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Editor's Column - Franciacorta in Focus

For many years now Franciacorta has been Italy's best kept wine secret. Produced for the first time in 1961 and awarded the coveted DOCG classification by the Italian government in 1995, Franciacorta is often referred by wine critics as Italy's highest quality sparkling wine.

However, despite global critical recognition, which is surely a factor in the significant increase in production and sales of this wine over the last five years or so (sales were up by 25% to just under 14 million bottles in 2012), 92% of all Franciacorta sold is still consumed in Italy. This is a fact which concerns producers as it leaves the entire region very much open to the effects of domestic economic issues and domestic consumer trends.

In a bid to change this though the Conzorzio Franciacorta (a body of producer representatives dedicated to protecting the quality of Franciacorta, its image and the interests of its producers) have this year stepped up their awareness programme and have installed a promotional team in the UK for the very first time in a bid to increase the sales of Franciacorta in this market that has a well known love of sparkling wines.

As part of this promotional effort the first ever dedicated tasting of Franciacorta in the UK was held at the Italian Embassy in London recently. The Independent Wine Review attended and this column is intended to provide a brief insight into that tasting and an introduction to the region and some of its wines.

The Region of Franciacorta

The Franciacorta zone of production is located in the heart of Northern Italy and covers around 230 square kilometres south of Lake Iseo. Rolling hills formed by ancient glaciers define the landscape here, with a lush and green appearance during the spring and summer being replaced by snow and ice in the winter. Generally planted on south-facing slopes, the vines of Franciacorta are sheltered from the cold climate of the nearby Alps by the peaks of the rolling hills and the climate is generally moderated by the large body of water that is Lake Iseo (and indeed by Lake Garda that sits further to the east.)

The soils deposited by the glaciers that formed those hills are gravelly, free draining and rich in minerals – perfect for high quality viticulture.

With just 11 producers and 29 hectares of vineyards in the early 1960s, production of Franciacorta has now grown substantially and today there are more than two hundred members of the producer Conzorzio with more than 2,800 hectares of vineyards at their disposal. Whilst there are a handful of very large producers in the Franciacorta zone of production (Bellavista, Guido Berlucchi and Ca' del Bosco to name a couple), the majority of producers in the region can be considered relatively small in size, with most owning fewer than 30 hectares of vines. 82% of the vineyard area is planted with Chardonnay, with the remaining 18% composed of Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc vines.

The Wines of Franciacorta

The wines of the Franciacorta DOCG zone of production are sparkling wines made using the "traditional method" (also known as the "Champagne method") of sparkling wine production. (Still white wines may also be produced within the Franciacorta zone of production, but these must carry the Curtefranca DOC name). First a still "base wine" is produced from Chardonnay and/or Pinot Noir and/or Pinot Blanc grapes, with this "base wine" re-inoculated with yeast as it is bottled, so that a secondary (bubble-inducing) fermentation occurs in bottle. Left on the "lees" of this fermentation for a legally enforced minimum of 18 months, Franciacorta may then be disgorged and sold.

For "entry level wines" it is typical for Franciacorta to be produced in a "non-vintage" style (i.e. made with a significant proportion of grapes from one year, with reserve wines used to maintain a house style and quality despite of vintage variations) although many producers will also make Franciacorta "Millesimato" in years when there are very good vintage conditions (or when they have a particularly high quality parcel of grapes). This is a single vintage Franciacorta made only from the grapes of a particular vintage, with a legally enforceable minimum of 37 months between harvest and release.

Wines labelled "Franciacorta Riserva" have been matured on the lees of the secondary fermentation for a legally enforceable minimum of 60 months and may not be released until 67 months (five and a half years) after the harvest.

Franciacorta labelled "Saten" will be a Blanc de Blanc style (i.e. made from white grapes only). The vast majority of these wines on the market are made from 100% Chardonnay, although legally up to 50% Pinot Blanc may also be used. As with "ordinary" Franciacorta, the legal minimum aging requirements apply (i.e. "Saten" must still undergo a minimum of 18 months "sur lie" maturation) however "Saten" is always bottled at a slightly lower pressure than "ordinary" Franciacorta (a pressure of less than 5 atmospheres is enforced), whereas "ordinary" Franciacorta is bottled with a pressure of between 5 and 6 atmospheres.

Rosé Franciacorta is also produced, but is rarer than rosé styles in Champagne for example.

All Franciacorta (with the exception of the “Saten” which must be bottled in a “Brut” style) can be produced with a range of dosage (i.e. added sugar), from the currently fashionable “zero dosage” (under 3g/l residual sugar) though to “demi sec” styles (with up to 55g/l residual sugar).

The Tasting Notes

The majority of the wines featured in this column were tasted at the Franciacorta UK tasting at the Italian Embassy in London at the beginning of this month. Others have been tasted with producer representatives over the course of the last few months.

The majority of “entry level” wines tasted would retail for between £20 and £30 per bottle in the UK and most of these are “Brut”, non-vintage styles. Most producers also then offered a Franciacorta Millesimato or a vintage dated “Saten” so as to offer a comparison in style with a retail price of up to around £50 per bottle. The wines tasted have been grouped by the winery that produced them and these wineries then listed in alphabetical order.

Ricci Curbastro



Twenty two and a half hectares of vines, just under a quarter of a million bottles per year and the endless enthusiasm for Franciacorta which owner Riccardo Ricci Curbastro holds defines this family winery's attempts to produce the highest quality wine possible. A real ambassador for the region (both within Italy and Europe) Riccardo is a man that believes in a sense of origin when it comes to his wines and petitions lawmakers and his fellow producers to continue the advancement of his region.

Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta Brut (NV)

A combination of 60% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Blanc and 10% Pinot Noir this non-vintage Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta was designed to offer the key flavoural cues from each of the grapes used to produce it, in an easy to drink style. The “base” fermentation was in stainless steel tanks, before 30 months of “sur lie” aging was undertaken ahead of disgorgement and release.

A relatively pale lemon colour, this non-vintage Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta offers aromas of white flower (derived from the Pinot Blanc grapes) alongside fruitier tones of apple and pineapple (supplied by the Chardonnay component). Quite toasty and offering a nice level of textural sophistication on the palate, this wine finishes (not quite as long as some) with hints of pebble and citrus zest. **86 points.**

Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta “Saten” (2008)

Produced for the first time in 1992 this 2008 iteration of Ricci Curbastro's “Saten” is 100% Chardonnay all of which was fermented in oak. 40 months of lees maturation in bottle followed the secondary (bubble-inducing) fermentation before this vintage Franciacorta was disgorged at 7g/l.

Richly coloured in the glass, this Ricci Curbastro “Saten” follows its eye catching appearance with a complex bouquet and luxuriously textured palate. Aromas of toast, cedar and lemon curd feed through to a palate which is exemplary in its length and silky sophistication. A lower bottling pressure lends elegance, with the initial application of oak and long period of “sur lie” maturation lending luxury. **91 points.**

The Results

The obvious headline from this column is the significant number of wines that were scored at greater than 90 points (thereby earning an “outstanding” classification from The Independent Wine Review). Out of the 37 wines reviewed, 11 of them attained a top score and whilst some might argue that the wines tasted were from a selection of the very finest producers in Franciacorta, quality across the board was very impressive. Yes there were top scores for historic and well established producers such as Ca' del Bosco and Bellavista, but there is clearly a wave of smaller, very quality conscious producers who simply want to make the finest wines possible. Shining examples are Il Mosnel, Biondelli and Cantina Villa and the wines from these producers are particularly attractive as they are both available in the UK and available at a price level which is lower than that demanded by more established names.

Whilst the style of the wines themselves tended to embrace a purer, more driven and more mineral style than some of the other traditional method sparkling wines available to the UK (think Champagne, or those examples made in America) there are some richer and toastier styles of Franciacorta produced that have clearly been vinified with one eye on the style of vintage Champagne (and thus may be more suitable for those amongst us that like that particular style of sparkling wine).

Whilst certain stylistic comparisons could be made with some English sparkling wines (i.e. the purity of fruit flavours and minerality that some English wines possess), generally it would be fair to say that English sparkling wine is still a few decades behind Franciacorta in stylistic development and still needs time to find its own inherent identity. (As the ongoing debate over the name that should be applied to English sparkling wine confirms!)

Perhaps the wines most emblematic of the region of Franciacorta were the silky and elegant “Satèn” bottlings and (with the notable exception of Cantina Villa’s Demi Sec) the rosé wines tasted were the least impressive.

Overall there are a couple of messages here:

- (1) If you enjoy sparkling wines and have never tried Franciacorta – you need to!
- (2) If you enjoy Franciacorta already you need to capitalise by drinking as many of these wines as possible now, because the popularity of this wine in the UK will surely increase (especially given the current promotional efforts) and prices will rise with demand.