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Italy, Franciacorta: Working Towards a Definition of Italian Metodo Classico Sparkling Wine

September 30, 2015



When I wrote my report last year covering the wines of Franciacorta, I detailed what Franciacorta is not: It cannot be compared to Champagne in France or Cava in Spain and it absolutely rejects any sloppy similarities to the popular Prosecco Superiore phenomenon that is sweeping the world. Franciacorta is Italian Metodo Classico sparkling wine and it is the only Italian region that aspires to embrace this specific segment of the world wine market. It is a niche product and that is precisely the identity it so enthusiastically aspires to.

My idea this year is to start working on a definition of what Franciacorta is. This is not an easy task given that the wide world of Italian sparkling wines represents a cross section of style, methods, grapes and diverse territories. My hope is to start a conversation that can be continued over the next few years as the region reaches a better sense of territorial identity. It appears to me that Franciacorta has spent too much effort trying to communicate what it is not. The focus, I believe, should be on what it is.

First, the region is celebrated for a wide spectrum of soil types. Jeremy Parzen is a wine writer and an industry media consultant. He is also a United States trade ambassador for the Franciacorta growers' association: "Franciacorta ranges from deep and shallow morainic to limestone and clay soils. Some 68 distinct soil types have been identified there," he tells me. These conditions give the wines the mineral-driven characteristics they are celebrated for. Most of the wines I tasted for this report exhibited sharp aromas of talc powder, flint and brimstone. "Some would call it 'salinity'," says Parzen: "Site generally trumps style in Franciacorta." The wines are edgy, sharp and focused with a very linear and clean approach. They rarely offer the yeasty heaviness that other classic method wines are known for.

These territory-specific characteristics allow for increased blending opportunities for vintners looking to create their house cuvée. Franciacorta enjoys an Alpine climate within close proximity of the Italian Alps and moderate temperatures associated with northern Italy's Lake District. This enclosed pocket of geography tends to see warm fall temperatures, a long growing season and steep diurnal shifts for optimal fruit ripening. That means that the sparkling wines of Franciacorta tend to be fruit-forward in style with clean layers of stone fruit, citrus, pear and honeydew melon. Again, the fresh fruit nuances are not overshadowed by the creamy yeasty notes that you get in other classic method sparkling wine that put so much emphasis on prolonged lees aging: "Riper fruit at harvest, lower dosage and lower residual sugar make for wines that are brilliantly fresh and more vinous in character, with more delicate fizziness and more creaminess thanks to fewer atmospheres," says Parzen.

Indeed the 50 wines tasted in this report reveal evident mineral notes with plump fruity freshness at the back. They are informal and approachable when consumed young, but they also have the capacity for long cellar aging. These are sophisticated sparkling wines with enormous potential. But production numbers are small (compared to the other great sparkling wine regions of the world) and price points are exaggeratedly high in many, if not most, cases. Franciacorta is slowly working towards creating its identity and I hope to continue to review its wines as a group (as opposed to mixed with other Italian sparklers such as Prosecco) to do my part in helping this fabulous region to carve out its own distinct identity.

Monica Larner

NV Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta Brut

A Proprietary Blend Dry White Sparkling wine from Italy, Franciacorta, Lombardy, Italy

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Drink: 2015 -
2019 \$28 (45)

The NV Franciacorta Brut is a tonic and refreshing sparkling wine with a brilliant, crystalline appearance. The bouquet offers white flowers, citrus, crushed stone and exotic fruit. This bottle was disgorged in March 2015. The blend of 60% Chardonnay, 30% Pinot Bianco and 10% Pinot Nero offers a lean, compact mouthfeel with tight, steely perlage on the finish. The fresh acidity gives the wine an extra dose of energy and vitality.

Importer(s):

Franco Wine Imports, 2177 N Batavia, #B, Orange, CA 92865, (714) 283-3731,
www.francowine.us

Domenico Valentino, 118 East 28th Street, suite 605, New York, NY 10016, (212) 679-0822,
www.domenicovalentino.com

Tavolo Vigneto LLC, 10701 Tesshire Drive, St. Louis MI, (314) 270-9230, www.tavolovigneto.com

Import INC Chicago, 1850 N. Leavitt Street, 60647 Chicago IL, (773) 227-9463, www.import-inc.com

D'Apuzzo Import Group, 8467 Firehorn Ct. 80503 Niwot CO, (303) 652-0100,
www.dapuzzogroup.com

2011 Ricci Curbastro Franciacorta Extra Brut

A Proprietary Blend Very Dry White Sparkling wine from Italy, Franciacorta, Lombardy, Italy

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Drink: 2015 -
2019 (52)

Ricci Curbastro's 2011 Franciacorta Extra Brut (made with Chardonnay and Pinot Nero in equal measure) offers a dusty bouquet with talc powder, crushed mineral, yellow fruit and dried herb. Those herbal notes of dried oregano or rosemary twig are more prominent in this expression. The mouthfeel is simple and streamlined and this vigorous sparkler offers tonic and crisp effervescence on the finish.