

Photo: Aldo Padovan

ITALIAN SPARKLING WINE

FRANCIACORTA ITALY'S ANSWER TO CHAMPAGNE

Prosecco is the bubbly from Italy that everyone loves, but there's another Italian bubbly which you should know about – Franciacorta. *Alessandra Piubello* delves into history and provides an indepth account of it

La Breda Prospettiva, a Franciacorta vineyard in the heart of Lombardy

The Franciacorta territory borders on the rocky and morainic hills of Rodengo, Ome, Gussago and Cellatica in the east, the lower shores of Lake Iseo and the tail of the Rhaetian Alps in the north, the River Oglio in the west and Mount Orfano in the south. We are in the heart of Lombardy, northeast Italy, in an area of about 200 sq km. A zone characterised by a large morainic amphitheatre, formed by glacier activity during the secondary and tertiary geological ages as the huge Valcamonica glacier expanded and contracted.

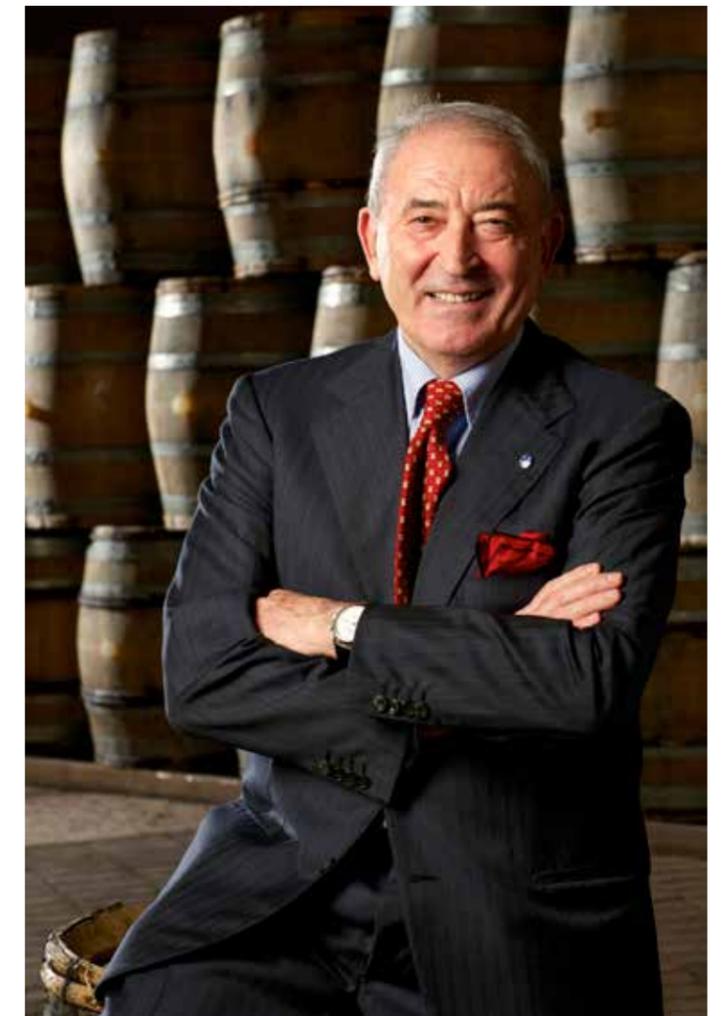
The common element of most Franciacorta soils is, therefore of morainic origin, which determines its main characteristics – modest depth, good drainage and good water retention. The landscape boasts considerable variety, which is responsible for the diverse grape-ripening dynamics and the different sensory features of the basic wines. To protect the quality of the grapes within the area, the rules don't allow vineyards higher than 550 metres above sea level to be set up. The production zone for the grapes used for making Franciacorta DOCG wine lies in the province of Brescia. Despite Franciacorta's location in the Alpine foothills, its proximity to Lake Iseo, has a mitigating effect on the temperatures both in summer and winter.

History and tradition

Vines have been growing on the hills of Franciacorta since ancient times. The discovery of grape seeds from prehistoric times and archaeological material found throughout the area, as well as the various references by classical authors such as Pliny, Columella and Virgil, are proof. Organised farming in the area dates back to the Middle Ages with the critical contribution of monks (especially those from the abbeys of St Peter in Lamosa at Provaglio and St Nicholas at Rodengo Saiano) who reclaimed the marshy areas. The name Franciacorta itself takes us back to the era of the monks when the territory benefitted from the free exchange of goods

(*curtes francae*, free courts). The interconnection between history, wine and culture in Franciacorta is highlighted in one of the earliest publications about the technique of making wine by natural fermentation in the bottle and its effect on the human body. Printed in Italy in 1570 and entitled "Libellus de vino mordaci", the book was written by Gerolamo Conforti, a doctor from Brescia. The studies of the doctor preceded the intuitions of the illustrious abbot, Dom Perignon. It documents the considerable popularity and consumption of sparkling wines in that period, describing them as *mordaci* (biting), that is, lively and foaming. Conforti proved to be something of a soothsayer!

Vittorio Moretti,
President of
Consorzio
Franciacorta





Left to right: Clusters of Pinot Bianco and Pinot Nero grapes. A single Chardonnay leaf



With the arrival of the industrial revolution in the 19th and 20th centuries, agriculture took a back seat. The countryside was depopulated and by the 1950s, Franciacorta looked very different from the agricultural hub it had once been. Warehouses and artisan studios sprang up everywhere and many old farmhouses were abandoned. Few believed in wine production in the 1960s and the Franciacorta red wines were among the lowest priced in all of Lombardy.

But now, two important characters entered the scene, revolutionising the territory – Guido Berlucchi and Franco Ziliani who were pioneers. Guido wanted to find a solution for some batches of Pinot that were giving him trouble. When he met the young oenologist, Franco Ziliani, he realised that his dream of making Pinot into a sparkling wine, an Italian version of the Champagne he loved so much, could be achieved.

After a series of experiments, in 1961, they saw success at last! The bottle, whose label bears the name “Pinot di Franciacorta”, is a milestone in the winemaking history of Franciacorta. By 1967, eleven producers began

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the production of 2,000 hectolitres of Pinot di Franciacorta on 29 hectares of vineyards, thus taking the first steps towards the success that the Franciacorta method went on to reap over the following years. The wine attained its DOC in the same year, followed in 1995 by its DOCG – the first Italian wine produced exclusively with the *metodo classico* (same as Champagne) method of re-fermentation in the bottle to achieve this classification. The label now carries the Franciacorta name, an umbrella term that defines the territory, the production method and the wine.

Vines in the vineyard

Franciacorta is made from Chardonnay, Pinot Nero, Pinot Bianco and Erbamato grapes. Erbamato is a 500 year old, long-forgotten white grape indigenous to the province of Brescia. It was introduced for the first time into



Left: Slices of salami on a cutting board; right: a glass of Franciacorta DOCG sparkling wine pairs well with a variety of dishes



Franciacorta during the sixth modification of the production regulations in August last year, as an ‘ally’ against climate change, owing to its late-ripening profile.

Erbamat reaches its ideal ripeness a month later than Chardonnay and Pinot. Its substantial aromatic neutrality and marked acidity contribute to giving freshness to the base. For now, only 10% Erbamato is permitted in the blend in order to test its potential. The two main reasons for this is to obtain greater product identity with a deeper link to the territory, and the need to mitigate the effects of climate change, especially on early-ripening grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot.

Chardonnay has now been cultivated in Franciacorta for several decades and currently occupies more than 2,000 hectares of vineyards, corresponding to about 80% of the total surface area. Pinot Nero is the second most commonly grown vine in Franciacorta, occupying 15% of the total surface area, planted on higher ground. It is mainly used in Millesimato and Riserva Franciacorta DOCG wines to which it offers structure and longevity. It is also an essential component for the cuvée in Franciacorta Rosé. Pinot Bianco is the third Franciacorta vine and is planted on about 5% of the total surface area.

Franciacorta vines yield a maximum of 120 quintals of grapes per hectare and the harvest, carried out absolutely by hand, usually

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takes place between the first 10 days of August and the first 10 days of September. Vines are planted at a medium-high density of between 4,500 and 6,000 plants per hectare with a maximum distance between the rows of 2.5 m and a minimum distance of 0.8 m. 70% of the vineyards are now organically farmed.

There are 2,800 hectares of Franciacorta DOCG vineyards (82% Chardonnay; 14% Pinot Nero and 4% Pinot Bianco) with 17.4 million bottles sold in 2017, of which 11% went abroad. Exports have seen a 5% increase in sales volume. The main market is Japan, which now constitutes 20.6% of the export total, followed by Switzerland, representing 17.4%, then Germany 13.6% and the United States 12.2%.

At the table

Due to its freshness and vivacity, Franciacorta is a highly versatile wine at the table. It is ideal as an aperitif as well as with an entire meal, dessert included. It goes particularly well with numerous local gastronomic specialities, such as casoncelli (a type of filled pasta), Brescia-style kebab, different types of salami, stuffed and baked tench and dried Iseo Lake sardines. Going beyond the typical local combinations, Franciacorta is well matched with delicate risottos creamed with cheese or vegetables, white meats and soft or medium-mature cheeses. It also accompanies a wide range of appetizers, pasta or fish dishes in style. ♦