

New Year's Eve drinkers: This sparkling wine is cheaper, more interesting than Champagne



[Michael Austin](#) Chicago Tribune

Are you one of those people who like to open a few bottles of sparkling wine around the December holidays — especially the one Dec. 31? In other words, are you adequately celebrating the miraculous phenomenon that is your life?

If so, allow me to suggest a special sparkling wine for the coming weeks. This bubbly is fresh and formidable, new and traditional, and as a bonus, will probably save you a little jingle. It comes from northern Italy and goes by the name of Franciacorta (Fran-chyuh-COR-tuh), which refers to the region, the overall wine production method and the wine style. This is sparkling white or rose made from various combinations of hand-harvested chardonnay, pinot nero (pinot noir) and pinot bianco (pinot blanc) — or, in some cases, 100 percent chardonnay or pinot nero — all using the traditional method of secondary fermentation in the bottle. (If you see "metodo classico" on a bottle, it means the wine has been made in this painstaking way.)

The wine region, which is in Lombardy near the city of Brescia, is Italy's most prestigious for sparkling wine. Like many places in the world, it was host to winemaking long before contemporary regulations took hold. Franciacorta's modern history began in 1961 when a handful of local producers starting making sparkling wine there, and in 1967 the area was recognized as an official appellation (DOC) by the Italian government. In 1995 Franciacorta obtained DOCG status, a step up on the wine-governing ladder, the extra G essentially guaranteeing the authenticity and quality of what Italy deems its best wines.

Franciacorta is home to more than 100 producers, and their wines are making their way to the United States now more than ever. A few years ago, it was easy to find Berlucchi (which carries the iconic '61 on its labels) and Ca' del Bosco, but today considerably more brands are available. They come with an intangible cool factor, too, because they are not as well known as wines from some of the other sparkling wine regions popping into your head right now.

"Saten" is the designation Franciacorta winemakers give to their wines that are made to be creamier and softer in the mouth because of less-aggressive fizz. The word itself is meant to call to mind the silky smoothness of satin. For anyone who marveled at the mind-blowing sensation of Pop Rocks as a kid, think of Franciacorta saten as the other end of the spectrum. Despite their creamy rich mouthfeel, saten wines, like most Franciacorta sparklers, are dry and crisp.

Nonvintage Franciacorta wines mature in the bottle for a minimum of 18 months before they are released (24 months if they are saten or rose styles), and vintage wines ("millesimato" in Italian) rest for 30 months. Reserva wines mature in the bottle for twice that long. All during this time, yeasty sediment is making these wines more layered and intriguing.

These are elegant wines, serious wines, and while they may be lower-priced than some other traditional-method sparkling wines, they are not budget wines. They simply enjoy a favorable quality-to-price ratio. You could spend less on a bottle of bubbles, but you would probably sacrifice complexity. On the other hand, you could find wine up to Franciacorta's quality from other regions, and it might cost you a little, or even a lot, more.

I tasted through some bottles currently in the market for you — always for you, friends — and here are some thoughts to help you pick out your December sparklers.

Berlucchi '61 Brut (\$32) had lime, pear and satisfying yeastiness, along with minerality and lively, mouth-filling bubbles.

Montenisa Brut Rose (\$36) was a wave of fresh fog rolling in, balanced by a wash of tangy, cleansing citrus.

Ricci Curbastro Saten Brut (\$40) was creamy and soft, with toasty, nutty aromas and the clean kiss of green apple.

2011 Barone Pizzini Saten Edizione (\$45) offered anise aromas to set up almond and lemon flavors leading to a low-fizz, mineral finish.

2008 Bellavista Brut (\$48) gave off anise and herbs but was bright and fresh at the same time, with zealous, mouth-filling bubbles.

2009 Monte Rossa Cabochon (\$50) was deeply layered, with savory and toasty notes followed by a hint of sweetness and a crisp finish.

Most Franciacorta is fresh enough to work well as an aperitif (perfect for holiday and New Year's Eve toasts) but also complex enough to stand up to many foods, from seafood and pasta to lighter meats and richer side dishes that benefit from palate-scrubbing acidity.

Have some bubbles ready, not only to kick off your holidays in mid-December but also to end them in the first few moments of January. Get your kissing done (priorities), and when you come up for air, chase those smooches with a swig of Franciacorta. It's pleasing to say and equally pleasing to taste. Plus, it's bubbles. A party is just a party until the bubbles show up. Then, it becomes a celebration.

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