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What's wrong with Franciacorta?

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This is one of two articles investigating where Franciacorta as an Italian traditional-method sparkling wine region stands today. See also [The new Franciacorta – a battle against dosage](#), with accompanying tasting notes.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery but in the case of Franciacorta, Italy's answer to Champagne, it has had a detrimental effect. This expensive Italian metodo classico wine has modelled itself closely on the French example, not only borrowing its grape varieties, with the occasional addition of Pinot Bianco, but also pretty much all

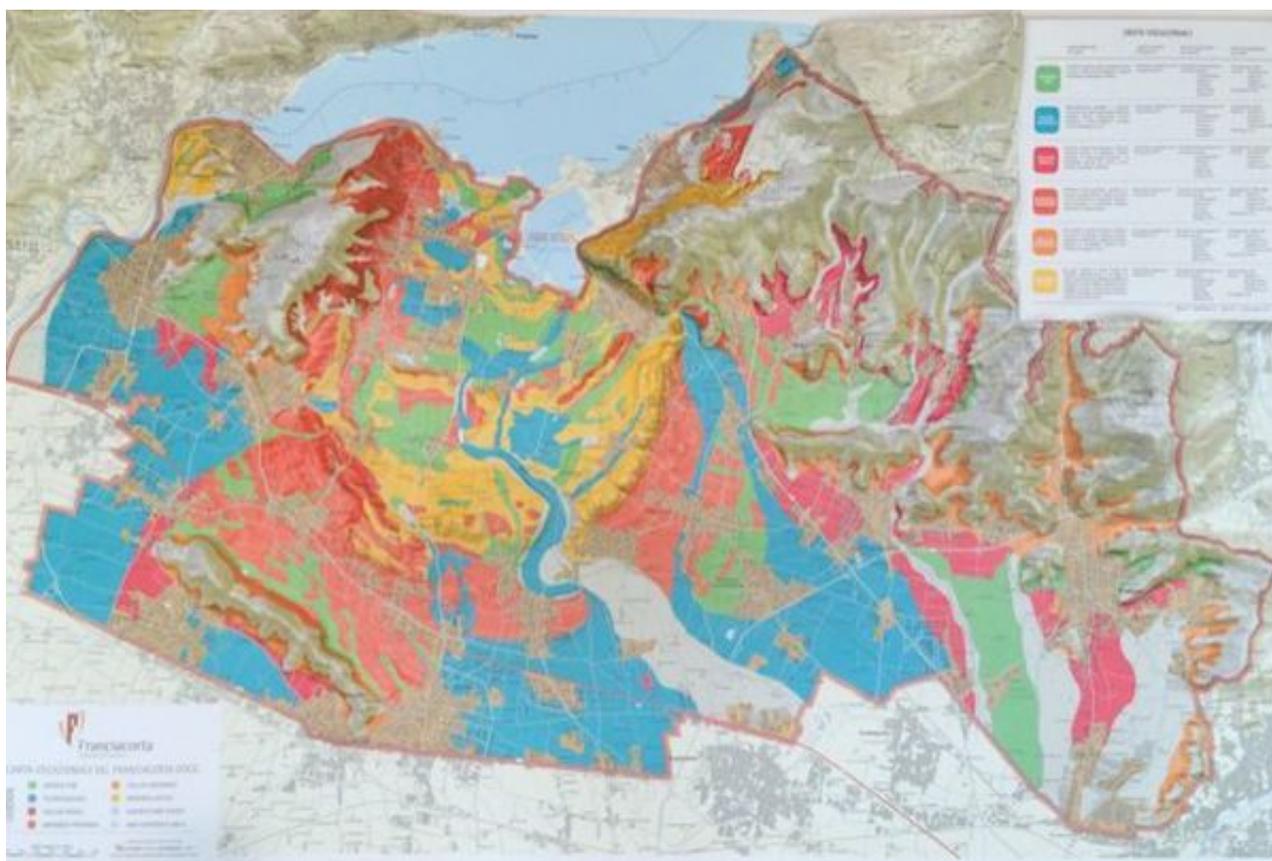
of the nomenclature. Because of this it struggles to sell its wines on their own merits - as unique vehicles expressing its complex, diverse terroirs.

In the last couple of years the marketing programme of the Consorzio of Franciacorta, the association of producers, has modelled its marketing almost exclusively on fashion and lifestyle, which suggests it is unable to describe the wine in a truly unique and compelling way. In the absence of a proper marketing strategy that embraces rather than ignores Franciacorta's own distinct characteristics, it has resorted to selective protectionism. With very few exceptions, only Franciacorta producers who have already found importers in foreign markets are allowed to take part in the Consorzio's international marketing programme. The cost of this programme, however, is borne by all producers through a mandatory levy that is taken from anyone wanting to label their wine Franciacorta. For producers who are not members of the Consorzio, this can add up to a whopping €1,800 per hectare, a burdensome charge from which they do not benefit.

The Consorzio justifies its ways by arguing that large brands already on the international market (of which there is only a handful, but voting rights within the Consorzio are based on number of bottles produced) have the volume needed to increase the exposure of Franciacorta, which will benefit all producers eventually. The truth is that this policy blocks the way for others, while conveniently reducing the numbers of potential competitors for the ones that already have a foot in the international door. This makes Franciacorta's international market share difficult to grow significantly.

In my view the approach the Consorzio should adopt is the most logical: to take its own unique characteristics, based on terroir, as its main lead. Luckily, a detailed geological map of the region, based on

in-depth research by none other than Attilio Scienza, professor of viticulture at the University of Milan, already exists. But although the map was commissioned by the Consorzio itself, it has never been used as a starting point for much-needed research, such as setting up experimental vineyards throughout the region, planting these with various clones and rootstocks, micro-vinifying the results and making the results available to its members.



The map itself may hint at why the Consorzio has little thirst for acquiring the knowledge that would enable a really thorough understanding of local terroirs. One glance reveals a hugely diverse area that is much less neat and uniform than Champagne. Franciacorta comprises around 2,800 ha (6,920 acres) of vineyards spread over very diverse terrain consisting of hillsides with manifold soil compositions, expositions and elevations up to 400 m as well as fertile plains. Climatic differences are striking too. While Champagne's climate is

estates, which later were turned into a monoculture of vines to become some of the biggest names in Franciacorta, were historically located here.

Berlucchi, one of the biggest players here today, gave the wine its name when in 1961 it labelled a sparkling wine 'Pinot Franciacorta' (changing the name in 1977 to Cuvée Imperiale). But Berlucchi was not the region's locomotive because its main activity used to be buying up base wines and turning them into sparkling wines in their cellars in Trentino and Oltrepò Pavese, two other regions with a tradition of producing sparkling wines (see [TrentoDoc - a marathon](#), for instance). The locomotive role was reserved for Ca' del Bosco and Bellavista, and their subsequent phenomenal success in producing and marketing their version of Franciacorta.

Pinot Franciacorta, one of many wines Berlucchi used to produce, was born by mere chance when Berlucchi's oenologist, Franco Ziliani (now co-owner of the Berlucchi brand and not to be confused with the Italian wine journalist of the same name) made a classic-method sparkling wine with Pinot Bianco grapes grown on the Berlucchi estate in Borgonato in the Franciacorta region in an effort to imitate champagne. The result was labelled Pinot Franciacorta and became an instant success.

Only as recently as 2005 did Berlucchi decide to concentrate on Franciacorta alone, building a state-of-the-art cellar and allegedly acquiring and leasing no fewer than 500 ha of vineyards. It is whispered in the region that this dramatic growth is one of the causes of a lowering in price for what was once Italy's most expensive sparkling wine. Unlike in the Champagne region, Franciacorta grape prices are not fixed. Fluctuating grape prices, with a distinct downward tendency currently, are the result of a general lack of

loyalty on the part of wine producers who have historically encouraged growers to plant as much as they can - a tendency which can easily lead to overproduction.

The downward pressure on grape prices is further aggravated by the many new estates that have emerged recently as a result of the ambition and large investments from industrialists, often from Brescia and nearby Milan. These new estates are set up to produce hundreds of thousands of bottles, but their owners often struggle to sell their unknown label at elevated prices, even if it carries the precious Franciacorta name. They learn the hard way that, in the end, it is not the Franciacorta denomination that sells, but the producer brand. To empty their cellars, they have no choice but to discount their produce.

The region is fully aware of its





problems, especially certainly since economic recession took hold of Italy, its most important market until now, but has been slow to decide in which direction it should go. Yet there are indications that new and exciting developments, driven by a small group of young Franciacorta producers, led by consultants [Giovanni Arcari](#) (pictured above) and Nico Danesi, themselves owners of a tiny Franciacorta estate, are taking place. They are still far from numerous, and may look like a little like David against Goliath, but their idea of focusing on terroir rather than simply on a style of wine is gaining momentum. While for the moment the Franciacorta establishment merely observes their efforts, there are signs that some are quite interested in at least some of their ideas, if only to maintain their position in a changing and potentially lucrative international market for Italian sparkling wine.



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