

# ITALY

No country has as many sparkling wine appellations as Italy, with its optional 'may be *spumante*' clauses cluttering up more than 100 of the country's DOCs (Denominazione di Origine Controllata, Italy's equivalent of the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée system).

The story is that despite this morass of 'maybe fizz' there was not a single Italian appellation specifically for classic Brut sparkling wine until Franciacorta was elevated to DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) in 1995. Since then, motivated by Franciacorta's success no doubt, other regions have followed in its footsteps. The area of Oltrepò Pavese in the hilly zone south of the River Po in Lombardy has a long tradition of producing *metodo classico* Pinot Noir under the appellation Oltrepò Pavese Metodo Classico, which received DOCG status in 2007. Now the region has come up with a new name, *Cruati*, for a traditional-method rosé made from Pinot Noir. Even though Trentino has had the Trento DOC appellation since 1993, it took the producers until 2007 to unite under the TrentoDoc trademark to market their traditional-method sparkling wines. Currently 33 wineries are producing TrentoDoc under 70 different labels. In Piedmont a dozen or so wineries have joined together to found Alta Langa, an appellation for traditional-method wines made from vineyards located higher than 250 metres above sea level. Alta Langa was elevated to DOCG status in 2008, but it remains small, with less than 500,000 bottles produced annually.



GUIDO BERLUCCHI BOTTLES WITH PRESSURE METERS

In addition to these regional initiatives an association of companies conforming to the Trento Decree founded the Istituto Tutela Italiano in 2009. This is essentially a collective brand that enables producers throughout Italy to identify themselves as makers of traditional-method sparkling wine made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc. Currently 21 producers belong to the institute. Even though Franciacorta is technically Trento, the producers have chosen not to use the term.

These recent *metodo classico* initiatives have changed the Italian sparkling wine scene, even though the volumes are minuscule compared to tank-method wines. Prosecco and Asti are the most prominent of the tank-method wines. Prosecco continues on its industrial path, but Prosecco has gone through a major appellation change. Following these changes, Prosecco DOC is likely to grow into the best-selling sparkling wine in the world over the next five to seven years.

## FRANCIACORTA

Franciacorta, Italy's most prestigious *metodo classico* wine, is made from Chardonnay, Pinot Nero (Pinot Noir) and up to 50% Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc) grapes grown on hilly slopes near Lake Iseo, in the Brescia province of Lombardy. It is the first classic Brut appellation to stipulate that its wines must be made using *metodo classico*. Until September 1995 Franciacorta could be still or sparkling, like so many other Italian DOCs.

The first sparkling wine in the region was produced by Guido Berlucchi's winemaker, Franco Ziliani, in 1961. The success of Guido Berlucchi encouraged others to go

into sparkling winemaking. But demand rose too rapidly and Berlucchi soon suffered from a lack of suitable grapes within the territory. Consequently, the company started sourcing grapes from elsewhere in Lombardy in the 1970s. It was left to other wealthy businessmen and noblemen to build the Franciacorta brand, which was done with Maurizio Zanella of Ca' del Bosco and Vittorio Moretti of Bellavista in the forefront.

Along with a handful of other producers, their vision and wealth enabled them to build this unique sparkling-wine-only appellation based solely on the principle of quality. In 1990 29 producers came together to form a consortium to decide on production laws. The parameters were adopted from Champagne and some were made even tighter, such as the minimum lees ageing period, which is 15 months for Champagne, but 18 months for Franciacorta. Today the appellation for the region's still wines is *Curtatone*, the term 'Franciacorta' being exclusively reserved for traditional-method sparkling wine.

## FRANCIACORTA TERROIR

Franciacorta is an ancient vitigrowing area dating back to Roman times. Monastic foundations played a large role in the region in later centuries. The name 'Franciacorta' first appeared in 1277 in municipal statutes in Brescia, with reference to the area south of the Lago d'Iseo. Today's Franciacorta boundaries were laid in 1429 by a decree of Francesco Foscari, Doge of Venice.

The topography and soil are varied due to the region's glacial history. The movements of ice that carved Lake Iseo



VIEW FROM DISOLES VINEYARD

also formed the amphitheatre-shaped chain of hills that protects the valley from southern winds. Franciacorta enjoys a sunny pre-Alps climate moderated by Lake Iseo. Within its boundaries 64 different soil types have been identified. In general, its moraine, sandy soils are well draining and rich in minerals.

In the mosaic of soils, aspects, altitudes and varieties there are plenty of blending options. Chardonnay is the most prominent variety, giving a linear backbone of freshness to the wines. Pinot Noir as a majority variety is much less common, but a few *Blancs de noirs* are made. Pinot Blanc, which came to the region long before Chardonnay, is declining in importance as it has little longevity or energy to give to the blend.

## NOT QUANTITY, JUST QUALITY

Franciacorta has been an overnight success, as few regions have been able to establish themselves to this extent in just 50 years. Well known – and actually more popular than Champagne in Italy – Franciacorta remains relatively modest in terms of exports and international recognition. This is partly due to its output. The region covers much less than a tenth of the area of Champagne, producing a mere 11 million bottles per year. But in the last 20 years or so the number of producers has risen from 29 to 106 and production volumes have increased accordingly.



As Mattia Vezzola, the living legend winemaker of Bellavista, puts it: 'There is no competition in Franciacorta in quantity, just quality.' And this is the secret to its success. Much smaller than its rival, Champagne, Casa or Prosecco, its quality is astonishing, with very few poor producers. Styles do vary from (too) ripe and heavy to light and vivid, but almost all share good winemaking, with clean fruit and general stylistic coherence. Many still aim to bottle 'what nature gives', which often means wines that are too vinous and rich, without sparkling wine energy and refinement. But that is a stylistic issue rather than a fault. There is a cool handful of very fine producers, but what Franciacorta needs is to tame the sunshine in the bottle in favour of the complexity given by yeast autolysis.

## SATÈN SMOOTH

The styles of Franciacorta are straightforward to understand, having been largely adopted from Champagne. The only exception is Satèn, the style trademarked by Franciacorta. Created by Mattia Vezzola, winemaker at Bellavista, this white-grape-only wine with less pressure became a style adopted by most producers. The smoothness and elegance of such a wine inspired the name, Satèn.

## PROSECCO

The international success of Prosecco made producers finally take action to protect its name in 2009. The problem was that Prosecco was the name of the variety and could thus be made anywhere. The inventive Italians found a village called Prosecco east of the classical region, drew the borders of the future DOC so that it would be included and, based on this, applied for a regional status for the name. The name of the grape variety was changed to one of its local synonyms, Glera.

A new quality pyramid was formed for the appellation, in which the vast generic area in Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia can call its bubbly Prosecco DOC. The more limited area is called Prosecco di Treviso DOC, whereas the best classical area is referred to as Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG. The small Asolo area was also awarded DOCG status. At the top of the pyramid is Superiore di Cartizze, the *grand cru*, and the word 'Prosecco' should not be used in conjunction with it.

These changes mean that there will be enormous volume growth in the generic Prosecco DOC, which is mostly a neutral and clean wine, easy to drink and easy to forget. The real quality lies in Conegliano Valdobbiadene, an area that is now trying to escape from the Prosecco label and build a name for itself. With this monster-of-a-name it will be difficult, and in discussion most people refer to the classic area as Prosecco Superiore. Prosecco Classico would have been a more descriptive term, and in line with the terminology of many other Italian wine regions, but as the term 'Classico' could also mean *metodo classico*, the area is unable to use it.

Prosecco is an easy-drinking fizz few people would describe as *terroir* wine. However, there are clear differences within the classic region, the wines of Conegliano being fruitier and tropical, often having more butter notes, whereas Valdobbiadene produces more floral and delicate wines. But the Italians don't seem to be very keen on protecting these differences. For example, if a winery is situated in Valdobbiadene it can call the wine Valdobbiadene DOCG, even though the fruit comes from Conegliano. Because of this loophole, many wines are labelled Valdobbiadene and not Conegliano Valdobbiadene, regardless of where the fruit comes from.

The Conegliano Valdobbiadene region has 43 sub-zones, five of which are the most ambitious producers make fine *terroir* Prosecco from these. The breathtakingly steep Cartizze hill, with its 106 lectures of old Glera vines, is its own, making feather-light, creamy and elegant wines traditionally in a dry (meaning medium-sweet) style.

Bodily most Prosecco DOCG is Extra Dry (15–17g sugar) but the Brut category (less than 12g/l sugar) is increasing in importance. The Dry (17–32g/l sugar) represents less than 10%. In Prosecco the sweetness level is not a question of quality but of style, but, as in dry wine regions in the world, the trend is towards dry Cartizze.



Brut in particular is attracting increasing interest, and for a reason, it is such an interesting *terroir* that it should not be masked by sugar. A Dry Cartizze is a delightful wine but, due to the sweetness, one glass is enough.

Prosecco is a wine to drink immediately upon release, and gain nothing from ageing. Some fine examples might

mature well, but this has nothing to do with the complexity gained by the best traditional-method wines.

## ASTI AND MOSCATO D'ASTI

Although Asti is a pure Moscato sparkling wine, Moscato d'Asti is an entirely different product and sparkling Moscato, without any geographical designation, is another thing altogether. Asti's success story began in the 1970s, but this style of wine is currently very popular worldwide, replicas being made in many corners of the world, notably in Australia.

A sweet sparkling wine is not taken seriously by many, but the best examples, especially of small-grower Moscato d'Asti, are fine wines indeed. Moscato d'Asti and Asti share many similarities, but are two different wines and appellations. The regional boundaries are the same – the difference lies in the style. Asti (sometimes still referred to as Asti Spumante as it was known until its promotion to DOCG in 1993) is a sweet fully sparkling wine with 7–9.5% alcohol. Moscato d'Asti, on the other hand, is just *fizz cantino* or barely *piquant*, having a maximum pressure of 1.7 bar. Moscato d'Asti has a low alcohol content of 4.5–6.5% and it is sweeter than Asti. Moscato d'Asti is often classified as white wine in wine shops and placed accordingly. It is sealed with a normal cork, which is fully inserted into the neck of the bottle, with no mushroom top.

Although Asti and Moscato d'Asti can be made from the same base must, the wines will taste different, the aroma being more prominent in the Moscato d'Asti due to lower CO<sub>2</sub> and alcohol. The biggest difference between the two is scale of production. Since the earliest days of its success Asti has been made in bulk by the big vermouth factories, offering nothing of real interest to the *fizz* lover. However, small-scale Moscato d'Asti production by top still winemakers has produced some truly wonderful wines, feather-light, beautifully floral and fragrant, refined sweet wines for after dinner. The higher amount of sugar in Moscato d'Asti makes these wines better suited to desserts that need a wine sweeter than the dish itself.

## STYLES OF FRANCIACORTA

### FRANCIACORTA NON-VINTAGE

- Chardonnay and/or Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc may be used up to 50% of total
- Bottle-fermented, with maturation on the lees for a minimum of 18 months
- Released earliest 25 months from the harvest

### FRANCIACORTA SATÈN

- White grapes only, majority of Chardonnay with maximum of 50% Pinot Blanc
- Smoothness acquired by less internal pressure, lower than 5 bar
- Minimum ageing 24 months on the lees
- Can only be made as Brut

### FRANCIACORTA ROSÉ

- Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and/or Pinot Noir (minimum 25%)
- Pinot Noir grapes macerated with skins to give the wine the desired hue
- Can be made with a Pinot Noir base wine or it can be an *assemblage* with Chardonnay and/or Pinot Blanc base wines
- Can be made in different sweetness levels from Pas Dosé to Demi-Sec

### FRANCIACORTA MILLESIMATO

- Made from at least 85% of a single vintage, aged on the lees for a minimum of 30 months
- Can be made as Pas Dosé, Extra Brut, Brut, Extra Dry

### FRANCIACORTA RISERVA

- A vintage-dated wine that may be a Satèn or a Rosé, has aged on the lees for at least 60 months
- Can be made in Pas Dosé, Extra Brut, Brut



## **LO SPARVIERE**

**MONTICELLI BRUSATI, FRANCIACORTA,  
LOMBARDY**

[www.losparviere.it](http://www.losparviere.it)

- Up to 8,300 cases

Lo Sparviere is one of the wine estates of the Gussalli Beretta family, much more famous for their eponymous firearms. Their ancient Monticelli Brusati estate used to be one of the family's country houses until wine production was started in 1974. The estate is vast, 150 hectares, out of which 30 are dedicated to wine, largely to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Only their own grapes are used for making the wines.

**WINEMAKER** Francesco Polastri

### **HOUSE STYLE & RANGE**

Full and ripe style of Franciacorta with partial fermentation in oak bringing textural richness. Fine mousse and clean fruitiness, but the wines could do with more finesse. The Satèn is lovely, with opulent toast and yeasty complexity. The Rosé is the weak spot, too phenolic with essence-like aromas.

### **★ Franciacorta Brut**

Vintaged, traditional method: 80–90%