

# Franciacorta

Most famous for its prestigious sparkling wines, Franciacorta in Lombardy is not often high on the tourist itinerary. But with its stunning hills and lake, pre-Roman history and many wineries to explore, you won't want to leave

STORY CARLA CAPALBO

Have dinner in any self-respecting restaurant in Italy, or a pre-dinner aperitivo in a bar there, and you'll be offered a glass of Franciacorta. The sparkling wines from this small, terroir-driven DOCG wine area in Lombardy, northern Italy, are Italy's answer to Champagne: high-quality, home-grown bubbles of prestige. If these wines are less well known outside Italy it's because the majority of the 17.5 million bottles produced in Franciacorta each year are drunk in Italy.

'Up and down the country, a glass of Franciacorta is our preferred way to celebrate or start a meal,' says Silvano Brescianini, the president of the Franciacorta consorzio. 'It's an expression of *Italianità* – Italianness.'

Franciacorta is as tied to Italy's national identity as Parmesan cheese or Parma ham.

There's a long history behind this loyalty: Franciacorta has been known for its wines since

at least the Middle Ages, when Germanic tribe the Lombards held a seat of power in Brescia, in the southeast. The most likely origin of the region's name is from the Latin *franchae curtes* – 'exempt from paying taxes' – due to the tax-free zone created there in the 11th century, although some theories suggest Charlemagne named it Franciacorta, to mean Little (or short) France. It's a scallop of land near Bergamo, less than one hour's drive east of Milan within a crescent of hills, bordered by the Lago d'Iseo lake to the north and the flat Po valley to the south.

## PERFECTLY FORMED

Unlike many more sprawling wine regions, Franciacorta is compact, just 25km by 10km, with almost 3,000ha of vineyards. So it's the perfect place to spend a long weekend or take a detour for a few days from Milan. You can quickly get a feel for the landscape, visit wineries small and

Monte Isola in the middle of the deep blue Iseo lake







‘The sparkling wines from this small, terroir-driven DOCG wine area in northern Italy are Italy’s answer to Champagne’



Daniele Gentile,  
Corte Fusia

large and eat some great food. There’s also a selection of complementary activities to make it more fun, such as horse-riding through the vineyards or exploring the **Strada del Vino Franciacorta** wine route ([franciacorta.net](http://franciacorta.net) – click on ‘The road’ tab) on e-bikes. The pre-alpine Iseo lake is small but spectacular, with Monte Isola, the largest inhabited lake island in Europe, at its centre. Boating is available on the lake, and those who fancy a romantic getaway can stay at lakeside hotels, a short drive from the vineyards.

Franciacorta DOCG is a sparkling wine made using the ‘metodo classico’ – or traditional method – during which the wine undergoes a natural second fermentation in the bottle as in Champagne (as opposed to in a large tank in the Charmat method used for Prosecco).

For Franciacorta DOCG wines, the release date cannot be less than 25 months from the harvest, and many wineries age their more prestigious wines even longer. During this long ageing process, the wines acquire complexity and staying power. As is the case with Champagne, the dosage added after disgorgement of the spent yeast deposits determines the level of dryness, ranging from extra brut to demi-sec; some are also made without dosage, completely dry. Franciacorta can be paired with a large assortment of foods, from

savoury antipasti to pastas, seafoods and even some meats and cheeses.

The Franciacorta wine route weaves in and out of the vineyards, so the most direct way to visit wineries is by car. A good start is at the Berlucchi cellars (see ‘My perfect day’, right). Guido Berlucchi and his oenologist Franco Ziliani were the ‘grandfathers’ of Franciacorta, who began making sparkling wines in the area 60 years ago. Before then, still wines were the norm in the region.

#### THE WINERIES MAKING WAVES

‘Franciacorta’s character derives from its terroir – the pebbly, well-draining morainic soils that are interspersed here with marine sediments, and the lake that tempers our weather,’ says Silvano Brescianini as we tour the vineyards of the **Barone Pizzini** estate ([baronepizzini.it](http://baronepizzini.it)), where he is executive vice president. ‘That’s why Chardonnay, Pinot Nero and Pinot Bianco do so well here.’ Brescianini has also been a champion of the only local variety to be included in the blend for Franciacorta, **Erbamat**. This rare white grape has been known since at least 1564 and has large, compact bunches and higher acidity than Chardonnay, so it’s perfect for Franciacorta. ‘Very few plants of Erbamat remained but we’ve been cultivating it and we now have two vineyards.’



Carla Capalbo is an awarded food, wine and travel writer, author and photographer, and a regular contributor to *Decanter*. Since 1998, among other titles, she has authored three books focusing on the regional food and wines of Italy. See [cartacapalbo.com](http://cartacapalbo.com)

## MY PERFECT DAY IN FRANCIACORTA

### MORNING

Wherever I’m sleeping in Franciacorta, I have breakfast at **Pasticceria Roberto** ([pasticceria roberto.com](http://pasticceria roberto.com)) in Erbusco. The pastries and buns are excellent, including the cloud-light brioche veneziana (filled with crème pâtissière). For extra calories, try the cappuccino della nonna, enriched with egg. I’m happiest with a spremuta d’arancia, freshly squeezed orange juice. From there, it’s a short drive to visit the most historic winery in Franciacorta, **Guido Berlucchi** ([berlucchi.it](http://berlucchi.it)). At its heart is the handsome 17th-century palazzo where, in 1961, the first 3,000 bottles of a sparkling wine ‘in the French style’ were made by Franco Ziliani. Today, award-winning wines are still made by the Ziliani family and aged in the palazzo’s imposing underground cellars.

### LUNCH & AFTERNOON

Lunch is on the spectacular terrace of **Albereta Relais** ([albereta.it](http://albereta.it)). Once the working home of the late great Italian



Pasticceria Roberto

chef Gualtiero Marchesi, the kitchen has maintained the maestro’s focus on clean flavours and excellent ingredients and technique, even if the menu has been internationalised. If you, like me, love organic wines and heroic viticulture, the two young owners of **Corte Fusia** winery ([cortefusia.com](http://cortefusia.com)) focus on reclaiming abandoned hillside vineyards from which they make characterful wines, and you can arrange to walk with them in their sloping, rocky vineyards on Monte Orfano with views over the Po valley before a tasting in their courtyard headquarters. From there it’s a short hop to the cellars of

**1701** ([1701franciacorta.it](http://1701franciacorta.it)). Silvia and Federico Stefini’s cellars may be less picturesque, but their biodynamic viticulture and winemaking (for some of their wines) in large Italian clay jars makes this a must for natural wine lovers. You can also visit their large walled vineyard.

### EVENING

I’ve saved room for dinner at my favourite traditional trattoria in Palazzolo sull’Oglio. Award-winning **Osteria della Villetta** ([osteriadellavilletta.it](http://osteriadellavilletta.it)), which dates back to 1900, is a classic: family-run, hospitable and fairly priced. Sample wonderful home cooking and selected local wines at wooden tables in rooms that are rich in atmosphere. Just nearby I’ll happily retire to **Cappuccini Resort** ([cappuccini.it](http://cappuccini.it)). The former 18th-century monastery was completely abandoned until Rosalba Tonelli Pelizzari lovingly restored it – with her own artistic style – and now includes 14 rooms, terraced gardens, a restaurant and a uniquely picturesque spa.





Biking the Strada del Franciacorta wine route



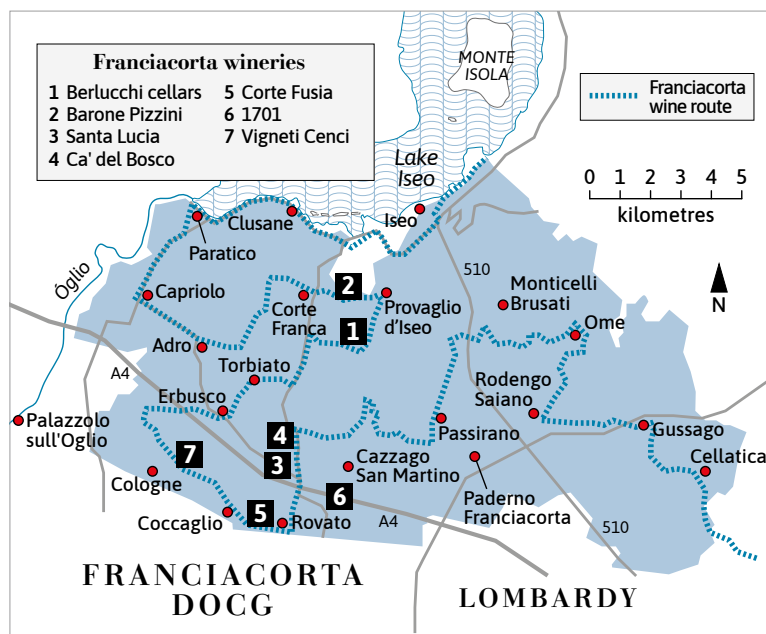
Silvia Stefini, 1701

The hope is to produce even more distinctive wines from Erbammat in the future.

Pierluigi Villa, of **Santa Lucia** winery ([santaluciafranciacorta.it](http://santaluciafranciacorta.it)), is another fan of Erbammat and has played a central role in its recent history. An ampelographer by profession (one who studies and classifies grape vines), he studied local grapes in Brescia and helped to classify the variety. He even makes small quantities of a pure Erbammat sparkling wine. 'This grape's natural higher acidity means we can let it ripen longer than Chardonnay and make wines that can't be mistaken for any other part of the world.'

Impressively, 80% of Franciacorta's vineyards are now being grown organically. That includes those of the trendsetting **Ca' del Bosco** ([cadelbosco.com](http://cadelbosco.com)), where huge investment has produced a modernist cellar and sculpture park that shouldn't be missed by fans of modern art.

While the biggest estates boast showstopping cellars and landscaped gardens, it's visits to the smaller, family-run estates that are the most illuminating about the Italian way of life. Giuliana Cenci and her son Maurizio Bassi live in an 18th-century *cascina*, or country farmhouse,



## Getting there

Two airports are close to Franciacorta: **Milano Linate** and **Orio sul Serio**, which is close to Bergamo and operated primarily by Ryanair. From there it's easiest to rent a car.

**Vigneti Cenci** ([vigneticenci.com](http://vigneticenci.com)), on the slopes of Monte Orfano. Its courtyard, with shaded tables and overhanging vine pergola, is the perfect place to taste their wines after a walk into the vineyards to see the views. 'My father started out making still wines but realised that the sparkling wines made here were more exceptional,' says Cenci. 'We're carrying on that tradition and offering the hospitality that makes Franciacorta so special.'





The waterfront, Iseo

## YOUR FRANCIACORTA ADDRESS BOOK

### ACCOMMODATION

#### **Agriturismo Locande le Quattro Terre**

For a restful stay immersed in the countryside at Corte Franca, this winery agriturismo offers spacious rooms, a restaurant with local dishes and easy access to the lake and wineries. [quattroterre.it](http://quattroterre.it)

#### **Corte Lantieri, Capriolo**

The agriturismo of a fine winery, Lantieri di Paratico, is surrounded by vineyards and has its own restaurant and pool. [cortelantieri.it](http://cortelantieri.it)

#### **Hotel Araba Fenice, Iseo**

If it's the lake you fancy, stay at this gorgeous hotel right on the shore, with lake views and a real feeling of the Grand Tour. [arabafenicehotel.it](http://arabafenicehotel.it)

### RESTAURANTS

#### **Dispensa Pani e Vini, Torbiato**

Wine shop, wine bar and restaurant, this is a perfect place for a meal or for sampling wines accompanied by assorted cheeses and salumi in a handsome contemporary



setting. You can also buy bottles to take away. [dispensafranciacorta.com](http://dispensafranciacorta.com)

#### **Ristorante Radici, Iseo**

In the centre of the lakeside village of Iseo, with an outdoor terrace, this is a great place to sample fresh lake fish and local pastas after a stroll along the lakefront. [radici-ristorante-iseo.business.site](http://radici-ristorante-iseo.business.site)

#### **Ristorante Dina, Gussago**

A gem for fans of Italian modern cuisine: chef Alberto Gipponi's idiosyncratic five-table restaurant in a vaulted interior

successfully explores textures and flavours, emotions and ideas. [dinaristorante.com](http://dinaristorante.com)

### SHOPS & MARKETS

#### **Cantine di Franciacorta, Erbusco**

This is the place to find a huge range of the area's wines at cellar prices. Great for tastings and for buying bottles to take home. [@cantinefranciacorta](https://www.instagram.com/cantinefranciacorta)

#### **Gelateria Leon d'Oro, Iseo**

On the waterfront, this is the best ice cream in the area. Don't miss their fresh fruit flavours. [@gelaterialeondoro](https://www.instagram.com/gelaterialeondoro)

#### **Iseo market**

Friday morning is the time to explore the big busy weekly market in the streets around Piazza Garibaldi in Iseo. [comune.iseo.bs.it](http://comune.iseo.bs.it)

#### **Find out more...**

Details about the Strada del Franciacorta wine route, sports, hospitality and the wineries are available on the consorzio's excellent website, [franciacorta.net](http://franciacorta.net) 