

THE *DECANTER* TRAVEL GUIDE TO

Franciacorta

This is prime Lombardy sparkling wine territory that blends rural charm and tradition with Italian sophistication, says Alessandra Piubello

Soft hills carpeted with rows of vines and dotted with stone hamlets, medieval castles and abbeys, farmsteads, and battlemented towers. Villas of 18th-century nobles set amid the lush greenery of secular parks. This is Franciacorta territory, a sunny amphitheatre that extends south of Lake Iseo, just a few kilometres from Brescia – itself a city of unique beauty. This is also Italy's choicest area for the production of sparkling wines (made with Chardonnay, Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco grapes), which were the first brut styles in Italy to obtain DOCG recognition, back in 1995. The name comes from the old *curtae* (courts) *francae* (free) in the area, settlements governed by religious orders that were exempt from paying taxes. Because of its strategic position, Franciacorta was a trading borderland, much contested among the powerful and the nobility.

The best way to discover the subtle charm of the region is to explore the villages and hills on foot or by bicycle. There are five food-cycle-tourist itineraries along the Strada del Vino wine route (see www.franciacorta.net, *Wine Tourism*). Or take a mountain bike (www.iseobike.com for rental), or even a horse from Al Burnec, near Adro (<http://circoloippico.burnec.it>) along the many winding paths. The less energetic can drive, enjoying the picturesque colours of the vineyards. Choose from the Franciacorta consorzio itineraries or follow the Strada del Franciacorta route, either independently or as part of a guided tour.

There's plenty to admire architecturally, too. The region's historical importance is conveyed through its aristocratic castles – don't miss the medieval castle at **Passirano**, one of the best preserved, and the castle at **Bornato**, famous for having hosted Dante Alighieri – and its 17th- and 18th-century palaces, including Villa Lechi at Erbusco, Palazzo Torri at Nigoline, Villa Soncini at Provezze and Villa Fenaroli at Fantecolo.

For a change of pace and scene, take a stroll through the peat marshes, a nature reserve abounding with birdlife and aquatic vegetation – the variety of flowering lilies is beautiful. These marshes can be viewed from the >



FACT FILE

Production area

18 municipalities in the province of Brescia

Planted area

2,500ha

Main grapes

80% Chardonnay, 15% Pinot Nero, 5% Pinot Bianco

Soil types

Sand, silt; calcareous gravel



Right: Monte Isola island on Lake Iseo makes a scenic day out



Maps: Maggie Nelson

MY PERFECT DAY IN FRANCIACORTA

MORNING

Start the day where Franciacorta was first re-fermented in the bottle in 1961 at the **Guido Berlucchi** winery in Borgonato (www.berlucchi.it). The Ziliani family has dedicated a special label to that first vintage, while another label is named after stately home Palazzo Lana. **Barone Pizzini** (www.baronepizzini.it) in Provaglio d'Iseo also holds a record: that of being the first winery to produce DOCG Franciacorta from organic grapes. The winery offers two tasting opportunities via the Animante tour or the Edizione tour with vintage-focused tasting.

LUNCH

A trip to **Dispensa Pani e Vini** in Adro (www.dispensafranciacorta.com) is highly recommended. At this inn-bistro, surrounded by hundreds of Franciacorta

labels, one can savour traditional dishes reinterpreted with intelligence, ranging from baked tench to beef in oil (see p119).

AFTERNOON

Less than 1km away in Erbusco is the splendid and striking bronze 'Hymn to the Sun' gate by sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro at the entrance to **Ca'del Bosco** (www.cadelbosco.com), a company that deserves a lengthy visit. The avenue that crosses well-kept vineyards and gardens leads to a cellar where advanced technology and refined hospitality come together like almost nowhere else in the world. Its series of Franciacorta Millesimati, Dosage Zéro, Brut and Satèn wines culminates in Riserva Annamaria Clementi. Time permitting, pop in to the Polastri local artisan butcher (www.polastrimaceler.it) in Torbiato for the



area's most typical cold cut, the Ret, made purely from knife-cut leg of pork.

EVENING

To end the day with flair, stay in Erbusco at the **L'Albereta Relais & Châteaux** (www.albereta.it) for excellent modern Italian gourmet cuisine at Leone Felice. Or, staying at the same hotel, go to the Vista Lago bistro version (the summer terrace is a real find) for a less exacting but tasty meal. The hotel rooms are stratospheric, as is the wellness centre.



Above: view over the marshes from San Pietro in Lamosa monastery

Far right: Ca' del Bosco vineyards

Right: Montisola salami, produced only on the island of Monte Isola



'The bubbling hills of Franciacorta are beautiful all year round'



courtyard of the **San Pietro in Lamosa** monastery (www.sanpietroinlamosa.com) in Provaglio d'Iseo, founded by Cluniac monks in the 11th century. Another monastery worth visiting is **Abbazia di San Nicola** at Rodengo-Saiano with its ancient herbal remedy workshop, where the monks still produce herb-based liqueurs.

At Rovato, **Castello Quistini** (www.castelloquistini.com), with more than 1,500 varieties of roses (a picture in spring) and a herb, fruit and age-old plant garden, and the **Convento dell'Annunciata** (www.conventodellannunciata.it) are both worth a visit.

Natural splendour

Any winery tour should start from **Ca' del Bosco** (see 'My perfect day', p117) which, with its owner Maurizio Zanella, has contributed so much to the success of this denomination.

In the same town, Erbusco, another not-to-be-missed stop is **Bellavista** (www.bellavistawine.it), where Vittorio Moretti, a leading player and current president of the Franciacorta consorzio, is a reference for the area. This first-class winery is named after the location of its vineyards on top of the Bellavista hill with its splendid view. Bellavista makes the most of its scenery, the visual impact and blend of art, sculpture and 'bon ton' (the waterfall and swing are enchanting).

Moretti, a dynamic businessman who unites tradition with technological

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is Bergamo-Orio al Serio, about 25km away by motorway (A4) in the direction of Venice. Exit at Rovato and follow the signs to Franciacorta.

innovation, also caters for his guests' wellbeing at the five-star **L'Albereta** resort with its immense park, spa and world-famous restaurant (see 'My perfect day', p117).

Just 10 minutes away is **Il Mosnel** (www.mosnel.com), belonging to the Barzanò Barboglio family, now in its fifth generation. The winery, with its 16th-century cellars, is the starting point for two excursions of 4km and 7km respectively around the estate's 40 hectares, and also offers themed dinners. Another 2km on, and we come to the **Monterossa** vineyards (www.monterossa.com), now under the guidance of Emanuele Rabotti, located on the top of a hill overlooking the entire morainic amphitheatre and whose grounds include a spectacular rose garden.

Travelling another 15km towards Monticelli Brusati (the nature walk to the Gaina waterfall is wonderful), we find **La Montana** (www.lamontina.it), run by the Bozza brothers, where you can combine wine tasting with culture – make time to look at the contemporary art in its gallery. A 10-minute drive away is yet another company that has helped shape the history of Franciacorta, **Ricci Curbastro** (www.riccicurbastro.it). Here you will find an agricultural museum outlining the stages of the farming calendar, an agriturismo and an antiques shop.

The curving shores of Lake Iseo (sailing and windsurfing on offer) are just a few kilometres from the vineyards – perfect for cooling off

after your vineyard tour. Iseo itself is a lively town, and the starting point for an excursion to Monte Isola (also spelt Montisola), the largest lake island in Europe and listed as one of Italy's most beautiful villages in the eponymous guide, *I Borghi più belli d'Italia*. After visiting the **Madonna della Ceriola** monastery with its spectacular view over the lake and the Franciacorta area, seek out the area's famous dried sardines, or a sandwich of locally produced Montisola salami.

If you have time to allow for a restaurant stop, look out for Franciacorta's two most famous dishes: stuffed tench, a speciality that originates in Clusane, a tiny fishing village near Iseo; and beef in oil from Rovato, where one of Italy's main meat markets was located in the times of the Serenissima Republic of Venice, up to 1797. The latter, a medieval recipe, combines two of the most important exports from pre-sparkling wine times: beef and Sebino oil.

The bubbling hills of Franciacorta are beautiful all year round, but if you happen to visit in June or September, don't miss the Franciacorta Festival (www.franciacorta.net/it/festival), which features a variety of events in the wineries and surrounding territory, all organised with wine lovers in mind. **D**

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FRANCIACORTA ADDRESS BOOK



HOTELS

Agriturismo Villa, Monticelli Brusati

A relaxed stay in contact with nature and the reality of life in the Italian countryside. www.villafranciacorta.it

Iseolago, Iseo

An elegant hotel with a lake view and mooring, offering a wellbeing area, mountain biking, tennis, surfing and sailing. www.iseolagohotel.it

Relais Cappuccini, Cologno

In a renovated convent that preserves part of the ancient architectonic lines. It boasts a very well-equipped spa. www.cappuccini.it

Relais I Due Roccoli, Iseo

A resort suspended above the lake overlooking Monte Isola. High-quality, elegant rooms with romantic balconies. www.idueroccoli.com

Relais Franciacorta, Colombaro

A haven in a renovated 16th-century farmstead. Close to the Franciacorta golf course, it is an ideal starting point for excursions among the wineries. www.relaisfranciacorta.it

RESTAURANTS

Agriturismo Al Rocol, Ome

The kitchen produces typical recipes from the Brescia province handed down through generations. Local products, from cheese to organic honey and jams are also on sale. www.alrocol.com

Hostaria Uva Rara, Monticelli Brusati

Located in a 15th-century farmstead, the food has a Lombard influence with the odd digression towards the classics. www.hostariauvarara.it

Osteria della Villetta, Palazzolo sull'Oglio

A reference point for local cuisine, with traditional atmosphere and the added value of a complete selection of wines. www.osteriadellavilletta.it

Ristorante Barboglio, Colombaro

High-level restaurant that enhances the quality of the raw materials selected from all available locally. www.barbogliodegaioncelli.it

Ristorante Due Colombe, Borgonato

A charming and historic family venue brought up to the rank of first-class restaurant by chef-owner Stefano Cerveni. Creative cuisine based on tradition. www.duecolombe.com

Trattoria del Muliner, Clusane

In a hamlet famed for its baked tench, here the food expresses the very best with dishes based on freshwater fish. www.trattoriadelmuliner.it

SHOPS

Le Cantine di Franciacorta, Erbusco

The most well-stocked wine store in the area, with bottles sold at winery prices. A selection of local food products is also on sale. www.cantinedifranciacorta.it