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BON APPÉTIT

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The Best Italian Sparklers

BY ANTHONY DIAS BLUE

IT WASN'T TOO LONG AGO THAT, WHENEVER ITALIAN SPARKLING wine was mentioned, I would immediately think of Asti Spumante, a sweet, charming but simple wine made from Muscat grapes in the Piedmont region of northern Italy. For most Americans, Asti is the only spumante (the Italian word for "sparkling") they know.

But there is much more than Asti Spu- with its own style and personality.

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they have their own special brio—a vivacity and brightness that are distinctly Italian.

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Berlucchi, the export sales director and the son of founder Guido Berlucchi. "We achieved that with a blend of selected grapes from the best areas of northern Italy," he says. "Each grape plays its own part in creating a perfect cuvée."

The Franciacorta wineries may be the biggest, but some of the oldest come from the Piedmont region. **Gancia**, founded by Carlo Gancia in 1850 in Canelli, a town famous for its Muscat vineyards, is credited with making Italy's first sparkler and its first metodo tradizionale wine.

Gancia's most popular wines are Asti Spumante and a brut called Castello Gancia, a dry sparkler that sells for $7.50. "There's a definite place for a well-made, inexpensive sparkling Italian wine in the American market," says Anthony Terlato, Gancia's Chicago-based importer.

Contratto, a small, family winery in Piedmont, was established by Giuseppe Contratto in 1867. Today it is run by his grandson Alberto, a tall and elegant man with wavy white hair and a neatly trimmed mustache.

Although Contratto produces a respected line of Piedmontese red wines, the family is most proud of its sparkling wines. The winery makes a superb Asti Spumante and a lively, fresh brut that is a blend of 20 percent Chardonnay grown in the Trentino-Alto Adige region and 80 percent Pinot Noir from the Oltrepò Pavese, an extension of the Piedmont hills that reaches into Lombardy.

Two newcomers to this fabled region are Americans John and Harry Mariani, who had great success with a fruity "pop" wine import called Riunite. They invested some of their profits in a wine operation named **Banfi Vintners**, establishing modern wineries in Tuscany and Piedmont. All of Banfi's Italian production is overseen by the highly respected enologist Ezio Rivella.

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niliar to Ameri- nt Piedmontese spumante. This sparkling wine metodo tradi- of 70 percent co and 10 per- Oltrepò Pavese eep flavors and

what more ob- lest producers

and one of the best, **Giacosa** makes a minute quantity of brut sparkling wine in the tiny hill-top town of Neive, in the Barbaresco region. Founded in 1890, the Giacosa winery is best known for fine regional red wines. But the Extra Brut spumante has become much sought after.

Bruno Giacosa is a studious perfectionist who oversees every step of the winemaking process. He makes his brut from 100 percent Pinot Nero grapes grown in Oltrepò Pavese and ages it at least three years. The currently available version is the 1986. Only 1,600 cases were made; the wine sells for $39 a bottle.

Another winery with exacting standards is **Ferrari**, which makes only sparkling wines produced using the metodo tradizionale. This winery is owned by the Lunelli family, and the wine is made by Mauro Lunelli.

"My goal is to make wines with elegance and finesse," says Lunelli. "For this reaso Chardonnay almost exclusively." His pri joy is the Giulio Ferrari Riserva del For an exquisite Blanc de Blanc. The wine i and rich with notes of honey and almo the equal in quality of the best tête wines from Champagne. It sells for $60

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA OKAMURA

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Here are your best bets fo Bon Appétit W

1988 Château Rausan-Ségla, M A graceful combination of ri beautifully balanced and

1990 De Loach Vineyards, W ($7). This is what white Zinf and crisp, with lively stra

1987 Iron Horse Vineyards A blend of Cabernet Sauv and crisp with lo

1989 Laurier Winery, Ch effort for Merry Edwar spicy with lavis

1989 Liberty School (Ca ($7.50). A surprising wi

1988 Matanzas Creek W Crisp and lively w

1987 Penfolds, Bin 3 A blend of Caberne smoky black cherry

1987 Sebastiani V ($18.50). A Merita Franc that

Nonvintage Ve The famous yell

1988 Williams Russian River V sugar,

Listed prices a