

The land of red wines

Nicolas Belfrage M.W. looks at the home of truffles and top red wines

The WINES OF ITALY

First Edition

French varieties, particularly Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco, are very much in vogue in the northwest today. Barrique-fermented and/or matured Chardonnay vino da tavola is the latest fever to grip the Albeise. Gaja and Pio Cesare both do one, and you can bet that more are on their way for one supreme if cynical reason: Chardonnay sells. In the Franciacorta zone of Lombardy several producers are having a go with Chardonnay, whether barrique-treated or otherwise. I have said elsewhere that Italians have yet to produce a fully convincing model of a Chardonnay on Burgundian lines, but Maurizio Zanella's 1983 made me eat my words. Rich and long and complex, yet with a breed and a backbone that few of the fleshier, more obvious New World Chardonnays can emulate.

The serious dry spumante centre of the Northwest, however, if not all Italy, is Franciacorta in the Lombard province of Brescia. This is strictly Champagne-method country, and by definition only Pinot grapes are employed in the Franciacorta Pinot DOC. Some of the wines made here are as good as you will find from Champagne, indeed Franciacorta is in my view the world's most serious challenger to Champagne in quality terms. Methods are very similar to those employed in The Marne (except that remuage here is still almost entirely manual) and there is a fair sprinkling of Frenchmen to be met in the cellars and vineyards. One advantage the Franciacorta producers hold over their Champenois counterparts is the much greater frequency with which they are able to produce well-balanced wine without dosage and indeed without addition of sugar at any stage. Their great disadvantage, in market terms, is that their wines cost virtually as much to produce as the French original, and therefore sell at comparable prices. However, one has only to taste the wines of *Ca del Bosco* or *Bellavista* to know that, though the price is not modest, the value is good.

Just recently there has sprung up a passion for Cru Classé-style Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet-Merlot blends in these parts. Gaja has been developing a varietal Cabernet-Sauvignon, matured in new French barriques, which he calls *Darmagi* (it means "What a pity!" in Piemontese dialect, *Dommage!*) the aim being if not to beat at least to take on the French at their own game. The only other outstanding exponent of the Bordeaux technique that I know of to date is Maurizio Zanella of *Ca del Bosco* in Franciacorta whose wine, modestly called *Maurizio Zanella*, has already met the challenge of the first and second growths in at least one major blind tasting and given them a good run for their money.

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young Gamay (it doesn't taste like Beaujolais but it has similar characteristics you see what I mean. You could chill it slightly in summer, if you want. Good Dolcetto (DOC) comes from Langhe again, and from the small zone of Ovino in Piemonte's southeast. There are other DOCs, as well as a vino da tavola marketed as Dolcetto del Piemonte Bonarda, from Oltrepo Pavese, is like Dolcetto and similar remarks can be made.

The French red varieties have had the impact in the northwest. They have in the northeast, where Cabernet and Merlot have been playing a prominent viticultural role for something like 200 years. Two Lombard reds which do contain Cabernet (mainly Franc) are Franciacorta Rosso and Valcalepio. The former, where Cabernet predominates despite being blended with such unlikely bedfellows as Barbera, Nebbiolo and Merlot, is now carving out something of a niche for itself on export markets and deservedly so, as it is a friendly, characterful and highly drinkable wine of excellent balance and little austerity.

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Just to round off the red section, it is worth remembering that throughout Italy, land of artists, there is an abundance of one off, strictly artisanal wines some of which can be amazing. One example, in Piemonte, is Valentino Migliorini's *Bricco Manzoni*, a judicious blend of Barbera and Nebbiolo. Another is Luciano de Giacomo's *Bricco del Drago*, which is mainly Dolcetto with some Nebbiolo. In Lombardy, overlooking the city of Brescia, are the vineyards of Mario Pasolini who produces a magical wine called *Mompiano* from Marzemino and Merlot. All these are vini da tavola in legal terms, but they are stamped with the high quality that comes with attention and devotion. And there are plenty of others in this ilk. In Italy, it is sometimes almost as if law stifles creativity.

Still white table wines have never, in the northwest, played anything better than third fiddle. This is true even to the extent that the first wine at a smart Piemontese dinner party would, tradi-

speaking of top Soave, and not of the rivers of cheap plonk).

There are a number of other native grape varieties of the northwest — such as Valle d'Aosta's *Blanc de Morgex*, which makes interesting wines but which are exported in such tiny volume as to make their encounter on a British wineshop shelf extremely unlikely. Perhaps the best, and there is a bit of it around, is *Arneis*, which under the vino da tavola denomination Arneis del Roero can be as full-flavoured and complex as a very good Mâconnais, if different (obviously).

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