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ITALIAN SPUMANTE
LEADS THE WAY FOR GLOBAL
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STARS AND WINE



Olivia Wilde



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Italian Spumante leads the way for global sparkling wine production

BY ROGER SESTO

Italian Spumante has a long tradition, deeply-rooted in the Piedmont region since the mid-19th century. For the classic production method there are four main areas: Alta Langa, Franciacorta, Trentino and Oltrepò Pavese, each of which has its own organoleptic idiosyncrasies and individual market dynamics. They are all protected by specific denominations whose legal specifications strictly regulate production of each sparkling wine. Incidentally, in some areas where the Charmat technique is used to enhance the features of some vineyards, the classical method is not suitable. This is the case in the Veneto and Friuli Venezia-Giulia regions where some of the best Prosecco Spumante and remarkable Ribolle Gialle sparkling versions can be found.

In Italy there are a number of areas dedicated to spumante production, some of them with solid origins and a long tradition, others established more recently, some geographically vast, others located in exclusive settings where spumante versions of (usually still) wines from native grapes are produced; a case in point is Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, Gavi and Erbaluce di Caluso. Some regions are governed by specific regulations and univocally linked to sparkling wines whilst others are more generic denominations. Below is a review of the main regions, with their related pedoclimate features, the varieties used and examples of noteworthy producers.

ALTA LANGA

The Alta Langa Docg was researched for over ten years to define its boundaries and for the avowed aim of identifying and producing spumante using the classic method entirely from Piedmont. The origin's territory was defined and given its own identity, which otherwise would have been lost. Above and beyond the historical implications, the move was primarily dictated by commercial needs. Origin always adds significant value to wines, particularly in the case of the Langhe area with its centuries-old wine making traditions and other traditions strongly associated with the region such as the white truffles of Alba. The initiative was taken by the Consortium, known as 'Spumante Tradition' that gathered seven companies to form the group 'Case Storiche Piemontesi'. However, all wine growers involved in the experiment also actively participated. Production criteria stipulated hillside sites, use of Pinot noir and



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Chardonnay (at least 90%) and yields of 110 quintals per hectare. The entire wine making and ageing process was not to last less than 30 months. Alta Langa can be produced as a red, white or rosé wine. It is grown on parcels with a strong vine-growing vocation located in the hills of the provinces of Cuneo, Asti and Alessandria, on the right bank of the Tanaro river; 142 localities are named in the legal production specifications.

Alta Langa Doc is home to just a small yet growing number of producers. Among them, one in particular deserves a mention: Fontanafredda, one of the companies which from the outset showed greatest faith in the denomination's potential.

FRANCIACORTA

This area was already featured in the last issue of our magazine, so we will just add some historical background to complete the picture.

Nothing is known of the origins of the name Franciacorta, so there are only hypotheses to fall back on and perhaps reference to a number of legends. It is said, for example, that Charlemagne was in Rodengo Saiano on the feast day of San Dionigi, even though he had promised to return to France in time to celebrate the patron saint. As the Emperor's oath cannot be referred to (although in 774 he wasn't yet emperor), he called the area 'little France' and claimed that its name should remain so over the course of time. It is an unlikely, but interesting theory. Much more plausible (even if it isn't confirmed by written documents) is the theory linked to the Cluniac monks who settled there in the early Middle Ages and whose courts benefited from preferential treatment. The name could thus refer to one of these *curtes francae* (Courts of the Frankish Empire) that were relatively widespread in the Alpine foothills. Franciacorta has very ancient wine traditions as evidenced by quotes by Pliny, Columella and Gerolamo Conforti in 1570 in his *Libellus de vino mordac*, locating a 'biting' wine, hence sparkling, in the Franciacorta area. In spite of all the historical literature, the area's contemporary wine history is very recent. Essentially, the Franciacorta vineyard was transformed into the gem it is today over the last thirty years.

TRENTO DOC

The hills along the Adige river, between Rovereto and Trento, which to the traveller appear as an unbroken chain of perfectly kept, orderly vineyards are cultivated using the pergola system. The grapevines climb to elevations of 700-800 m above sea level, and in less exposed sites drop down almost to the valley floor. In this area, Chardonnay mostly, but also Pinot noir grapes, are grown to make Spumante Trento, a controlled designation of origin obtained in 1993; it was the first designation solely dedicated to a spumante wine. The spumante tradition in the Trentino region dates back to the early 19th century, when the area was still a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



VALLAGARINA, LANDSCAPE AND VINEYARDS NEAR ROVERETO

Giulio Ferrari, a local nobleman, who had studied agriculture first in San Michele all'Adige and then in Montpellier, was fascinated by a journey he made to Champagne. He noticed that the area's limestone soil was not dissimilar to the one in the Champagne region and also that the hills had similar slopes that allowed water to percolate easily. He therefore decided to push the area's potential for making spumante wine and in 1902 he began production using Chardonnay scions imported from France and otherwise completely unknown in Trentino. Nowadays, every single vineyard dedicated to sparkling wine production must be certified by legal specifications. The Autonomous Province of Trento, through its surveillance department, is expected to check the suitability of natural conditions, check new plantings from a technical and viticultural perspective and assess how well they fit in with the traditional system; if these requirements fail to be met, the vineyard is not listed in the official Register authorising production of Trento Doc wine. Trento Spumante can be produced as a white or rosé wine, the maximum yield is 150 quintals per hectare and it can only be produced using the classic method, with bottle fermentation for at least 15 months. However, very often producers prolong this period.

The region is home to a great private company, Ferrari by the Lunelli brothers, some big co-operative groups like Cesarini Sforza, Cavit and Rotari, along with a number of small private companies such as Maso Martis, Abate Nero, Revi Methius...

OLTREPÒ PAVESE

Until a short time ago, just one Doc covered about twenty different wines from this area. From them, spumante could be made using both the classic and Charmat method. A few years ago, a Docg was created to introduce just one production method, the Oltrepò Pavese Classic Method, predominantly using Pinot noir. Additionally, the



TRENTO SPUMANTE CAN BE PRODUCED AS A WHITE OR ROSÉ WINE, THE MAXIMUM YIELD IS 150 QUINTALS PER HECTARE

Cruasé brand was established to regulate classical method rosé wines produced in the area beyond the Po valley. This extensive region – with over 16,000 hectares under vine – encompasses very different types of terrain, from plains near the Po River to hills rising up and heading South towards the valleys running perpendicular to the river. Here, a large quantity of wine is produced: more than 70% of wine from Lombardy and almost 6% of the nation's wine. Each area is very different in terms of climate, soil composition and agricultural traditions. Spumante wines are more interesting in the western part of the region, where Cortese and Malvasia (Charmat method) and Pinot noir (classic method) are grown on poor, well-exposed soils. Historical documents dating back to 1872 prove that the Oltrepò area had a natural inclination for Spumante production: at that time Pinot noir beyond the river Po was used for sparkling wines, not only by locals but also by producers from Piedmont. Some of the most noteworthy companies of this area are Il Bosco di Zenevredo, a Lombardy estate belonging to Zonin specialising in spumante production; in addition to the classic method Brut Millesimato, a wine with a remarkable structure and longevity, it is worth mentioning Phileo, a more feminine but no less intriguing wine, produced using the Charmat method and 100% Pinot noir grapes. Also look out for: Anteo, La Versa, Travaglino, Tenuta Mazzolino, Bruno Verdi...

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PRODUCERS

TRENTINO - FERRARI: opening up new avenues for the smaller companies

From a wine perspective, no article could fail to feature the Giulio Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore, with its 110 years of experience; it is

recognised as the most prestigious Italian spumante. Much has already been said about the company, so we asked Camilla Lunelli if it is true that one of the assets of sparkling wine from Trentino is the quality of the local Chardonnay grapes. "Absolutely. It is the variety with the strongest identity, the most stable in terms of quality and the most flexible in terms of growing requirements. We no longer buy base grapes for spumante grown below 300 m above sea level. Our Maso Pianizza 'cru' by Giulio Ferrari comes from vineyards 700 m above sea level, but with Villa Margon we aim to further increase vineyard elevation to 1,000 metres. The strength of Trentino is also the fact that being in the valley gives us the opportunity to rise to greater heights!". What is your approach to sugar dosage? "Over the last few years, the market demanded rounder spumante wines, now we are moving towards more balanced products. We have definitely reduced the average dosage, above all in order to improve the quality of the base grapes. If you start with healthy, balanced grapes, rich in structure and acidity, they don't need to be corrected with excessive doses of sugar at the end of the wine making process. The essential advantages of the product are its drinkability and its capacity for expression. Using great fruit, we are able to use malolactic fermentation on the base grapes, making them more stable and harmonious, without losing their crisp vitality. Finally, by using good base grapes we can extend the ageing period on the lees, which is essential (and we will further extend this!). For example, our Riserva Lunelli, stays for as long as 7 years on the lees". So what is the company's relationship with TrentoDoc and small producers? "We believe in our territory, in the Doc Trento institution established in 1993 and in the Trento Doc brand that will focus more on sparkling wines. We believe there is a strong connection between the success of our business and that of our region, particularly for spumante production. In our opinion, small entrepreneurs are cultural and social resources, who perpetuate tradition in terms of their differences and are therefore an asset. Certainly, excessive fragmentation could interfere with a unique strategic vision and make collaborative actions difficult. Co-operative groups, in spite of their irreplaceable social function, are slow and less reactive than they should be because of their dynamics, which are often linked to political factors. As a large family business, we can benefit from the dynamism typical of the smaller structures, but also have the resources that small companies cannot access, giving us greater marketing and communication possibilities. For this reason, we consider ourselves to be an asset for this region, leading the way for smaller companies so that they can follow in our slipstream. We have been criticised for our famous advert in Venice. However, the lagoon city is known worldwide and it is a strategic showcase for promoting sparkling wines from Trentino. It is too early to promote the Valley itself, at least on a global scale. First of all, we should identify the concept of Italian sparkling wines, then Trentino sparkling wines and mountain sites. We all agree on the promotion of mountain sites, but world wide market penetration relies on universally-known symbols. Although our strategy paved the way for that, we were criticised". The day ends with Camilla in Villa Margon, where we were first invited to lunch in the beautiful restaurant and then to a visit of the magnificent

GILBERT & GAILLARD SELECTION - WINTER 2013

92
/100

TENUTE TOMASELLA
Bastie Bianco 2007



Brilliant gold. Expressive, intense nose suggestive of raisins, candied citrus and flower honey. Full, fresh palate enhanced by a touch of rancio. Wonderful sense of place. Drink with sophisticated gourmet foods.

LE BASTIE

92
/100

FERRARI F.LLI LUNELLI S.P.A.
Perlé Noir 2007



Straw-yellow with a fine mousse. Expressive, concentrated nose driven by dried flowers, cream and herbs. Lively, clearly-delineated and savoury palate. Focused, elegant finish. Ideal for calamari cooked on a hot plate.

89
/100

TOBLAR S.R.L.
Sauvignon 2012



Straw-yellow. Expressive nose with vegetal accents, redcurrants, white flowers and a menthol touch. Fresh, clearly-defined palate flowing into savoury spring-like notes. A harmonious style pairing well with finely-sliced vegetables.

89
/100

COLLAVINI - EUGENIO COLLAVINI VITICULTORI
Broy 2012



Brilliant gold. Intense nose intermixing notes of redcurrant, boxwood and a touch of white pepper. Full, fresh palate revealing more of the nose aromatics. Imposing finish with a pronounced vegetal character. Drink with tomato-based dishes.

FULL CONTACT DETAILS FOR THESE ESTATES
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medieval mansion. We then continue by asking whether the time is ripe to consider a wine with no dosage. "Why not? Who knows..." We insist by also telling her we are big fans of Giulio Ferrari in jeroboams. "Maybe, never say never... In any case we will wait for at least ten years until the Riserva del Fondatore has fully matured."

TRENTINO - CESARINI SFORZA: increasing emphasis on more natural methods

This particular company is entirely devoted to spumante production. The present-day structure of Casa di Trento dates back to 2001, when Cesarini Sforza joined forces with Lavis to create greater synergies. That year the decision was made to concentrate almost exclusively on the production of Trento Doc, giving greater importance to the classic method. Current production amounts to about 1.2 million bottles, of which 800,000 are obtained using the classic method from all parts of Trento Doc; the balance is made using the Charmat process. Cesarini Sforza winemaker, Giorgia Brugnara, reveals some of the secrets of sparkling wines from Trentino, with particular emphasis on her company's wines. "The strength of spumante wines from our area is the varied nature of its soil types, which no other spumante district in our region boasts. The variety comes from different soils, aspects and elevations. Val di Cembra, Valle dei Laghi, Volano, Faedo... each *terroir* is different. The main variety is undoubtedly Chardonnay, which is

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FROM L-R: MARCELLO, CAMILLA,
MATTEO AND ALESSANDRO LUNELLI



SASSOSCRITTO, THE RED WINE OF SEITERRE

predominant here, but Pinot Noir is also essential to Cesarini Sforza, even though it is more demanding and performs best at 500 m above sea level and over, using the Guyot method of vine training. Chardonnay is certainly more flexible and manageable, even if the hot summers over these last few years have been challenging. Hence, optimal altitude has been raised to a minimum threshold of 400 m above sea level. We try to obtain base wines that are balanced in terms of acidity, thereby lowering the need to use high amounts of sugar (maximum 8 g/l for Brut), which would reduce drinkability and blur sense of place. Moreover, we have almost eliminated the use of wood, depending on the kind of wine; it only plays a role in Trento Brut Aquila Reale Riserva. We also tend to use malolactic fermentation as our natural acidity allows us to do so. As far as our rosé wines are concerned, our focus on Pinot Noir means we produce them as single varietals. Finally, although our vineyards are already farmed in the most natural possible way, Cesarini Sforza is converting all its estates over to organic, starting with wines from Aquila Reale where everything is now organic!"

TRENTINO - SEI TERRE: many estates, all devoted to excellence

Seiterre groups together six small farms located in the most important Italian wine regions: Piedmont, Trentino, South Tyrol, Veneto and Tuscany. Every region is characterised by different climates, geography, soil types and vineyards. "Every estate is monitored by a group of trained winemakers and agronomists, whose shared aim is to preserve

the natural qualities of the vineyards and make the most of them", explains Silvia von Dellemann, the group's sales manager. "Every estate has its own particular merits and idiosyncrasies. Every wine is the ambassador of its place of birth and has its own typicity. Seiterre wines reflect a true sense of place". Asked to reveal more about Trento Doc, Silvia von Dellemann says: "Trento Doc is the direct expression of the land from which it originates, i.e. a small territory with a great range of climates rising from Lake Garda to the Dolomites. Its geo-climatic conditions produce the typical temperature range for Alpine environments that are needed to bring out quality and aroma. Chardonnay grapes ripen well in these particular conditions, thanks to the nature of the soil. They form the basis of Trento Doc spumante and after a second fermentation in the bottle, they express the flavour, freshness and unmistakable aromas that identify them as unique mountain spumantes.

Production rules are strict: precise growing techniques and careful grape selection, production restricted to Trentino, second fermentation in the bottle, extended lees contact and the required ageing periods. Additionally, the wines are matured for no fewer than 36 months on the second-fermentation yeast".

Digressing briefly from the main topic of conversation, we asked Silvia von Dellemann about the importance attached to the firm's Tuscan wines. "Our wines from Tuscany come from Maremma, in the province of Grosseto, where we have two estates: Poggio Le Capannelle in Civitella Paganico and Podere Sassoscritto in Roccastrada covering a total 140 hectares, partly planted to vineyards and partly to olive groves. The vineyards are located on hillside sites enjoying good ventilation and wide temperature ranges. The soil is sandy with moderate clay content and a skeletal texture, allowing good water penetration, perfect oxygenation and excellent penetration of the roots. All these features, together with sun and marine winds, create top-flight wines, with great structure and ageability".

VENETO - TOMASELLA: great sparkling wines from Treviso

Owner Paolo tells us: "Spumanti Tomasella stems from the constant search for balance, elegance and softness, which make this wine an enjoyable companion for special moments. The delicacy of the fruit, softened by floral and fruity scents, are harbingers of the pleasurable experience awaiting the palate, an experience augmented by fine beading. Our wines are geared to simplicity, but they are never trivial. They are considered to be good party wines or partners for a nice dinner party with friends; along with good company, they are one of the components conducive to creating atmosphere". Asked which kind of customers these sparkling wines are aimed at, Paolo says: "Prosecco Spumante targets consumers of all ages who enjoy a social life and who are not looking for anything cerebral in wine, just an

Italian Spumante leads the way for global sparkling wine production

opportunity to drink it at parties and share fun moments, without waiting for that 'special occasion'. The person who drinks it is a positive, sociable person, who loves being in other people's company, who likes sharing and therefore makes shareable choices. His/her average age is 25 and his/her passion for sharing leads him/her to choose a good quality-price ratio: wines at either end of the price spectrum would bring him/her to the centre of attention and increase the chances of not being to someone's liking. Pro consumers like to be appreciated and know that our pleasurable Prosecco Spumante helps them achieve that. Also, its structure and elegance can be used to extend enjoyment and be paired with sushi, fish dishes, even raw, but also with croutons and cured meat". Paolo Tomasella continues: "Osè, a rosé spumante demi-sec, has been a challenge for us. The creation of a new and unique cuvée was an important project for our company and proves how much we like to experiment and create new products. We used two native grapes - Verduzzo and Refosco - with natural withering on the vine for the Verduzzo grapes. We managed to offer a wine with impressive balance that can also be enjoyed by consumers who are not normally interested in medium-dry wines. We demonstrated that this very unusual product, which is excellent on its own, also complements all kinds of food: savoury, spicy, fruity, smoked and sweet. The perfect sparkling wine for a brunch!"

But does the company produce other spumante wines? "Of course! The Rigole Spumante Brut from Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay, which spends up to 6 months in autoclaves, or sealed pressurised tanks, with fine yeasts was our first step towards more complex and elegant spumante wines geared to a more demanding palate, in search of more delicate tastes. Also, in this case we were able to combine elegance with enjoyability, a wine designed for sharing, before or after a good meal or an important event. But that's not all: the range of our spumante wines will soon be extended to include a wine called Tomasella Cuvée 38 brut, produced using the classic method from Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and a little barrel-aged Friulano. After bottle fermentation, we leave it on its yeast for 38 months. Its liqueur d'expédition - made primarily of barrel-aged Friulano - is the final touch that will contribute to the personality of this great spumante". Incidentally, Osè was listed in the TOP 100 Vini d'Italia (TOP 100 Wines from Italy) by Paolo Massobrio and it was awarded 4 stars by the Guida Vinibuoni d'Italia (Guide of Good Wines from Italy) by Touring Editore. Again in the Guida Vinibuoni d'Italia, the Rogole Brut was awarded the 'Sparkling Star'. Finally, the German guide Selection awarded 88/100 points to Pro and Rigole Brut.

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA - COLLAVINI: a promoter of Ribolla Spumante

Between Collio and Colli Orientali in Friuli, Manlio Collavini reveals some of the secrets of his Ribolla Gialla spumante. "We begin with differentiated harvests in the vineyards; fermentation takes place partly in stainless steel tanks and partly in barrels. Ageing in autoclaves is



extremely lengthy for a Charmat wine, lasting up to 28 months. Then the wine is left to age in the bottle for another 8 months before being sold". How did you come up with the idea of making a spumante out of Ribolla wine? "It originated from a suggestion by Professor Gaetano Perusini, who firmly believed in the potential of this variety. We first tried the classic method, but I wasn't convinced so I chose the Charmat technique based on the advice of the great owner who told me: "If you are brave enough to use autoclave and respect the time frame of a great classic method, you will obtain a great spumante". And so it was. The result was a complex, elegant and long-lasting sparkling wine".

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA - PIERA MARTELLOZZO: exports are essential

The Piera Martellozzo company in San Quirino (Pordenone) relies a lot on sparkling wines, and places particular emphasis on producing spumante wines from Ribolla Gialla, a native grape par excellence from Friuli. Piera Martellozzo, its dynamic owner, tells us: "Our spumante wines aim in particular for freshness and sense of place. They are all produced using the Charmat method. Ribolla Spumante is our pride and joy, a mixture of tradition and innovation, which bowls you over after the first sip. It is outside the box, but it respects the nature of the vineyard". So who are the company's target consumers? "Our wines, sold in Italy and especially abroad, have a transversal appeal and enjoy praise from different kinds of consumers, both young and old. The spumante line 'Perle di Piera' (Piera's Pearls) is designed mainly for the on-trade and is our top of the range. It is refined but at the same time fresh and highly-coloured. For four bottles there are four colours, one for each vineyard: Perla Blu (Blue Pearl) for the well-known Prosecco,



**COLLAVINI WINEMAKER,
MANLIO COLLAVINI**

Perla Rosa (Pink Pearl) for Rosé, Perla Grigia (Grey Pearl) for Pinot Gris and Perla Gialla (Yellow Pearl) for Ribolla Gialla". Could you tell us more about the sparkling wine production process of Ribolla Gialla? "It has a complex but at the same time subtle bouquet, with floral scents of acacia, chestnut and slightly toasted oak, in addition to fruity suggestions of golden delicious apple. On the palate, there is fresh acidity, pleasant astringency and citrus-like notes that are well-balanced with this well-rounded wine. It is a dry sparkling wine, with nicely harnessed alcohol content giving it drinkability. It is excellent as an aperitif and it complements cold starters, such as cured San Daniele ham and fresh goats cheese. It is also perfect with vegetarian main courses and stewed freshwater fish. We also target foreign markets and 50% of our turnover comes from historical importer countries of Italian wine, such as Canada, the United States, Germany, Austria



PERLE 32 OF PIERA MARTELLOZZO

and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, our export efforts have paid off and our wines are enjoyed in countries that have just entered the world of wine, such as Mexico, Brazil, the Arab Emirate states, China, Thailand, Singapore and India. Our role is not just to be experts, but also ambassadors, pioneers of the wine culture inherited from our ancestors. Our land has provided us with great wealth and the chance to share it makes me proud of exporting a well-known, Made in Italy product, that is not just a concept but also a real taste experience".

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA - TOBLÂR: Charmat is perfect for Ribolla and Prosecco

This company from Nimis (Udine) is called "Toblâr" after the tables formerly used to dry grapes in the vineyards for the production of the famous dessert wines of this area. Paolo Duri, at the company's helm, tells us: "Our sparkling wines – products we are very fond of – range from Ribolla Spumante to Prosecco Doc and a rosé made from Refosco and Schioppettino grapes". Why do you rely on the Charmat method? "We don't want to compete with the classic method used in areas better established than ours, because it would be an unequal struggle. Besides, our grapes, especially Ribolla and Prosecco (we only produce a minimal quantity of rosé wine), when used as single varietals are not suitable for the traditional method because they would lose their traditional characteristics. They are however very suitable for the Charmat method that keeps their fragrance and aromas, an essential aspect of Prosecco". So who drinks the company's sparkling wines? "Apart from the rosé wines that are very popular abroad, Ribolla is very successful in Italy, where 80% is sold. Prosecco, despite a well-established domestic market, is mainly geared towards foreign markets: 50% of bottles are shipped to Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. Recently we also managed to enter the Canadian market. Ultimately, we expect to improve distribution of our wines in England and the United States, which are potentially interesting markets. We definitely have a firm belief in our capacity to expand our spumante line: we have managed to increase overall production of sparkling wine from 12,000 bottles in 2012 to 50,000 bottles in 2013. Prosecco can be marketed fairly quickly (it is ready for Christmas) because shorter Charmat production is ideal for enhancing its typicity. Conversely, the greater complexity of Ribolla requires a longer ageing period on yeasts and it can therefore be released from the April following the grape harvest, with two other releases during the summer". ■