

# FOOD

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## Ca' del Bosco

### A visit to an Italian wine estate reveals some tasty surprises

By Anthony Dias Blue

Things were very different in Italy this summer. The usual July and August busloads of American tour groups were missing from the piazzas of Florence and Rome. As a result, the shops were mostly empty, and restaurant reservations were easy to get.

The peaceful ambiance rather was warm and was fabulous, or tasted better. I missed seeing summer should make get there next year.

I visited the remarkable estate of Maurizio Zanella near Brescia. Just an hour east of Milan in the Franciacorte viticultural zone, Ca' Del Bosco is one of Italy's most important new wineries.

Unlike many other Italian estates, which have been developed over several centuries, Ca' Del Bosco ("The House in the Woods") is the creation of Zanella, who has single-handedly carved this 137-acre estate out of a hilly, forested section of Erbusco. The property was bought by Maurizio's father, a trucking executive, as a family country home. The young Zanella wasted no time in converting this vacation property into a modern winery, complete with a network of underground caves.

Zanella planted the grapes necessary to produce DOC Franciacorte wines: *pinot bianco* (*pinot blanc*) for the white, and *cabernet franc*, *merlot*, *barbera* and *nebbiolo* for the red. He also put in a large amount of *chardonnay*, *pinot noir* and *cabernet sauvignon*.

Ca' Del Bosco produces excellent Franciacorte red and white, but the winery has become world-famous because of its superb *chardonnays*, *cabernet* blends and sparkling wines.

The Ca' Del Bosco sparkling wines are considered by many to be the best bubbly that Italy currently produces. The wines are made by the painstaking "*methode champenoise*" in which every bottle — including jereboams and methuselahs — acts as a small fermentor.

There is a lovely non-vintage Brut (\$22) that is crisp, fruity and loaded with finesse. Although this is obviously not champagne, it is a wine of comparable quality. Zanella makes his sparkling wines from a blend of *chardonnay*, *pinot blanc* and *pinot noir*.

Also impressive is the Ca' Del Bosco Cremant (\$25), a softer, lower-pressure sparkling wine made from *chardonnay* and *pinot blanc*. This one has astonishing complexity and graceful balance.

I was also very excited by Zanella's *chardonnays*. His wine-maker, 24-year-old Southern Californian Brian Larky, is particularly



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proud of these wines, which are aged in new French oak barrels. The 1983 (\$20) is ripe, crisp, rich and beautifully oaked. The 1984 (\$20) came from a lesser vintage and, as a result, it is leaner and a bit less complex. This one has more finesse but less depth. Best of all is the 1985, which I tasted out of the barrel. It combines the best characteristics of the first two wines. The bad news is that Ca' Del Bosco's *chardonnay* production is tiny — fewer than 1,000 cases of each vintage were made.

Also worthy of attention are the Zanella "Signature" red wines, amazing claret-style wines that are made of 40 percent *cabernet sauvignon*, 30 percent *cabernet franc* and 30 percent *merlot*. These surprising reds are lush and velvety with plenty of complexity and rich fruit. They sell for \$22 a bottle.

I also visited the celebrated winery of Angelo Gaja in Piedmont. This venerated estate produces outstanding red wines made from *nebbiolo* grapes grown on the steep slopes surrounding the tiny town of Barbaresco.

Gaja is the recognized leader among producers of Barbaresco, the elegant red that is considered by many to be the best of all the wines produced from the *nebbiolo* grape. The winery turns out a wonderful regular version and three extraordinary special bottlings, made from individual vineyards: Costa Russi, Sori San Lorenzo and Sori Tilden.

The 1982 versions of these wines have been well-received (1982 was just as good in Piedmont as it was in Bordeaux). The 1983 was not considered quite as good a vintage, but the Gaja wines from that year I tasted in Italy were all outstanding.

The best 1983 for current drinking is the Vignaveja, Gaja's *Nebbiola d'Alba*. This inexpensive fruity red wine is snappy, fresh, spicy and delicious.

Gaja also produces excellent *chardonnay* and *cabernet sauvignon*. The 1984 *chardonnay* (\$20) is exquisite — rich and intensely varietal with lovely French oak flavors and persistent fruit. The 1983 Cabernet (\$20) is soft and lovely with intense fruit and a complex finish.