

# Franciacorta shines with Chardonnay

WHERE IS Franciacorta? You might well ask. Outside of Italy the region and its wines are virtually unknown. Although wine has been produced here since ancient times, the modern wine industry is young by Italian standards. Until the 1960s, the pleasant but undistinguished table wines of the region were consumed locally. Today, the region is synonymous with high quality sparkling wine. The development of the sparkling wine industry here is an interesting case study because it appears to have been one of those rare instances where the end product was chosen before the suitability of the grape material had been confirmed. For example, two major Italian wine companies, Bellavista and Ca' del Bosco, decided to invest in the region (for economic reasons) in order to expand their production of sparkling wine. The market demand for the resultant product was good and, fortuitously, the region turned out to be a good location for Chardonnay grapes for sparkling wine.

The vineyards of Franciacorta are found in rolling hills to the south of Lake Iseo in central Lombardy, 20 km west of Brescia and 60 km east of Milan. Lombardy is the largest and most populous region of Italy. In addition to Franciacorta, its wine-producing regions include Oltrepò Paese in the southwest, Valtellina in the north and Lugana and Riviera del Garda Bresciano in the east. The name of the region may be derived from *Francae curtes*, a reference to the small communities of Benedictine monks who settled in the region in 1100 AD—the com-



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munities (*curtes*) were allowed to be free (*francae*) of taxes.

Since 1995, use of the Franciacorta name has been permitted solely for *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG) sparkling wines made by the *methode champenoise*. It is the only DOCG in Italy restricted to sparkling wine. Significantly, mention of the production method on the label is forbidden. The intention is to achieve a comparable situation with the wine of Champagne, France, whereby the origin of the product completely identifies the nature of the product. Today, Franciacorta produces more than half of the *methode champenoise* wine of Italy, mainly from Chardonnay with lesser amounts of Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir.

The table wines of the region must be designated as DOC Terre di Franciacorta. The white wines are made from Chardonnay and/or Pinot Blanc whereas the reds are predominantly from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot with lesser amounts of Nebbiolo, Barbera and Sangiovese.

The DOCG zone is approximately 36 km west to east and





Above: A typical soil of the region. Left: Dr Francesco Iacono of Fratelli Muratori in a young Chardonnay vineyard with Lake Iseo in the background.

20 km north to south. Other than vineyards the main land use is cereal production. The climate is characterised by moderate summer temperatures (MJT<sup>1</sup> is probably around 22°C) with low diurnal variation. Winters are cold and CTL would be at least 20°C. Lake Iseo has a moderating effect on climate and the most favourable sites are said to be in the northern part of the region, close to the lake. Average annual rainfall is 1,000 to 1,100 mm with 60% or more during the growing season. Hail damage is the major limitation to production. The mineral-rich soils of glacial origin have a high stone content and have proved to be suitable for viticulture with good drainage and pH ranging from 6.3 to 7.7.

The vineyard area has expanded significantly since the early 1990s. There are now approximately 2,000 ha. The main variety Chardonnay (1,000 to 1,100 ha) is increasing at the rate of 100 ha annually. Sixty per cent of the production is classified as DOCG. There are 80 wineries and 80% of the vineyard area is owned by small to large wine companies. The major producers are Bellavista and Ca' del Bosco with 117 and 100 ha of vineyards respectively.

The vineyards of Fratelli Muratori are typical of those planted in the past decade. Row × vine spacing is 2 m × 1 m. The trellis is a VSP with a fruiting wire at 75–80 cm, a pair of moveable foliage wires at 110–115 cm and a single fixed foliage wire at 145–150 cm. Vines are trained as unilateral or

bilateral cordons and pruning is to six, 2-node spurs per vine (25% of the area is pre-pruned mechanically). Canopy management practices include shoot thinning, shoot trimming and leaf removal. The latter, usually mechanical, is often restricted to one side of the canopy. Irrigation is permitted but it is rarely used because rainfall is relatively high and soils have good water-holding capacity. The main rootstock is SO4. Mid-rows are sown to a mixture of grasses and legumes. These are mown several times per season. By law, all growers must spray twice each season to reduce the population of *Scaphoideus titanus*, the leafhopper vector of Flavescence Dorée. This disease, caused by a phytoplasma, is an increasing problem in Europe. A grapevine showing the symptoms of this disease usually dies within a few years<sup>2</sup>. Typical annual infection rates in Franciacorta are 1 to 2%.

For DOCG, the minimum planting density is 4,000 vines per ha and the maximum permitted yield is 10 t/ha. High yielding trellis systems such as *tendone* (a type of pergola) and Geneva Double Curtain are prohibited. Budburst of Chardonnay is typically on 21 March, flowering on 20 May and veraison in mid July. In normal years, harvest commences in mid August (at which time fruit is around 21°Brix). However, in 2003, an exceptionally hot year, harvest took place from 5 August. Only manual harvesting is used.

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<sup>1</sup> MJT = mean July temperature (northern hemisphere) or mean January temperature (southern hemisphere); CTL = continentality or mean annual range.

<sup>2</sup> For more information refer to Gily, M. (2003) Australian Viticulture. Nov/Dec: 60-63.