



Champagne's
**LITTLE-KNOWN
ITALIAN COUSIN**

Oltrepò Pavese's Sparkling Wines

By ALLISON LEVINE



I am sure that Champagne is what comes to mind when you think about sparkling wines. Who doesn't love a fancy bottle of wine that you can pronounce like you speak French? Keeping it romantic, when you think Italian sparkling wine, Prosecco's your go-to. After all, Prosecco is the number one sparkling wine in Italy, both in terms of production and export numbers. Delve a little deeper and there is Asti Spumante, that very sweet (sometimes too sweet) bubbly, which follows as Italy's second-most produced sparkling wine. But, in fact, Italy actually produces more varieties of sparkling wine than any other country, and they've been doing so since the Roman times. That's a lot of bubbles! And, to get the best of both fizzy worlds, in the Oltrepò Pavese they make sparkling wines in the Champagne style, for less money. This means that the wine is made using the same grapes as in Champagne, France: Chardonnay

and Pinot Noir, and the same method, called secondary fermentation in which the bubbles form inside the bottles.

Oltrepò Pavese is located 40 minutes south of Milan, the capital of the Lombardy region. It is just across the river from Pavia and means just that, "on the other side of the Po River from Pavia". As you cross the river, you will begin driving through rolling hills peppered with vineyards and might think you are in the ever-famous Tuscany. The Oltrepò is frequently called the "Tuscany of the North" but has been overshadowed by its neighbor Franciacorta, located an hour north of Milan, which is known for making some of Italy's most prestigious sparkling wines. But, Oltrepò Pavese is the region to be on the lookout for.

The Oltrepò Pavese region produces more than half of all wine from the Lombardy region, and Pinot Noir has

been planted in the area for almost 200 years. Oltrepò Pavese used to be a part of Piedmont, which used to be a part of France. Hence, more than 50 percent of the Pinot Noir in Italy is actually planted in Oltrepò Pavese. This makes it the Pinot Noir capital of Italy, making it a perfect place to make Champagne-style sparkling wines.

The sparkling wines from Oltrepò are affordable – between \$20 and \$40 – and worth looking out for. One exemplary producer is Ca' di Frara, owned and made by Luca Bellani. Ca' di Frara was started in 1905 by Luca Bellani's great-grandfather and today has 116 acres of vines. But it wasn't until 2004 that Luca decided to start making sparkling wines in the classic Champagne method, helping to put Oltrepò Pavese on the map as a region for quality sparkling wines.

After studying Enology in Piedmont and working at some of the best wineries in Tuscany, Luca Bellani returned to the Oltrepò Pavese in 1991 to take over his family winery. Luca came home because he wanted to return to the place where he was born and carry on his family tradition. He had a vision and passion for the Oltrepò. With the high content of gypsum in the soil and the marine residue in the hills, which contribute to the minerality of the wines, he knew that the terroir is what makes the Oltrepò unique.

As sparkling wine has been produced in the region for more than a century, Luca felt that adding sparkling wine to the Ca' di Frara portfolio would be his personal contribution to the winery. He finds the process of making traditional method sparkling wine enchanting. Today the sparkling production is 20 percent of their total production.

Always looking to be at the forefront, Luca recently released a new sparkling wine called Julè in addition to his Champagne-style sparkling wines. Using a modern vinification technique, Julè is made from 100 percent Croatina grapes and is fruity and fresh, but not sweet. The story behind Julè is that in 2010, Alejandro Mazza, who handles the public relations for the winery, discovered a manuscript in the gothic market in Barcelona. The manuscript told the true story about Julè, a Count from Champagne who lost his feudal privilege during the French Revolution and moved to Italy in search of new adventures. The Count fell in love with the Oltrepò and due to an unrequited love, created a formula for a unique wine to “open their hearts, melt the senses, and amuse all those who had drunk.” Alejandro brought this manuscript to Luca who challenged himself to recreate this formula. Luca Bellani is a man of passion, technique, and knowledge and is making delicious wines while helping to elevate the reputation of the Oltrepò wines to the rest of the world. ■