



Vineyards overlooking Lake Iseo

Alpine Sparklers

Touring Franciacorta, a Summer Wine Destination

Italy is endowed with a rich heritage of native grape varieties, nearly 600 by some estimates, which makes for a myriad of distinctive wines that are difficult if not impossible to replicate elsewhere in the world. These wines are currently in vogue with sommeliers looking to create esoteric wine lists, and with adventurous wine consumers keen for something new and different. **But if you're interested in sparkling wines, it's worth making a trip to Franciacorta in Lombardy, where chardonnay and pinot noir rule in bottle-fermented sparkling wines.**

by Stephanie Johnson



This small wine region is nestled at the southern end of Lake Iseo, one of several long, skinny glacial lakes that flow into Lombardy from the foothills of the Alps. The area's considerable natural beauty and proximity to Milan (about an hour by car) have made it a popular holiday spot for moneyed Milanese. Vines have been growing in the area for centuries, but it wasn't until 1961, when Franco Ziliani and Guido Berlucchi produced their bottle-fermented bubbly (known then as Pinot di Franciacorta) that sparkling wine became the wine region's focus.

Today, Franciacorta's vines cover more than 7,000 acres and yield about 17.4 million bottles annually, up from eight million bottles in 2009. That's impressive growth, but fewer than two million of those bottles make their way to buyers outside of Italy. One of the best ways to get to know this region is to approach it as a wine tourist.

You can start with Bellavista, Ca' del Bosco and Guido Berlucchi, three wineries that collectively account for about half of Franciacorta's total production and lie just a few miles from one another in the gently rolling hills south of Lake Iseo. All are as well-equipped to welcome wine lovers as any large Napa Valley winery. The artistically inclined should head for Bellavista and Ca' del Bosco; both feature sleek, modern wineries, their grounds dotted with contemporary sculptures. If history is your thing, pay a visit to Berlucchi, the original Franciacorta producer. The winery's dimly lit passageways are lined with thousands of bottles that cover upwards of two acres in Berlucchi's massive, historic cellar.

Beyond the big three, Franciacorta has dozens of smaller producers to explore, and some offer distinctive, if less polished, aspects of the region.

Colline della Stella's vineyards lie near Franciacorta's eastern border, where the terrain is hilly and the soils rich in clay and limestone. The winery resembles a converted garage, where the Arici family made red wines before turning to sparkling wines in 2002. From the outset, Andrea Arici made the radical decision to produce all of his Franciacortas without dosage, firm in his belief that grapes can ripen amply in the region's moderate climate, negating the need for added sugar at bottling. Arici makes about 60,000 bottles a year, all with grapes from a single vintage since he lacks the capacity to store reserve wines for blending. His wines are distinctive in a similar way to grower Champagnes, expressing each season's conditions and the characteristics of his particular territory. Arici makes five Franciacortas,

including Zero Nero, a pure pinot noir from grapes grown on steep, terraced slopes that reach up to 900 feet of elevation. It offers one of the best examples of his style with its clean, crisp freshness and subtle red-berry flavors.

The Muratori family of Villa Crespia is pushing the notion of terroir in Franciacorta by tying their wines to the six different soil types identified in a study initiated by the region's winegrowers in 1992. Villa Crespia's Numero Zero is entirely chardonnay from vines growing in deep morainic (glacial) soils, and offers flavors of crisp apple and bright lemon in a lean, tightly-knit profile.

Barone Pizzini, another historic estate, was purchased in 1992 by a group of investors that included former restaurateur Silvano Brescianini, now the vice president of the Franciacorta consorzio. Pizzini led the region's move into organic viticulture, and is now promoting experiments with erbamat, a variety native to the area that was just approved for inclusion in Franciacorta wines, starting in 2017. Pizzini's entry-level Brut Animante Franciacorta is worth seeking out: With less than four grams of dosage, it accents lemony acidity and tart green-apple flavors.

Cavalleri is a medium-sized estate run by fourth-generation vintner Francesco Cavalleri, who has converted the winery's 103 acres to organic viticulture and continues to press for lower dosage in the family's wines. His 2011 Collezione Grandi Cru is a chardonnay that gains richness from partial oak fermentation and five years on the lees; yet, with just three grams per liter of dosage, it retains plenty of freshness and precision.

Cavalleri began experimenting with biodynamic farming in 2016, but tiny Cantina 1701 has been committed to biodynamics since 2012, when Silvia Stefini and her brother Federico rented 26 vineyard acres and began producing Franciacorta in a makeshift cellar in an industrial park. They have a tasting room in the town of Erbusco, where you can sample all four of their zero-dosage Franciacortas, including the crisp and lightly toasty 2013 Brut Nature. ■



Andrea Arici of Colline della Stella