

Fizz Factor

IN ITALY'S FRANCIACORTA REGION, HOME TO SPARKLING WINES THAT RIVAL THOSE OF CHAMPAGNE, **TARAJIA MORRELL** FINDS ANCIENT CASTLES AND CRYSTALLINE LAKES, AND RIDES HORSES THROUGH THE VINES.



Scenes from Franciacorta, including winemaker Vittorio Moretti and a squash blossom dish at Laboratorio Lanzani.

A **S A BIG BELIEVER** in the idea that no occasion is too small to warrant popping a bottle of bubbly, I was delighted to discover that Italy produces a sparkling wine with far more finesse than often pedestrian Prosecco. It's called Franciacorta, the name of a bucolic area near Brescia, in northern Italy. Here you'll find lovely landscapes, superb cuisine, and subtle wines made with Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco that are admired for their impeccably delicate bubbles. About an hour's drive from Milan, Franciacorta is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its designation as an official wine region this year. And, really, what better reason do you need to plan a visit?

DAY 1



9 A.M. ARRIVE AND REVIVE
Drop your bags at L'Albereta, a luxury hotel nestled in the vine-laced hills of Erbusco, and head to the property's VistaLago Bistrò. Enjoy a macchiato and a pastry on the flower-fragrant terrace, overlooking pretty Lake Iseo. *Doubles from \$324; albereta.it.*

10 A.M. WINE ROOM WITH A VIEW
From L'Albereta, it's a beautiful 10-minute walk or a quick drive to Bellavista, one of Franciacorta's largest and oldest producers, which is run by Vittorio Moretti, the distinguished winemaker who also serves as president of the Consorzio Franciacorta. As the winery's name would suggest, the views it affords are as enticing as its minerally, meringue-scented Alma Cuvée Brut. *(By appointment only); bellavistawine.it.*

12:30 P.M. ARTFUL COOKING
Head into Brescia for lunch at Laboratorio Lanzani. The retro design alludes to Andy Warhol's Factory, but chef Augusto Pasini's menu is an ode to the surrounding region and the Mediterranean beyond. Case in point: cured sardines (sourced from nearby Lake Iseo) in whipped Neapolitan burrata cream with Sicilian langoustines, paired with a bottle of crisp, dry 2006 Barone Pizzini Bagnadore Franciacorta Riserva. *laboratoriolanzani.it.*

2:15 P.M. MONUMENTAL MOMENTS
Walk off your lunch in the terraced gardens of Castello di Brescia, a medieval fortress that overlooks the city from Cidneo Hill. Miraculously, you may even have the winding, poppy-punctuated castle paths to yourself, so there's nothing wrong with having a quick catnap beneath an olive tree. Be sure to pay a visit to the nearby Roman ruins and Brescia's side-by-side "old" Romanesque and "new" 17th-century duomos before you head back into the countryside. *bresciamusei.com.*

4 P.M. A FAMILY LEGACY
In nearby Borgonato, Fratelli Berlucchi offers a secret-garden allure. Pia Donata Berlucchi, whose family started producing wine here in 1927, will recount tales of hand-labeling bottles as a child while she guides you past 15th-century frescoes in the winery's vat room. Buy a bottle of the toasty 2011 Freccianera Brut, one of Franciacorta's most elegant wines, for the next picnic opportunity or to take home. *(By appointment only); fratelliberlucchi.it.*

6:30 P.M. LUXURY, ITALIAN STYLE
Back at L'Albereta, take advantage of its Chenot spa, featuring an indoor pool and gym, massage therapists, osteopaths and beauticians. Then settle in for a meal at LeoneFelice, the most refined of the hotel's three restaurants. Chef Fabio Abbattista's creativity with local produce—exemplified by his delicate cappelletti with rabbit and anchovy butter—is not to be missed.

DAY 2

WHERE TO
TASTEWHERE TO EAT
AND DRINKWHERE TO
EXPLORE**8 A.M. RIDING HIGH**

Rise early and head to the nearby Crazy Horse stable for a relaxed trail ride through the quiet slopes of Erbusco. There's no better way to feel a part of this land's long history and to appreciate the precision of the vines than by winding through them for a couple of hours on horseback. (And disregard the farm's colorful name—the steeds here are so calm that Lazy Horse might be a more apt moniker.) scuderiacruzhorse.it.

10:30 A.M. DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

The Monte Rossa winery in Bornato features a tower from the Middle Ages, frescoes from the 1200s that presage the Italian Renaissance style, a chapel dedicated to Santa Barbara and, in the distance, a view of Castello di Bornato. In other words, it's spectacular. Book ahead to taste wines from the 20-month-aged, stone-dry Prima Cuvée Brut to the vintage Cabochon cuvées; every one of them serves as a bottled expression of this historic producer's allure. (By appointment only); monterossa.com.

1 P.M. ISLAND TIME

Some 20 minutes from Monte Rossa, you arrive at the picturesque lakeside town of Iseo, where a hired boat (reserve at barcaioliimontisola.it) can shuttle you across the water to Monte Isola for lunch. On the island, stroll through the quaint port, past sun-drying sardines, to the restaurant La Foresta. Enjoy a leisurely meal of grilled lake fish with a bottle of the graceful Barboglio de Gaioncelli Extra Brut. forestamontisola.it.

3 P.M. CRUISE CONTROL

Have your boat take you on a tour around the island to admire its grandeur as well as the tiny Isola di Loreto, which is home to a 15th-century monastery converted into a private neo-Gothic-style castle. While you're cruising around, go ahead and open one of those bottles of Franciacorta you've acquired along the way, because why not sip sparkling wine in a vintage speedboat on an Italian lake?

4:30 P.M. DRINKING IT ALL IN

After reluctantly leaving the serene perfection of Lake Iseo, make the 10-minute drive to Corte Bianca, a stylish estate surrounded by organically farmed vines. At the end of the mulberry tree-lined drive is a stunning home designed by its owner, architect Marina Tonsi. The original medieval structure merges seamlessly with elegant contemporary additions by Tonsi, who has created a distinctive setting for sipping wines such as Corte Bianca's bright, honey-accented 2011 Satèn, made entirely from Chardonnay. (By appointment only); corte-bianca.it.

7:30 P.M. NEXT-LEVEL LOCAL

Spend your last meal in Franciacorta at the Michelin-starred Due Colombe in Borgonato. Chef Stefano Cerveni's reimagining of local classics, such as baked tench from Lake Iseo and a "courtyard ragout" of rabbit, quail and chicken served with farfalle and truffles, make it an essential visit. Cerveni is the third generation of his family to run this rustic yet immaculately updated restaurant. End things on a sweet note by indulging in dessert and an obligatory glass of Sebino Passito, the unctuous local fortified wine made from raisins. duocolombe.com.

10:30AM



1:00PM

After tasting at Monte Rossa estate, TOP, take a boat from Iseo for a scenic lunch. RIGHT: Cheese and charcuterie at Corte Bianca.



4:30PM