

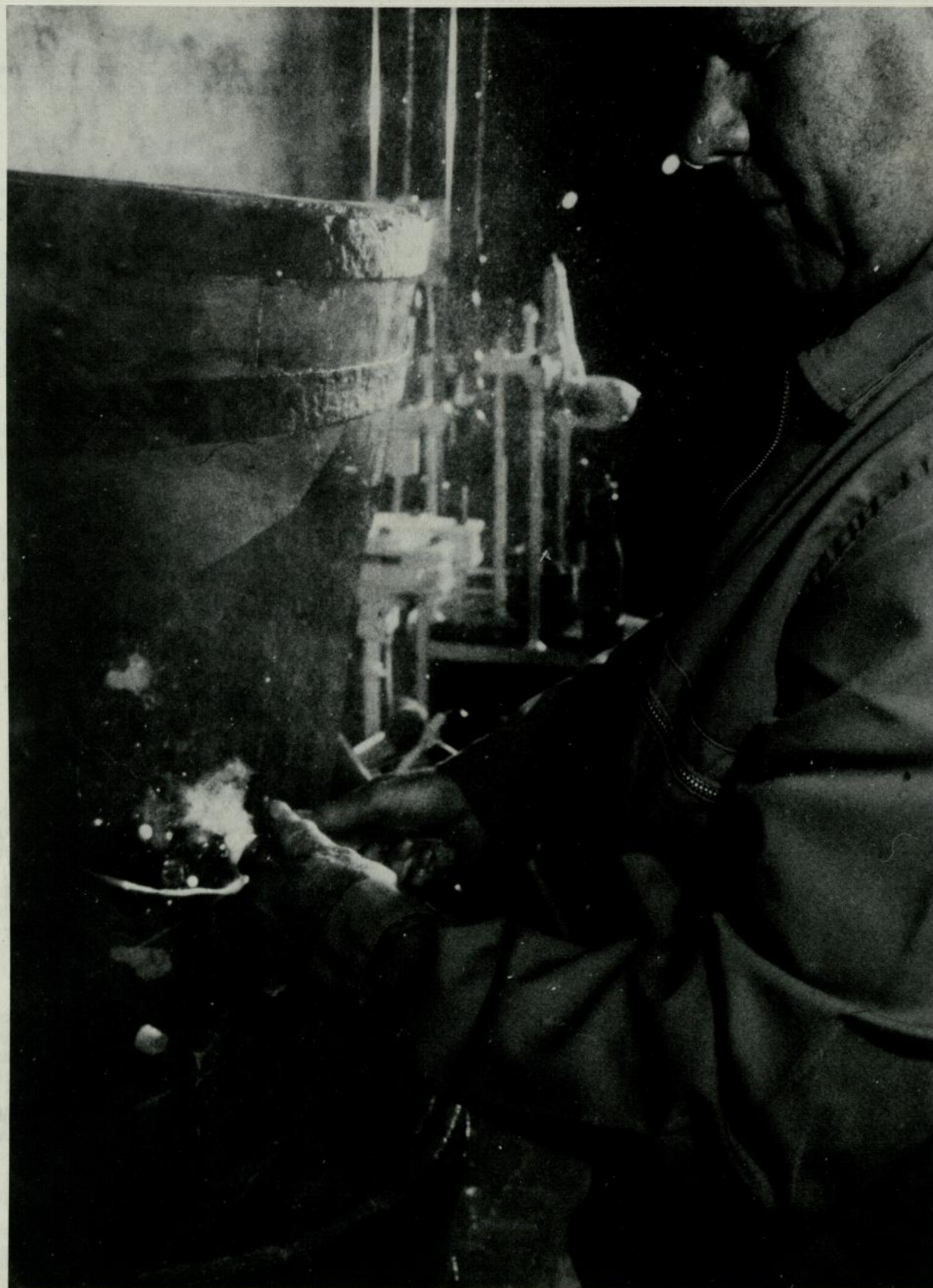
Vintage

the voice of the wine consumer

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Degorgement à la volée, as demonstrated by chef du cave M. Dubois of Ca' del Bosco.

Italian Rivals of Champagne

by Sheldon and Pauline Wasserman

Not all that sparkles is Champagne. Some of it is *spumante* (Italian for "foaming" or "sparkling"). And some of the Italian spumante is very fine wine indeed. In our opinion, the finest sparkling wine produced outside of the Champagne region is made in Italy.

Spumante is produced in a variety of styles — from quite sweet to bone dry (It's not all Asti, contrary to popular belief.), and by a number of methods. The Charmat method is the most widely used — the bulk of Italian spumante is made by this method — but the finest spumante is produced *méthode champenoise*.

Some of the natural (no *dosage*) and brut spumante of Italy, in fact, rivals the true champagne of France.

The *Instituto Spumante Italiano Metodo Champenois*, whose aim is to promote and protect the quality of *metodo champenois* spumante, was formed in 1975 by six Italian producers:

Gran Spumante Ferrari¹
Equipe 5 Trentina Spumanti
Giuseppe Contratto¹
Carpene Malvolti²
Cantina Sociale di Santa Maria della Versa
Fattorie dei Marchesi Ludovico e Piero Antinori²

These original six were later joined by four others:

Calissano²
Cinzano¹
Fontanafredda²
Gancia²

The wines of the Instituto members must meet certain standards and their production follow prescribed guidelines. Only Chardonnay and the Pinot varieties — Pinot Bianco (Blanc), Origio (Gris), and Nero (Noir) — may be used. The grapes must be from vineyards in the four recognized zones: Trentino-Alto Adige, Serralunga d'Alba in Piemonte, the Franciacorta and Oltrepò Pavese regions of Lombardia.

These wines undergo the second fermentation in bottle,

and spend a minimum of two years *en tirage*, on the yeast. The wine is clarified in the bottle it was fermented in — the transfer system is not allowed. The wine must be at least three-years-old when it is sold.

Members whose wines meet these qualifications are allowed to display on their bottles the Instituto seal, depicting a pupitre holding ten bottles on a green background. (Some members, notably Ferrari, don't use the seal although their wines qualify.)

The firm of Ferrari, located in Trento, produces champagne method sparkling wines exclusively. It buys most of the grapes it requires: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, from hillside vineyards above the Adige River. Chardonnay is used for perfume, delicacy and elegance; Pinot Noir gives the wine body. Sometimes a small amount of Pinot Meunier is also used, as in Champagne.

The grapes are harvested early to capture the youthful acidity necessary in a fine spumante, and to avoid the full, fruity character of ripe grapes. This tart acidity gives the wine a lively freshness, delicacy and the fine balance looked for in a sparkling wine.

The Ferrari wines are kept at least two-and-a-half years *en tirage* before being disgorged.

Ferrari's production, recently increased to almost double, is about one million bottles annually. There are six different Ferrari wines — all spumante, all *metodo champenois*: brut, nature (bone dry), rosé, sec, brut de brut and riserva.

Contratto, in Canelli, Piemonte, is one of the few firms remaining that still use *degorgement à la volée* ("on the fly") in the traditional manner. Nearly all firms now use machines to freeze the bottleneck and disgorge the wine automatically. In the Contratto cellars, the *degorgeur* performs the job by hand.

He removes the crown cap, flips the bottle into an upright position, and allows just the first spurt of wine, containing the sediment, to gush out of the bottle before covering it with his thumb — in one swift, smooth operation. It is quite a sight to see.

Contratto purchases all of its grapes. Contratto *metodo*

¹ = available in the U.S.A.

² = was available in the U.S. at one time, may not be at present



Maurizio Zanella stands by salmanazar size bottles in the riddling racks at Ca' del Bosco. The firm is unique in that its wines undergo the secondary fermentation in the same large-sized bottles in which they're sold. Most wineries use nothing larger than magnum size for the secondary fermentation.

champenois spumante is given two-to-three years *en tirage*. A number of spumante wines are made; of the two produced by the champagne method, only the brut is imported into the States.

Besides the ten members of the Instituto, there are a number of other producers of *metodo champenois* spumante. The largest is Berlucchi, with an annual production of two million bottles.

Ca' del Bosco, a fairly new winery — produced its first spumante in 1975 — and, in our opinion, is among Italy's top producers of *metodo champenois* spumante. And if it continues to improve at its current rate, within another year it should be the best. At present Bosco wines are about equal with those of Ferrari.

It grows all of its own grapes on its estate in Franciacorta — for the spumante: Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco and Pinot Nero. Its annual production for the sparkling wines, all *metodo champenois*, is about 125,000 bottles. Bosco expects to increase that to 200,000, maximum.

André Dubois, the *chef de cave*, worked for twenty-five years in the cellars of Moët et Chandon before joining Ca' del Bosco.

To our knowledge, it is the only firm anywhere producing sparkling wine in out-sized bottles — methuselah, jero-boam, salmanazar — where the wines all undergo the se-

cond fermentation in the same bottle they are sold in, from half-bottle right up to the case-in-a-bottle Salmanazar. All other houses so far as we know use only bottles and magnums — *perhaps* half-bottles — for the second fermentation and remuage, decanting the wine into the larger, or smaller, sizes which are used. When we visited the cellars of Ca' del Bosco we saw some of these huge bottles *en tirage* — an impressive sight.

Italian metodo champenois spumante can be an excellent wine. And, not being “le vrai champagne”, often offers very fine value as well.

We recently tasted a range of these wines. Here are the results of our degustation.

Tasting Notes

Very Good

1975 Ferrari Brut de Brut Fast-rising, pin-point bead, long-lasting; the bouquet comes close to Champagne, yeasty notes; light-bodied, dry, crisp, lively acidity, creamy texture; has length, elegance, and style. (100% Chardonnay from their own vineyards; no *dosage*. Very limited availability)

1975 Ferrari Brut (en magnum) Lively *mousse*; lovely bouquet, yeasty, has richness and intensity, champagne-like; crisp and dry, nice feel on palate, lively acidity, refreshing; a long, lingering finish. (90% Chardonnay, 10% Pinot Nero from hillside vineyards near Trentino)

1977 Ferrari Brut (\$16.50) Pin-point bead, fast-rising & persistent; delicately scented bouquet, complex, with yeasty overtones; lively acidity, delicate structure, elegant, almost creamy in texture; a long, lingering finish — very good, but over-priced none the less.

1978 Ca' del Bosco Dosage Zero (Franciacorta Pinot) Lively, persistent *mousse*, pinpoint bead; a delicate scent, fruity with yeasty notes, clean and fresh; light-bodied, dry, refreshing acidity; good flavor; moderately long finish that leaves a clean, refreshing taste in the mouth — has style and elegance (no *dosage*; 40% Pinot Bianco, 20% Pinot Nero, 40% Chardonnay. Ca' del Bosco should be available shortly in the U.S. in a few major markets, on a very limited basis.)

NV Ca' del Bosco Brut (Franciacorta Pinot) Fast-rising, steady stream of very small bubbles, long-lasting; elegant bouquet of fruit and subtle yeasty notes; medium-bodied, dry and flavorful; moderately long, refreshing finish.

(1976) Soldati La Scolca Pas Dosé Fast-rising pinpoint *mousse*, long-lasting; lovely bouquet, delicate with some elegance; well-structured, flavorful, lively acidity; long on the palate — stylish. (very limited availability)

Good

1977 Ca' del Bosco Dosage Zero (Franciacorta Pinot) Steady stream of tiny bubbles; fruity aroma; light-bodied, crisp, lively acidity; a clean, refreshing finish.

1978 Ca' del Bosco Brut (Franciacorta Pinot) Good *mousse*, tiny bubbles, fast-rising and long-lasting; fresh, clean, fruity aroma; clean, fresh and lively in the mouth with some delicacy, smooth in texture; moderately long finish — very good; perhaps our rating is a bit severe. (*dosage* 1%; same *cuvée* as the Dosage Zero above)

1977 Ca' del Bosco Brut (Franciacorta Pinot) Moderate *mousse*, tiny bead; clean, fruity aroma; dryish, nice acidity, flavorful; a bit short.

1977 Ca' del Bosco Rosé Pale pink; moderately strong *mousse*, tiny bubbles; lots of fruit on the nose, and palate, well-made — good. (50% Pinot Nero, 50% Pinot Blanc; *dosage*, 1%)

1978 Ca' del Bosco Cremant (Franciacorta Pinot) Fast-rising, moderate *mousse*, pin-point bead; delicately scented bouquet; soft & fruity, moderate acidity, lacks a little on firmness, structure. (*dosage* .5; 50% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Blanc).

1977 Ca' del Bosco Cremant (Franciacorta Pinot) Lively *mousse*; fresh and fruity, dry, flavorful; some length, and style.

1972 Giulio Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore Lively pinpoint bead, fast-rising & long-lasting; lovely bouquet, elegant, some yeastiness; soft, creamy texture, delicate, stylish; lacks a bit on length. (We don't know the price, but suspect it is probably too high for what it is. This wine is produced in very limited supply and is difficult to find. It went on sale late last year or early this year.)

1976 Ferrari Brut (\$15.00) Lively *mousse*; fruity aroma, fresh and clean with light yeasty notes; lively acidity, flavorful; moderately long on the aftertaste.

NV Contratto Brut (disgorged Spring 1980) \$11.99 Lively *mousse*; fresh, clean fruity aroma with a light yeastiness; light-bodied, dry, lively tart acidity; a clean, refreshing finish. (70-to-80% Pinot Nero from the Oltrepò Pavese; 20 to 30% Chardonnay from near Bolzano.)

1976 Fontanafredda Contessa Rosa Brut Nature Smallish bead, lively & persistent; clean, fruity aroma; nice flavor, balanced; has length, and style. (Pinot Bianco and Pinot Grigio grapes from Serralunga d'Alba)

1977 Carlo Zadra Pinot Nero In Bianco Steady stream of pinpoint bubbles; delicate scent; delicate structure, well-made; has some length — good quality. (Very limited production).

1976 La Versa Brut Lively *mousse*; small bubbles; fruity aroma; dry, refreshing acidity, fruity; moderately long aftertaste. (Pinot Nero and Pinot Grigio grapes from Oltrepò Pavese)

1977 Equipe 5 Brut Lively, persistent *mousse*; delicate scent; light, dryish, lively acidity; some length. (Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco from Trentino)

Average

1977 Carpenè Malvolti Brut Fast-rising, very small bubbles, lively bead; clean, fruity, pear-like aroma; off-dry, fruity, soft; short, somewhat dull finish. (60% Chardonnay, 20% Pinot Bianco, 20% Pinot Nero from Trentino-Alto Adige; .8 dosage, 3 years *en tirage*. Annual production of spumante *metodo champenois*, about 400,000.)

1977 Carpenè Malvolti Brut de Brut Lively perlage, pinpoint bead; delicate aroma suggesting pears; light-bodied, fruity, dry, clean, acid a bit low; a refreshing aftertaste. (same *cuvée* as the brut, no *dosage*, special selection).

1979 Catturich-Ducco Bianco Fast-rising *mousse*; fruity aroma and flavor, off-dry, a trace of sugar, sufficient acidity to balance; a dull aftertaste, slightly bitter. (Barbera and Nebbiolo grapes vinified in white, 10% Pinot; .8 to .85 dosage. Catturich-Ducco's wines are on the U.S. market, but this wine may or may not be available here; we tasted it at the winery.)

1974 Cinzano Brut (\$15.79) Smallish bubbles, lively *perlage*; a delicate aroma; light-bodied, dryish, fruity; lacks length — grossly overpriced. (Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc grapes from the Oltrepò Pavese)

1977 Cocchi A fairly steady stream of fast-rising, small bubbles; a straightforward aroma, fruity; balanced, dryish, fruity, clean. (Pinot Bianco and Pinot Grigio from Trentino-Alto Adige, and Pinot Nero from the Oltrepò Pavese; eighteen months *en tirage*. Available in a few limited markets.)

(1977) Equipe 5 Brut Rosé Pretty pink color; lively bead; fruity, clean, delicate aroma; dryish, fruity flavor, lively acidity, somewhat lacking in distinction; a bit short. (100% Pinot Nero)



Cellars at Ca' del Bosco

1975 Carlo Gancia Brut Tiny bubbles, very slow-rising, but persistent; a clean, fruity aroma though one-dimensional; light-bodied, dry; a clean, refreshing finish. (Pinot Nero and Pinot Blanc from the Oltrepò Pavese.)

(1977) Lagaria Brut del Concilio (Pinot del Trentino) Moderately lively *mousse*; very small bubbles; a clean, fruity aroma; off-dry, mellow, moderate acidity; a little short. (one-third each Pinot Nero, Pinot Bianco & Chardonnay; about 15 months *en tirage*)

Fair

1974 Calissano Real Brut Slow-rising, tiny bubbles; a straightforward fruity aroma; dryish, fruity, but a bit dull on the palate; finishes flat.

1977 Catturich-Ducco Rosé Ramoto-pale pink with an orange cast; moderately lively bead; slightly herbaceous — bell peppery aroma and flavor; dull and heavy in the mouth — but interesting, different. (Barbera, Nebbiolo and a small amount of Merlot grapes; *dosage* 1%. Catturich-Ducco also makes a red spumante by the champagne method from the same grapes as the rosé plus some Cabernet Sauvignon — yes, it's an odd wine, presumably an acquired taste.)

1977 Gran Cavit Brut (\$7.99) Lively *perlage*, though few bubbles, smallish bead; light, fresh simple aroma; light-bodied, gassy in the mouth, fruity, straightforward; fleeting aftertaste.

NV Martini & Rossi Riserva Montelena Brut Extra Secco Moderate strength *mousse*, very small bubbles; very strong fruity aroma and flavor — almost foxy! gassy, lacking any class or style — rather pedestrian.