta competes with California sparklers and less-expensive Champagnes—around \$25–\$50. That's a good price for a quality sparkler that uses the same techniques and mostly the same grapes as Champagne.

Franciacorta winemakers hate being compared to Champagne, but that's what people do. It's their frame of reference, which isn't surprising given the numbers: Champagne has 20,000 grower/producers and sells 300 million bottles annually, whereas Franciacorta has 109 wineries in its DOCG consortium and sells 15.5 million bottles. What's more, Franciacorta is a relatively new invention as a wine—but we'll get to that in a moment.

First, it's helpful to understand where Champagne and Franciacorta are similar and where they're different. The key grapes in Franciacorta—chardonnay and pinot noir—also play a leading role in Champagne, which permits five others. In Italy, pinot bianco is the only additional grape that can join the blend (up to 50 percent).

The process of making the bubbles is the same. Called *méthode champenoise* in France and *metodo classico* in Italy, it's when secondary fermentation happens in the bottle, rather than in pressurized tanks (as with Prosecco).

Wine and yeast cohabitate in bottle for years, breeding character and complexity. At the end, the deposit is "disgorged" (expelled like a rocket after being captured in a plug of frozen wine), the bottle is topped off with wine plus sugar (*liqueur d'expédition*), then it's sealed with a mushroom-shaped cork and wire cage.

Where these sparklers part company can be boiled down to two (loaded) words: climate and soil. Even though it's northern Italy, it's still *Italy*, which makes Franciacorta a whole lot warmer than Champagne, which lies east of Paris, towards the northern brink of viability for grapes. Warmth spells fleshier, fruitier wines. As for terrain, those ice-age glaciers not only carved out Lake Iseo, they left a calling card of glacial deposits. Crescent-shaped slopes fan out from the lake's base and undulate over Franciacorta's 19 townships, each ridge having its own varied mix of morainic debris, calcareous gravel, and sandy soil over the limestone bedrock. That variety gives winemakers a lot to play with—and play they do, usually sourcing grapes from vineyards scattered throughout the region.

### Turning 60

It feels so right to be drinking some bone-dry Pas Dosé Franciacorta in the garden of Il Mosnel, a winery that embodies the history and winemaking potential of the region.

"I used to play here as a child," says Lucia Barzanò, scanning the towering pines, aged magnolias and blossoming groundcover behind the stately villa that was once her summertime stomping ground and is now headquarters of the winery she runs with her brother, Giulio. For centuries, this 16th century farmstead had cultivated a mix of agriculture—a practice her Brescia-based ancestors had continued after inheriting the property in 1836. While her *nonno* worked in the city as an engineer, her great-grandmother tended the farm. "She passed a passion for agriculture on to my mother," says Barzanò.

The big change happened in 1967. That's when Franciacorta was recognized as a *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC). And that was the push Barzanò's mother needed to shift the farm's focus wholly to grapes—and to sparkling wine.

It's not that the region had a long history with spumante. On the contrary, that began just a decade earlier. In 1955, Guido Berlucchi, descendent of a count, was having stabilization problems with his estate's white table wine. He sought the advice of Franco Ziliani, a cocky young enology-school graduate who'd come highly recommended. Ziliani answered his questions, then, before





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leaving the palazzo's *grand salone*, inquired, "And if we were to make a French-method sparkling wine too?"—his childhood dream. Berlucchi took the bait. He was soon joined by 10 other gentleman farmers who collectively wanted to up their standards and put Franciacorta on the map as a serious wine region, making serious bubbles. In 1961, they released 3,000 bottles of sparkling "Pinot di Franciacorta." By 1967, Franciacorta had become a DOC, then in 1987 it graduated to DOCG status—Italy's first *metodo classico* to earn that denomination.

Today, part of the charm of touring the Franciacorta Wine Trail is seeing these old grand manors and farmsteads. Il Mosnel still has the configuration of a villa with working farm, though stainless steel tanks now occupy the stables and manicured vineyards have replaced the fields of grain. Montenisa, a partnership with Antinori, occupies an elegant Renaissance palazzo, resplendent with frescoed salone and graceful porticos. Ricci Curbastro is headquartered in the family's 18th century villa; outside is the most dignified chicken coop you'll ever see—a double-decker pagoda—while an adjacent farm building cum museum is crowded with agricultural antiques. Contadi Castaldi occupies a converted brick factory, bought in the 1980s by Bellavista's Vittorio Moretti for his wife, whose godmother had worked there.

Then there are the newer cantine, like Barone Pizzini, a state-of-the-art, environmentally green facility. This noble Austro-Hungarian family put down roots here in the 1840s (a portrait of Mozart testifies to their social connections), but the last heir sold the property in 1991 to a group of progressively minded entrepreneurs. They've since reshaped not only the winery architecture, but the grapes too; Barone Pizzini is the first winery in Franciacorta to work exclusively with organically grown grapes. (Now there's so many it's possible Franciacorta could become the first wine region to go entirely organic, says Barone Pizzini general manager, Silvano Brescianini.)

The majority of Franciacorta wineries are small, places where the family both live and work; one might find a baby's high chair tucked in the corner of the tasting room, like at Le Marchesine. Built in 1985 by Giovanni Biatta, descendent of an old Brescia winemaking family, Le Marchesine's facilities seem workaday, but that belies their innovations. "My grandfather understood the need to invest," says Andrea Biatta, ticking off their forward-thinking steps: They were among the first to abandon the over-productive pergola system, to have

their own disgorgement machine, and to use mechanical pupitres (*giropalle*) in place of hand-riddling to coax the sediment into the bottle's neck. A mechanical pupitre "avoids the inconsistency of handmade work," he explains—consistency being essential to cracking the foreign market—and it dispenses with another downside of manual riddling: "No Saturdays, no holidays, no time off."

### Theme and variations

To indicate sweetness level, Franciacorta borrows its nomenclature from France. At the bottom of the scale is Non Dosage or Pas Dosé. With no added sugar, this is the driest and most pristine category; like the barest of sheath dresses, it showcases the wine in all its natural glory. Next comes the very dry Extra Brut (up to 6 grams per liter of sugar), followed by the smoother, more versatile Brut (up to 12 g/l)—the most common dosage and what you're likely to find in U.S. wine shops. Above that is Extra Dry (12 to 17 g/l), Sec or Dry (17 to 32 g/l), and Demi-sec (33-50 g/l).

Another set of terms describes styles. The starting point is Franciacorta, plain and simple. That word tells you the wine has been in contact with the yeast (*sur lie*) for at least 18 months, has been held at the winery at least 25 months from the time of harvest, and has 5-6 atmospheres of pressure. Then there's Rosé, with a minimum of 25 percent pinot noir; Millesimato, a single-vintage Brut held at least 37 months; and Reserva, a Millesimato held 67 months or more.

But there's one style that's wholly unique to Franciacorta: Satèn. The name echoes the French word *satén* (or *satiné*) and harkens back to the lake region's history as silk producer, serving the fashion capital of Milan. Satèn is a Brut, usually from 100 percent chardonnay, but has only 4-5 atmospheres. In other words, it's less bubbly. Those finer beads give a creamier sensation. Combine that with appealing lemon-drop and chamomile flavors, and you've got a perfect gateway for sparkling wine skeptics, which is precisely its intent.

There's no time like the holidays to crack open a sparkler. Try to track down an Il Mosnel Franciacorta Brut (\$30), Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta Satèn (\$32), Bellavista Pas Operé Millesimato (\$55), or Ca' del Bosco Franciacorta Cuvee Prestige Rosé Brut (\$57). Any of these will dress up your festivities splendidly. Just don't call it Champagne.

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FRANCIACORTA SLEEPS on its yeast for 18 months or more.



WINES OF ITALY



LUCIA BARZANÒ welcomes guests to Il Mosnel's 16th century cellar.

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
A LINE-UP OF Franciacorta sparklers.

