



As with any first course, bubbles are a starting point with Italy's highest-quality sparkling wines coming from Franciacorta, located midway between Milan and Venice in the region of Lombardy. Wines here get their sparkle from the same method as Champagne, allowing secondary fermentation to take place in the bottle. And, like Champagne, Franciacorta refers to both the geographical region and the wine itself. But, Franciacorta is distinctively Italian, expressing the region's unique terroir and geographical anomaly that provides the immense daily temperature shift needed to produce Italy's luxury fizz. Excellent with early and light courses, such as fresh oysters, Franciacorta also can escort a meal all the way to the finish.

Also, located in the north and gently cupped by the Swiss Alps is Piedmont. Two of the country's most legendary reds, Barolo and Barbaresco—often referred to as the king and queen of wine, respectively—reign from this preeminent region. Complex and riveting, Barolo and Barbaresco's characteristics are powerful. Made from the grape, Nebbiolo, Italian wine experts often characterize the aromas and flavors as "tar and roses," along with violets, prunes, licorice, chocolate, leather and black figs. These wines are also a test of patience, and waiting for them to age will truly reward and soften its forceful tannins.

Mike Tadich, Italian wine portfolio manager for Breakthru Beverage Nevada, said, "According to [Luca Currado](#), who took over winemaking from his

legendary father, Alfredo Currado of Vietti, once said, 'A man bottles Barbaresco or Barolo when his son is born, only to open that vintage when the son gets married.' And, knowing Italian boys, that could be 30 to 40 years easy."

People of the region love to enjoy these wines with one of the world's most rarified specialties and perhaps the food that most immortalizes Piedmont, the white truffle. Generously mounded over polenta or taglierini, the earthy pungency of the truffles intensifies the earthiness of the wine.

Moving south along the Adriatic Coast is Abruzzo, where appealingly rustic, food-friendly wines, such as Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, can age brilliantly, especially in the hands of the right producers.

Emidio Pepe has been making wines in this area since 1964, during which time his winemaking style has been unchanged, following an ultra-natural and artisanal path. His grapes are de-stemmed by hand, naturally fermented in glass tanks, unfiltered and unfiltered. When he is ready to sell his wines, they are rebottled by hand, labeled by hand, then released into the world.

"Two weeks ago, I had a 1983, which Emidio didn't like when he originally bottled it," said Tadich. "Thirty-three years later, he opens it, and suddenly the wine was good for him and is now available."

