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# The new Franciacorta - a battle against dosage

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Franciacorta may have been a runaway success in its domestic market since the 1970s until affected by Italy's current economic woes, but internationally it has fared less well. This is the undesired consequence of emulating champagne, from which it stylistically differs significantly. It is a fact the region is slowly coming to terms with, but it seems reluctant to change its course. I believe it is the main reason Franciacorta is struggling to find a loyal following in the international market. The general consensus on export markets is that Franciacorta

wines are good, but being priced at roughly the same level as champagne, most wine lovers would rather buy the real thing.

This is also why Franciacorta has attracted my attention only superficially since, more than anything, I am interested in originality, something this region, as a kind of default setting, has always tried to ignore. So when Jamie Wolff of New York wine merchant [Chambers Street Wines](#), winner of our [indies competition](#) last year, who has a real talent for sniffing out wines chock full of personality, asked me to join him for a couple of visits in Franciacorta while he was in Italy last July, I was wondering what could possibly have piqued his interest. (The picture above is of me and Jamie during our tasting at the Camossi estate.) He suggested we meet with consultant Giovanni Arcari, 'a somewhat polarising figure here', as Wolff described him. I saw this invitation as a chance to find out what is wrong with Franciacorta.

Together with oenologist Nico Danesi, Arcari founded TerraUomoCielo in 2002, a quirky young consultancy advising three small-scale Franciacorta producers, recently joined by Ferdinando Principiano from Serralunga d'Alba, who has begun producing a metodo classico from Barbera grapes. So good so far, as Italy has several of these young start-ups, but what makes TerraUomoCielo so different is the fact that their website doubles as Franciacorta's voice of dissent. What is thought by many, but rarely said, will find Arcari's ready ear and keyboard. Arcari is not exactly shy when writing about what he feels are key issues the region needs to address: its marketing, its addiction to sugar, and the lack of expression of terroir in many of its wines.

Arcari used to be a courtier and commercial wine rep and, although he originates from the region, he had never been involved with

Franciacorta commercially. That changed in 2000 when he met Nico Danesi. Fresh out of university with a degree in oenology, Danesi had just begun to work as a vineyard consultant at Feudo di San Gregorio in Campania, when one of his fellow students, Andrea Arici (pictured below), asked him for advice. Arici was about to take over the running of a small family vineyard in Gussago - the 'classic' zone of Franciacorta, if you like - which, until then, had served merely to supply additional income to the mixed agricultural activity by selling off grapes. Arici wanted to use that plot to make a still wine, but Arcari and Danesi convinced him to devote it to Franciacorta.



Arcari and Danesi offered to consult for Arici, but owing to a lack of capital on both sides (Arcari and Danesi didn't have the capital necessary to register as an official consultancy company), they developed what they call 'a project' with Arici. 'We entered the life of a *contadino*, a farmer, and we set off to understand his terroir and support him with technical advice', explained Arcari. Arici paid Arcari and Danesi only when he sold the wine, Arcari told me during a visit to his and Danesi's new, jewel-like estate, called Arcari + Danesi, perched high on the Monte Orfano hill and making, you've guessed it, their own, highly original version of Franciacorta.

There were no written contracts, just a handshake. What followed was a tiny production of 900 bottles of metodo classico, which was hardly going to deliver a high enough return to pay Arcari and Danesi, while the majority of Arici's grapes were still sold off to keep the estate afloat. But the urge to create something original was much stronger than mere financial gain.

That was in 2001. The vineyard with red wine grapes, from which Arici originally wanted to produce the still wine that was the reason he initially called in Danesi, was ripped out and replanted with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. In 2003 the production had already climbed to 3,000 bottles, while from 2007 the estate became financially self-sufficient as a wine producer. From the very beginning Arici has been the only producer in Franciacorta never to have used liqueur de dosage in any of his wines, labelling them all 'Dosaggio Zero'.

I asked Arici why he had made that extraordinarily radical choice at a time when the standard practice in Franciacorta was Brut, which sold like hot cakes in the domestic market, and when Zero Dosaggio had hardly been given a second thought. 'I wanted to understand my

hardly been given a second thought. I wanted to understand my terroir. Sugar would have only gotten in the way', came his succinct answer. In those days, it was standard practice for the handful of oenologists that were working in Franciacorta to automatically bring the liqueur de dosage with them and bill for it as well as for their advice, something which added more than its fair share to the standardisation of the Franciacorta style.

Arci's approach to take terroir, instead of a preconceived style (and a foreign one at that), as his main inspiration is radically different from that of most Franciacorta produced today and very much the vision of TerraUomoCielo. That is not to say that the idea is brand new, but it has never been advocated so strongly before. It is so unusual in the region that when Arcari and Danesi stopped using sugar in any form for the production of their own wines, they requested an inspection of their cellars by the anti-fraud department of the ministry of agriculture so that there would be no suspicion that they were buying sugar on the black market.

Arcari and Danesi consider sugar in the form of dosage as the main culprit in the lack of identity in many of the Franciacorta wines. Playing devil's advocate [as usual, Walter – JR], I asked Arcari if it is actually possible to make truly great sparkling wine in Franciacorta without resorting to using champagne as the inspiration. He answered with a resolute 'yes'. 'You can make great wines here if you stop harvesting grapes before they are physiologically perfectly ripe. Unripe fruit cannot express terroir and the sugar you use in the second fermentation and liqueur d'expédition makes for very uniform wines'.

But delaying harvest to obtain perfectly ripe grapes poses a risk and can potentially diminish the volume. 'It [delaying harvest as much as possible] is often avoided to keep yields as high as possible', Arcari told me. As an example he mentioned the very cold and rainy 2014 in

which several large producers harvested very early to save as much of the crop as possible. 'They harvested at only 8% potential alcohol [which is so low it is unheard of in Franciacorta] and subsequently requested government permission to chaptalise.' Unlike in parts of France, chaptalisation to achieve higher alcohol levels is not standard practice in Italy and is not allowed without prior official consent. In 2014 Arcari and Danesi and their producers delayed harvesting as long as possible to try and reach that all-defining physiological ripeness, resulting in a loss of 30% of their total production.

To use the C-word again, one of the crucial differences between champagne and Franciacorta is that the former has a marginal climate in which grapes do not always ripen fully, leaving producers no option other than chaptalisation to achieve a decent alcohol level. With very few exceptions, such as the freakish 2014 vintage, Franciacorta never encounters this natural limitation. It is exactly this fact that makes Franciacorta unique: it can make traditional method wines without any enrichment, and, later, without any liqueur de dosage to counterbalance excessive acidity. In fact, zero dosage should be Franciacorta's default setting and, in the majority of cases, would result in fresher, much more original wines.

Although it seems logical that producers aim at fully ripe grapes, I admit I was doubtful at first and wondered whether it would not lead to heavier, more alcoholic wines. All Franciacortas hover around 12.5% alcohol (more or less the same as champagne), at least in theory and on the label. I had the impression that an early, possibly too early, harvest aims at keeping the total alcohol down as well as retaining acidity. To get the bubbles in the wine, producers have traditionally had to add cane sugar to provoke the secondary fermentation, thereby also adding to the total alcohol. Arcari and his clients, on the other hand, have

begun to add grape must from the same vintage, instead of cane sugar, to trigger the secondary fermentation. According to him, adding grape must dilutes the base wine's original alcohol level and results in only a marginal increase in the total alcohol.

A direct consequence of refusing dosage in the form of sugar is SoloUva – Only Grape Sugar – another project that Arcari and Danesi have started, this time with Andrea Rudelli. They produce only one wine, Franciacorta Brut, of which the philosophy is staggeringly simple. The first fermentation is triggered by indigenous yeast without chaptalisation and from juice from fully ripe grapes. The secondary fermentation that creates the carbon dioxide is triggered by the addition of grape must from the same vineyard. The liqueur de dosage is, again, grape must. The back label proudly states '*vino prodotto senza utilizza di zuccheri esogeni*' – wine made without the addition of any exogenous sugar. This wine appears to be Arcari and Danesi's battle horse and seen as a tool to draw attention to a different way of producing Franciacorta.

An idiosyncrasy that is often overlooked is the fact that although the majority of Franciacorta wines are labelled non vintage, practically none are the result of blending wines from different vintages. Most producers simply cannot afford to keep reserve wines from several vintages to guarantee a continuous house style regardless of vintage differences, because it ties up too much money. The consequence is that practically every NV Franciacorta wine is actually a vintage wine, even if it is not declared as such on the label. 'If I want to put a vintage on the label, much stricter ageing requirements apply', Arcari told me. While NV must remain for a minimum of 18 months on the lees before being disgorged, a vintage wine must have at least 30 months. However, unlike the majority of champagnes (but like most TrentoDoc fizz), almost all Franciacorta has the date of disgorgement

on the back label. So with a little calculation, the vintage of an NV can easily be found out – generally two years before the year of disgorgement.

Because of this, practically all NV Franciacortas are an expression of a single vintage, something the region should embrace, especially in the light of the growing popularity of so-called grower champagnes. But Franciacorta producers also need to accept the relevance and impact of terroir on their wines. Embracing this could be a stepping stone to achieving wines whose identity comes from the site instead of from the vinification.

Another potential obstacle preventing more original wines is yield. This is legally set at a maximum of 10 tonnes/ha, or around 70 hl/ha. It is not excessively high but the volume of press wine taken from this yield often is, according to Arcari. Although 65% is allowed by law, Arcari feels that this regularly leads to bitterness in the wines. He and Danesi, as well as his clients, press 20% at the first pressing, which is destined for wines that undergo long ageing on the lees, while the second pressing is for NV wines.

Arcari has, unsuccessfully so far, lobbied the Consorzio to set the percentage of press wine at 10% lower. He suggests a system analogous to that of Côtes du Rhône-Villages, in which on a generic level, in this case Franciacorta, the percentage of press wine would remain as it is. The next level up would be the 17 villages making up the region, whose name could be mentioned on the label if the press wine is 10% lower than for generic-level wines. According to Arcari, this would be an effective tool, which on the one hand leaves it up to the individual producer what volume they want to press and, on the other, would greatly facilitate research by dividing this diverse region into more manageable units, which could facilitate the identification of

potentially superior vineyards.

Although the Consorzio has yet to accept this model, unsurprisingly, Arcari and Danesi have already set their course in this direction, together with their clients, the brothers Claudio and Dario Camossi. Arcari met Camossi (pictured below disgorging one of his bottles) in 2005 when he produced only 5,000 bottles a year. Their vineyard holdings are spread in three different parts of Franciacorta, a fact that triggered the investigation into what sort of quality each of the vineyards can achieve in order to decide what type of wines Camossi wanted to make. The single plots could become the basis for a single-vineyard wine. But although the emotive word *cru* was mentioned in our conversation, this is not Arcari's immediate aim. He believes identifying specific *crus* is something only future generations can establish.

It will be difficult to establish the idea of single-vineyard wines in Franciacorta. It runs counter to the interests of the large estates that produce and buy grapes from all over the region. A potential *cru* system could



drive prices up, while the potential gain could encourage grape growers to try and bottle their own wine.



For the moment Franciacorta's establishment prefers to resist some of the laws of fine wine (lower yields in the vineyard as well as the press, and research into and identification of the best terroirs), while continuing the superfluous practice of using dosage in the production of its wines, instead of harvesting fully ripe grapes. Yet in continuing thus, they risk seeing their marketing efforts fail in international markets because it is difficult to explain why Franciacorta should be considered a fine wine sold at elevated prices.

The new generation of Franciacorta producers such as Arcari and Danesi and their clients have well understood how to make wines that stand out in a crowd purely because of their own distinct characteristics. These are wines that don't need comparison with any other wine. In actual fact, you immediately forget about champagne as soon as you taste them. They are effortlessly different and unique on their own merits, as I explain below.

Andrea Arici, Dosaggio Zero NV Franciacorta

*90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Noir. Bottle sample of the 2013 vintage and not yet released. This was disgorged in front of my eyes. Will be released once it has had between 20 and 24 months on the lees. This is the first year in which*

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*grape must has been used instead of sugar for the liqueur de tirage.*

Lovely balance between savouriness and the beginning of lemon fruit. Great, complex length and lasting sparkle.

(WS)

Drink 2016-2022

Andrea Arici, Dosaggio Zero NV Franciacorta

16.5+

*90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Noir. Vintage 2010. 23 months on the lees. Disgorged on 19 April 2013.*

Straw yellow with a slow bead. Savoury and a little herbal and just a tiny bit reductive. Slow to open up with mere hints of lees and lemon. Vibrant palate with brisk, almost razor-sharp acidity. Long and focused palate with a fine biscuit note and a lipsmacking finish. Needs and deserves needs more time in the bottle. (WS) 13%

Drink 2015-2022

Andrea Arici, Dosaggio Zero 2009 Franciacorta

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*80% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Noir, disgorged on November 2014 after 44 months on the lees.*

Intense, green apple and lemon nose with hints of garden herbs and lees/breadcrumb. Very fine mousse with just the merest hint of wax indicating some development. Lively, fresh, lemon-fruit palate with a delicious bitter note.

Elegant, intense and long. Highly original and can age.

(WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2022

Andrea Arici, Bianco de Nero Dosaggio Zero 2010 Franciacorta

17+

*100% Pinot Noir. 44 months on the lees. Disgorged on 28*



JP

a brooding layer of white fruit underneath. Not a lot of autolysis, and still very young. Fuller than the Zero Dosaggio Rosé and with finer perlage. Delicious, fresh, lemony finish. Long. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2022

### Andrea Arici, Francesco Arici Riserva 2008 Franciacorta

*100% Chardonnay. 66 months (!) on the lees, disgorged in November 2014 (NB a riserva must have 60 months on the lees). Before tasting this wine, I muttered that I find the 60 months trivial if there is little knowledge in Franciacorta in general about whether the terroir has real potential and whether prolonged lees ageing renders a superior wine. Arianna Vanelli, who has recently joined Arcari and Danesi after 10 years working for the Consorzio, tells me that the rule was designed to create a more serious level of wine, but in many cases it is the same wine, just aged longer. In this case, however, Arici used only the first, very gentle pressing. Intense straw yellow. Very slow bead. A nose that shows some waxy age notes, but becomes more complex with aeration showing hints of brioche and savoury fruit. Subtle, savoury lemon-fruit palate with minerally notes. Very fine mousse that doesn't persist entirely, but the finish shows crystal-clear lemon fruit. (WS)*

Drink 2015-2020

### Andrea Arici, Rosé Dosaggio Zero NV Franciacorta

*100% Pinot Noir, 24 months on the lees, disgorged 25 June 2014. Vintage 2010 and the current one on the market!*

16.5

16.5

Palest of salmon pinks. Attractive breadcrumb and lees nose with subdued hints of strawberry. Very fine bubbles on the palate and with a fresh, lemony finish displaying hints of red fruits. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2020

### Camossi, Brut Satèn NV Franciacorta

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*Vintage 2010. Date of disgorgement 30 December 2014. 4 g/l RS. 100% Chardonnay, 10% fermented in old barrique, in which it also went through malolactic fermentation.*

Straw yellow. More intense, more focused and more minerally than the NV Brut. Lovely freshness, lemon fruit, mandarin and notes of breadcrumbs. Assertive, yet fine bead. Energetic, lemony finish. Truly animating. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2020

### Camossi, Brut NV Franciacorta

16.5

*Vintage 2011. 7-7.5 g/l acidity, 4 g/l RS. Disgorged 28 May 2014. Until 2014 the liqueur de tirage was cane sugar, but since 2014 both liqueur de tirage and liqueur d'expédition will be grape must.*

Straw yellow. Concentrated, ripe-apple nose with hints of tropical fruit and hay. Shows real depth. Fresh, lively citric fruit. Really satisfying and energetic. Wonderful, zippy and clean finish. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2020

### Camossi, Extra Brut NV Franciacorta

16

*This wine is disgorged a year before it is released on the market: 'We work really reductively from the beginning of*

*the harvest and it needs its time in the bottle.' This has only 40 g/l SO<sub>2</sub>. 50% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir. Only stainless steel.*

Straw yellow. Concentrated breadcrumb, lemon and satsuma nose. Wonderful, energetic, vivid acidity that is almost a little tart yet adding fantastic linearity to the wine. Super-clean lemon-juice finish. This can age. (WS) 12.5%  
Drink 2015-2022

### Camossi, Brut Satèn 2014 Franciacorta

*Bottle sample that will be released on the market in two years. This is vintage 2014. The liqueur de tirage was grape must, which had 12.3% potential alcohol. It was disgorged before my eyes.*

Straw yellow. Brioche nose and a little medicinal with hints of crushed sea shells (reductive) and hints of yellow fruit. Wonderfully rich yellow fruit palate shot through with lemony acidity. Very long and complex finish with hints of wax. (WS)

Drink 2017-2026

17

### Camossi, Brut Satèn 2010 Franciacorta

*100% Chardonnay. Disgorged more than 18 months before it was released on the market.*

Intense yellow. Beautiful, intense, ripe lemon, apricot and minerals on the nose. Ripe palate lined with lively acidity that melts into the finish. Fine, lasting bubbles.

Wonderfully fresh and elegant. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2022

17

### Camossi, Extra Brut 2008 Franciacorta

*100% Chardonnay. Current vintage! Disgorged 8 August*

17+

2013.

Intense, straw yellow. Leesy garden herbs, mandarin and mineral nose. Becomes richer on the nose with aeration. Lemon, mandarin, and grapefruit palate, and with an Almafì lemon squeeze on the finish. Fine, lasting CO<sub>2</sub>.

(WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2024

Camossi, Pietro Camossi Riserva 2008 Franciacorta

*100% Pinot Nero. 60 months on the lees. Disgorged October 2014. Blanc de Noir.*

Lovely, lively white and yellow fruit nose with hints of strawberry and stones. Energetic acidity that is truly linear. Focused, fruit-driven finish. A palate cleanser of real breed.

(WS) 12.5%

Drink 2015-2024

17++

Camossi, Rosé Extra Brut NV Franciacorta

*Vintage 2010, disgorged 28 October 2014. 100% Pinot Noir. Only two hours' skin contact in the press.*

Palest of salmon pinks. Enticing fruit nose with hints of brioche. Soft, shy red-fruit palate. Strikes a perfect balance between brisk acidity and subdued, lingering fruit. (WS)

12.5%

Drink 2015-2022

17

SoloUva, Brut NV Franciacorta

*Grapes from 6 ha of rented vineyards. Vintage 2011. 100% Chardonnay. Liqueur de tirage was grape must and the dosage, also using must, was 3 g/l ('tiraggio con mosto, sbocatura con mosto').*

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A touch of iodine on the nose, then green fruit, lemon and bread rind. Generous, yet taut and with notes of brioche. Lively lemony fruit with real depth yet elegant. Fine and lasting CO<sub>2</sub>. (WS)

Drink 2015-2020

### Arcari + Danesi, Zéro Dosage NV Franciacorta

*100% Chardonnay from an old vineyard in Gussago, which they had hired. Since then destroyed by Flavescence Dorée and extirpated. Stainless-steel fermentation, followed by 40 months on the lees and aged for an additional year in bottle after disgorgement. Vintage 2010. Why didn't you label it as a vintage? 'At that time we didn't want to give our base wine a millesato, but since 2011 we only have vintage wine. Only 4 bar pressure because I wanted to use as little sugar as possible. Until 2011 we used sugar.' Disgorged July 2014.*

Straw yellow. Beautiful nose of breadcrumbs, apple, lemon and white fruit. Really taut on the nose. Silky CO<sub>2</sub> structuring lemon fruit. Wonderful linear acidity that doesn't stand out on the finish. Delicious. Long. (WS)

12.5%

Drink 2015-2022

### Arcari + Danesi, Extra Brut 2011 Franciacorta

*'We have added one gram of must after the disgorgement. The must is filtered hence the wine is stable. It has added one gram of residual sugar, so you can legally call it Zero Dosaggio, but we didn't want to do that because we actually did add something.' Does that one gram really make such a difference? 'Yes, we tasted different dosages: zero, one, two, three etc, but we liked the one gram best.'*

A shade deeper than the Zéro Dosage. More minerally and

17

17

almost a little iodine on the nose. Exciting and complex.

Brioche and then perfumed white fruit with a hint of green walnut. Super-precise lemon and green peach with mouthwatering acidity. This will certainly benefit from further ageing. Very long and precise like a Swiss watch, with super-fine mousse. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2016-2022

### Arcari + Danesi, Brut Satèn 2010 Franciacorta

*31 months on the lees, and disgorged November 2013. 100% Chardonnay.*

Fuller than the above, complex but holding back. Perfumed green walnut. Intense yet lithe quince and almost steely lemon. Real energy and linearity with a hint of brioche on the finish. (WS) 12.5%

Drink 2014-2022

17.5

### Arcari + Danesi, Brut Satèn 2009 Franciacorta

*34 months on the lees. Powerful but elegant nose of wax and earth and almost a little saline. Green fruit hiding underneath. A little fuller and creamier on the palate. Waxy with ripe apple and lemon fruit. Intense and aromatic and with a hint of fruit sweetness on the finish. Amazing length and depth, yet precise. (WS) 12.5%*

Drink 2013-2020

17

### Arcari + Danesi, Brut Satèn 2008 Franciacorta

*100% Chardonnay. 34 months on the lees. Disgorged 22 November 2012.*

Quite deep straw. The most developed, in comparison with 2009 and 2010. Autolysis character but more mineral than leesy. Almost a little savoury. Ripe Amalfi lemon and super-

17.5

fine CO<sub>2</sub> on the palate. A little mouth-watering, clean and super-long and showing some age, which adds to its complex finish. Truly refreshing, pick-me-up wine. Still lots of potential. (WS)

Drink 2014-2022

Arcari + Danesi, Tzero Riserva 2006 Franciacorta

*60 months on the lees, and 30 months in bottle after disgorgement. First wine ever made. 1,000 bottles produced. 100% Chardonnay.*

Beautiful complex nose with the beginning of waxy notes, but still with plenty of energy. Oatmeal and green walnut and green apple and minerally too. Very fine CO<sub>2</sub> on the palate and minerally fruit with an iodine, salty note. Long, complex and multi-layered and really taut and bone dry. Serious stuff. (WS)

Drink 2015-2024

17.5



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