

# ITALY

## FOCUS ON FRANCIACORTA



*It has been just over 50 years since Franciacorta became a DOC—and 23 years since it achieved DOCG recognition.*

During this time, the focus on the production of top quality sparkling wines has been relentless—relentless, in terms of aspirations and capital investment; relentless, in terms of strengthening and upgrading its production regulations; and relentless in terms of stylistic refinements and wine quality improvements.

First, a few numbers, and then some critical comments on the wines.

- *In 1967, there were only 120 acres (48.5 hectares) of sparkling wine grapes; today, there are 60 times more (7,104 acres/2,876 hectares).*
- *In 1967, total sparkling wine production was approximately 432,000 bottles; in 2016, it was 40 times more (1.74 million bottles).*
- *In 1967, there were 11 metodo classico producers in Franciacorta; today, there are 120+.*
- *In 1967, Franciacorta sparkling wine was one of many aspiring Italian sparkling wines, with—at best—a modest domestic reputation. Today, Franciacorta is considered Italy's best metodo classico denomination, and one of the world's best sparkling wines.*

It has been five years since our last Focus on Franciacorta (issues #144-#146), for which we tasted 50 wines, and recommended 38. Here, we tasted 52 wines and recommended 50. (In the intervening years, we continued to taste at least a dozen different Franciacortas annually.)



First bottle of Franciacorta produced from 1961 vintage



Soc. Agr. Corte Fusia

## FRANCIACORTA TIMELINE

- 1961** Guido Berlucchi produces first metodo classico in the region; 3,000 bottles of Pinot di Franciacorta
- 1967** Franciacorta table wines and sparkling wines receive DOC recognition; sparkling winegrape acreage in the region totals only 120 acres (48 hectares), and total sparkling production is around 432,000 bottles
- 1983** Franciacorta sparkling wine production surpasses the one million bottle mark
- 1990** The Consorzio Per la Tutela del Franciacorta is formed, with 29 members
- 1991** The Consorzio approves rigorous new viticultural and winemaking regulations in order to enhance the quality of its metodo classico wines
- 1995** Franciacorta becomes Italy's first metodo classico-only DOCG (table wines are given the Terre de Franciacorta designation)
- 2000** Franciacorta sparkling production reaches the 4 million bottle mark
- 2010** Franciacorta sparkling wine production reaches 11 million bottles; the Consorzio continues to update Franciacorta standards and regulations
- 2016** Production surpasses 17.4 million bottles (1.45 million cases)
- 2017** Current regulations require that: Rose-designated Franciacorta to be at least 35% Pinot Nero (up from 25%); yields/hectare be increased to 120 quintals (up from 100 quintals/hectare) but that the juice from grapes ratio be reduced from 65% to 54%. A fourth permitted grape variety, the indigenous white variety Erbatat, is added to the list of authorized Franciacorta varieties.



### Our Observations 2017

Generally, the wines were more consistent in quality from type to type and from producer to producer than the wines in our tasting in 2012, as suggested by our high level of recommendations.

The wines also displayed more freshness of fruit, more subtlety (even elegance) in aroma/flavor, and more character than those tasted five years ago. They were also drier, crisper, and better balanced. In short, it was a group of excellent—even outstanding—wines.

**Why? Vines are older. Vintners have more experience—and more confidence.** Harvesting decisions (for vineyard parcels and varieties) are more precise—and alcohol levels have fallen in the finished wines: in 2012, 29% of the wines tasted had alcohol levels of 13% or more; this year, with 25% more wines tasted, only 2% had alcohol levels of 13%, or higher!

We found the wines recommended here to be much more exciting overall than those from our 2012 tasting, with higher 'high points', suggesting that Franciacorta's 'personality' and true potential are finally being revealed by a larger pool of wine producers, who have gone beyond emulating Champagne and are consciously encouraging their wines 'to speak Franciacorta'.



## Franciacorta at a Glance

**Where:** northwestern Italy, in east-central Lombardy, about 65 miles northeast of Milan

**Size:** 2,876 hectares (7,104 acres)

**Annual production: (2016):** 17.4 million bottles (1,450,000 cases), or 2,449 bottles (204 cases) per acre

**Climate:** moderate alpine (cold winters, warm/hot summers)

**Soils:** glacial moraine, silt, and clay over limestone subsoil

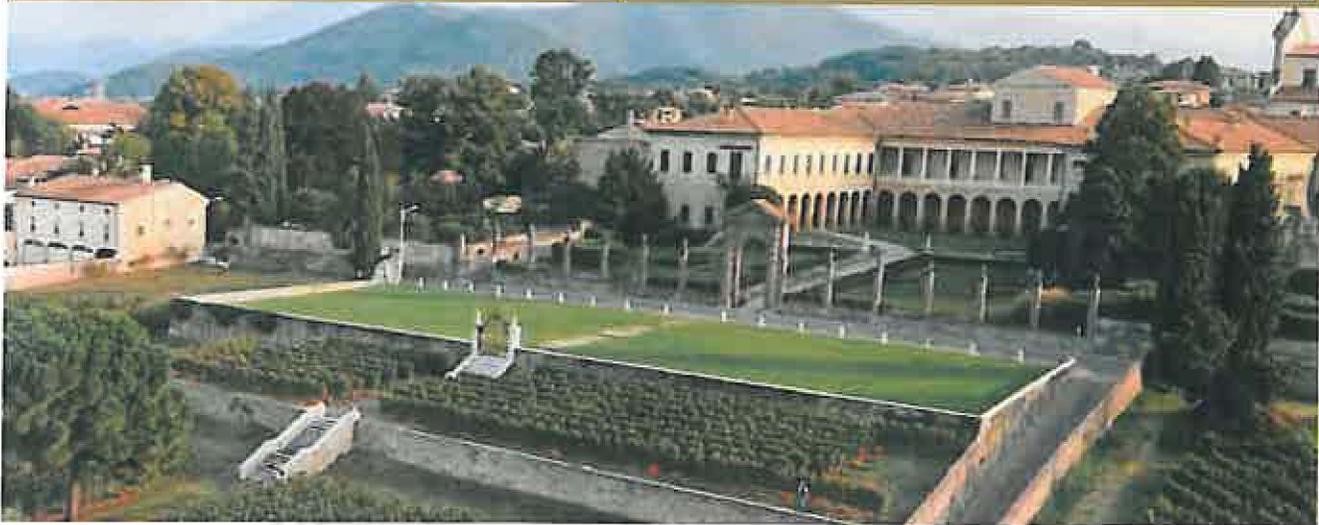
**Permitted varieties:** Chardonnay, Pinot Nero, Pinot Bianco, Erbatat

**Vineyards by variety:** 5,825 acres Chardonnay (82%); 995 acres Pinot Nero (14%); 284 acres Pinot Bianco (4%); Erbatat <1%

**Number of producers:** 120 (117 of these are members of the Franciacorta Consorzio)

**Franciacorta by market (2016):** 89.8% Italy, 10.2% exports (Japan, Switzerland, Germany, USA)

**Style Designations:** Non Dosato (Pas Dose)—up to 0.3% R.S.; Extra Brut—up to 0.6% R.S.; Brut—up to 1.2% R.S.; Extra Dry—between 1.2% and 1.7% R.S.; Sec/Dry—between 1.7% and 3.2% R.S.; Demi-Sec—between 3.3% and 5% R.S.



### Key regulations:

1. the only permitted grape varieties are Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco, Erbatat—all white—and Pinot Nero (red)
2. no Franciacorta may contain more than 50% Pinot Bianco or more than 10% Erbatat (Erbamat is not permitted in Saten)
3. maximum yield per hectare is 72 hectoliters/hectare (5.355 tons/acre), and the maximum yield of juice from grapes is 54% (down from 65%)
4. minimum yeast-aging periods are:

Non-vintage Franciacorta (all dosage levels) 18 months

Non-vintage Saten & Rose 24 months

Vintage Franciacorta (including Saten & Rose) 30 months

Riserva (including Saten & Rose) 60 months

### Three Main Franciacorta Types:

**Saten** – Made from white grapes only, with lower pressure (4.5 atmospheres) than other Franciacorta sparklers; Saten—meaning ‘satin’ in Italian—is only produced in the Brut style (up to 1.2% R.S.). The name itself (Saten) is a registered trademark of the Consorzio; in 2016, Saten accounted for 11.1% of production (193,000 cases). Both non-vintage and vintage-dated versions are made.

**Rose** – Must contain at least 35% Pinot Nero; can be made in multiple styles, from ultra-dry to sweet (Non Dosato through Demi-Sec). In 2016, Rose accounted for 10.3% of Franciacorta’s production, including both non-vintage and vintage dated versions.

**Franciacorta (NV & Vintage)** – By far, the most important Franciacorta style: in 2016, this category accounted for 78.6% of total production. Of this, approximately 2/3 is non-vintage, and 1/3 vintage-dated (Millesimato)—and primarily Brut.

**Note on Riserva** – Franciacorta Riserva is wine that has been aged on the yeast 60 months or more. It is the least important Franciacorta category at present, because most producers opt not to use it, even though some wines exceed the minimum aging-on-the-yeast period required). In 2016, Riserva accounted for less than 1% of production.

For additional information: Consorzio per la tutela del Franciacorta  
<http://www.franciacorta.net/en/home/>