

Italy SPARKLES *with* QUALITY

*In Franciacorta, tradition makes
a mark on modern sparkling wine*



In the northern hills of Italy's Po Valley, just south of serpentine Lake Iseo, bubbles rise. Dense woods flank the rows of grapevines and groves of olive trees along the tortuous hillsides. This is Franciacorta, home of the exceptional Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) sparkling wines that carry the region's name.

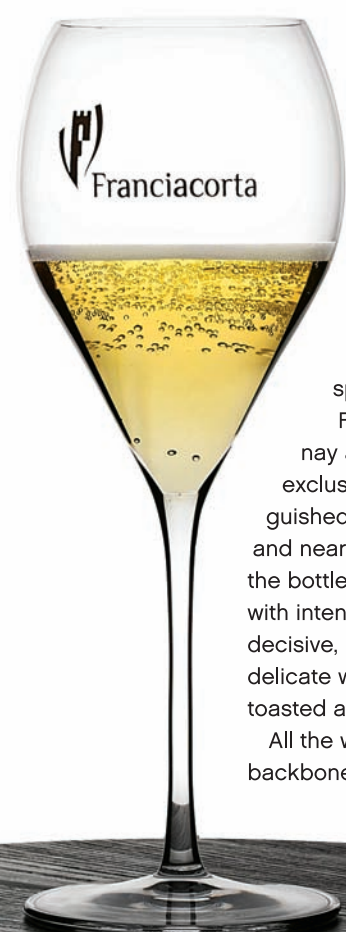
The first Italian wine produced exclusively using bottle fermentation to obtain the DOCG status, Franciacorta's production method is officially recognized and distinguished from that of "vino spumante." What makes Franciacorta unique is its fermentation method: by using the traditional method, bubbles are allowed to form naturally in the bottle rather than in a tank. Here, it also makes for sparkling wines that are light, dry, and full of yeasty notes. Sur lie aging—where in the wine rests on yeast fragments and lees during aging—adds even more complexity to Franciacorta.

Made from local Chardonnay, Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco grapes, Franciacorta wines are produced in five distinct styles—Franciacorta, Franciacorta Satèn, Franciacorta Rosé, Franciacorta Vintage Millesimato and Franciacorta Riserva—and range from exceptionally dry to lightly sweet.

A blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Nero, no more than 50 percent Pinot Bianco, it may also contain up to 10 percent Erbammat, an ancient white grape variety originally from the province of Brescia which first appeared in written records in 1500. Erbammat contributes freshness to the base wines without altering the established and beloved profile of Franciacorta. As a whole, Franciacorta tends to be straw yellow in color, with golden highlights. Aromas of bread crust and yeast are enriched by delicate citrus, nuts—such as almond and hazelnut—and dried fruit notes like fig. Ranging in sweetness from zero dosage to demi-sec, the wine is known for being savory, fresh and harmonious, in part because it spends at least 18 months on the lees.

Franciacorta Satèn is composed of Chardonnay and up to 50 percent Pinot Bianco. Produced exclusively as a brut, Franciacorta Satèn is distinguished by its smooth taste, fine and persistent bead, and near creamy texture—as if silk was pouring from the bottle. In the glass, the wine is straw yellow, often with intense tinges of green. The nose is subtle but decisive, lush with ripe fruit aromas and balanced by delicate white flowers and dried fruit, as well as hints of toasted almond and hazelnut.

All the world loves a rosé, and it's the Pinot Nero backbone that brings special body and character to the



Franciacorta Rosé. To make this wine, which can be produced anywhere from zero dosage to demi-sec, winemakers first create an entirely dry still rosé from Pinot Nero. After crushing, the grapes are left to ferment on the skins until the juice has reached its desired hue. The resulting base wine is then either made into a single-variety sparkling wine or blended with Chardonnay, up to 50 percent Pinot Bianco and no more than 10 percent Erbammat for a rosé that dances in the glass.

While non-vintage Franciacorta is aged sur lie for at least 18 months, non-vintage Satèn and Rosé each spend at least 24 months on lees. Vintage levels of all wines spend at least 30 months on lees, while Franciacorta Vintage Millesimato—produced exclusively as a single-vintage wine—must spend an additional 37 months in the cellar before being released. What makes Millesimato even more special is the wines' distinct sensory profile and taste, which reflect the climatic conditions of the vintage as well as the unique qualities of the grape at that year's harvest. All Millesimatos may be made anywhere from zero dosage to brut, with the exception of the Satèn Millesimato, which is always made as a brut.

As with Millesimato, Franciacorta Riservas are single-vintage wines made only in particularly exceptional years. To express their olfactory and gustatory characteristics to the fullest, these wines are bottle-aged on lees for at least five years.

While the region is renowned for its méthode traditionnelle sparkling wine, that is not all it does incredibly well. In fact, although Franciacorta's modern wine history gained a foothold in the late 20th century, the area has been producing fine wine since the 16th century. A study of the Napoleonic Cadastral records of 1809 show the region was a hub for commercial winemaking and home to nearly 1,000 hectares of vineyards—far more than would be needed to serve the wine-drinking needs of the roughly 40,000 local inhabitants.

A focus on organic farming and winemaking is on the rise in Franciacorta, with 965 hectares currently being managed organically, and another 898 hectares under conversion. In the end, more than 65 percent of the area under vine will be cultivated organically, in response to producers' desire to safeguard the future of their breathtaking local area, including that lake. In addition to being a source for regional cuisine and recreation, Lake Iseo is fundamental to viticulture. In summer, cool breezes coursing across the lake from the Valcamonica temper the sultry heat of the plain to help keep sugar levels in grapes in check. In winter, the lake protects the moraine amphitheatre from Valcamonica's blistering cold.

Year-round, the region is a draw for cultural and culinary tourists. La Strada del Franciacorta—The Franciacorta Road—winds through

the region, connecting wineries and the region's 19 municipalities. Monasteries and convents, Romanesque churches and the ruins of castles rise along hillsides, and museums, like one founded by King Desiderius and located in an ancient monastery, dot the region. The local gastronomic scene flourishes—as it has for at least 1,000 years—especially around a regional sardine-style delicacy. Each night, come sunset, local fishermen make their way onto Lake Iseo in little boats known as naecc and drop their nets to gather a type of shad. After they are caught, the fish are gutted and scaled, then placed in salt for at least 48 hours before being arranged on wooden racks and left to dry in a shady, well-ventilated place for 30 to 40 days. The "sardines" are then packed in containers, covered in oil, and left to mature for another year.

Here too are regional cheeses like Brescia Robiola and the PDO Gorgonzola, cured meats, lightly smoked venisons and Sebino's boutique extra-virgin olive oil. All of which pair, naturally, with the fine beads and intense bubbles of Franciacorta wines.



Franciacorta

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