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Sampling Umbria's many gastronomic delights

Patsy Yang

Like most regions of Italy, Umbria draws visitors with its food and wine.

With a reputation for rustic fare, the local Umbrian cuisine includes plenty of hearty dishes made with fresh local produce and seasonal ingredients.

The ancient Etruscans are credited with bringing the hallmarks of Mediterranean agriculture to the region: the grape, the olive and wheat. Once they conquered the Western area of what is today Umbria they started to reclaim land from the swamps of the Tiber valley. They also began to plant wheat in the plains, and vineyards and olive trees on the hills.

The people who lived in this region before the Etruscans arrived were known for making a type of bread that today is called "torta al testo." In modern times, the bread is served with prosciutto or grilled sausage.

Cured meats have also been made in Umbria throughout the ages. For example, the town of Norcia, in the southeastern portion of the region, is famous not only for its pork butchery but also its norcineria, a variety of locally-produced cured meat.

Umbrian food also relies on seasonal produce and regional treasures, such as the local truffles. From the area around Gubbio come the delicious white truffle. Grated white or black truffles are an important ingredient in many Umbrian dishes, including appetizers, pastas and risottos.

The region's wines are also renowned among diners the world over. Although Umbrian winemakers produces only one-third as much wine as their counterparts in Tuscany, they have nevertheless managed to build a solid reputation within the



A traditional Umbrian food shop in Norcia. The town is famous not only for its pork butchery but also its norcineria, a variety of locally-produced cured meat.



Umbria lamb

international wine scene. The peachy white wine known as Orvieto — which is produced in a town with the same name — is perhaps the best-known of the four major Umbrian wines. Meanwhile, the hills surrounding Perugia are known for producing some of the region's best reds, most of them made with Sangiovese grapes.

The Lungarotti Winery is among Umbria's top wine producers. I recently had the pleasure of meeting the CEO of Lungarotti Group, Chiara Lungarotti, and sampling some local Umbrian fare paired with the winery's famous Rubesco wine.

During our encounter at Le Tre Vaselle Resort — which the Lungarotti family owns — in Torgiano, Chiara's eyes sparkled as she talked about her

late father Giorgio Lungarotti, a man whom many credit with bringing Umbrian wine on the world's attention.

"After World War II, my father decided to turn his family estate into a wine estate, and replaced the old vineyards with modern ones. He also had the idea of giving a proprietary name to its first wine. In 1962, the Rubesco was born. The name derives from the Latin word 'rubescere,' which means 'to blush.'" Chiara explained this as we sampled the Rubesco Riserva Vigna Monticchio 2008, the group's flagship wine.

The full-bodied Rubesco has been named one of Italy's 10 best red wines. Along with the Montefalco Sagrantino, it is also one of the region's two signature reds.

"Rubesco has brought a blush to 120 million wine lovers all over the world, twice the population of Italy and 20,000 times that of Torgiano, its birthplace, located in the province of Perugia."

The Lungarotti Group produces about 2.4 million bottles of wine each year, and exports to 50 countries. Its vineyards cover 250 hectares of land between Torgiano and Montefalco. It also produces an average of 500,000 bottles of Rubesco each year.

In 1974, the Lungarotti family opened a wine museum, which has been described by the New York Times as one of the best in the world. The family's five-star Le Tre Vaselle resort was opened in 1978. The resort includes a gourmet restaurant and a wine spa. According to Chiara, the family wanted to enhance their company with world-class facilities that celebrate the culture of wine.

After lunch, I followed Chiara to the Lungarotti's wine museum, which was only a short walk from the resort. The museum is housed in the imposing Palazzo Graziani-Baglioni, a 17th



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The Mastri Birrai Umbri is one of the best selling artisan beer in Italy.

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With archeological artifacts, ceramics collection, glasswares, engravings and ethnographic pieces, the museum takes visitors on a trip through 5,000 years of wine history. Wine and Bacchus (the Roman god of agriculture and wine) run throughout the different collections on display in 20 different rooms.

Another notable family in the region are the Frachionis, who are the biggest producers of olive oil in Umbria. They also set up the Terre de la Custodia Winery in the Montefalco area. Following the artisanal beer trend, the Frachioni family established the Mastri Birrai Umbri brewery in 2010. The brewery produces about 2.5 million bottles of beer annually and is one of the best-selling artisan beer in Italy.

Foodies drive growth in US tourism as nation moves beyond burgers

Colleen Barry

Culinary tourists are pushing growth in foreign tourism to the United States, which is transforming its image as a fast-food mecca to a land of regional tastes and dishes, said officials visiting the Expo 2015 world's fair focusing on food this week.

Foreign tourism to the United States in 2014 rose by 7 percent to over 75 million, contributing US\$221 million to the economy, according to Christopher L. Thompson, president and CEO of Brand USA, a private marketing organization created five years ago to promote the United States as a destination. That's on the way to the Obama administration's goal of attracting 100 million visitors by 2021, from 55 million in 2012.

The boost coincides with Brand USA's culinary initiative to make food one of the country's main selling points, including the creation of guides for top culinary destinations, videotaped chef vignettes for its Discover America web portal and sponsorship of the Food Truck Nation food concession at Milan's Expo world fair, which is expected to attract at least 20 million visitors.

In the second year of the culinary focus, food rose to be among the top five reasons for choosing the United States as a destination, officials said.

"We've recognized culinary as a real drive of tourism, with all the diversity that the United States offers,"



The United States is transforming its image as a fast-food mecca to a land of regional tastes and dishes.

Thompson said.

"It is becoming one of the reasons that people are coming to the United States."

Daniele Catania, who runs the Alidays travel tour operator that organizes tours for Italians in the United States, said he has started creating itineraries guided by food.

"Food is like a language. You can learn a lot of history through food," Catania said.

Thompson said Brand USA's goal is to attract visitors not only to cities well-known for their cuisine, but also to smaller towns and rural areas.

"Palates have no boundaries," said Dorothy Cann Hamilton, founder and CEO of the International Culinary Center and president of the Friends of the USA pavilion. She declared the days that the hamburger defined American food as bygone, saying American cuisine is developing regionally, with strong immigrant influence.

"We don't think the rest of the world understands how regional tastes are," she said. "If you are Vietnamese and living in New Orleans you are eating a lot of shrimp. You won't necessarily see that in New York."

Vietnam's tycoons explore agribusiness

Mai Nguyen

A STEELMAKER turning to pigs and animal feed, a property developer raising cows, a stockbroker milling rice and a real-estate-to-retail billionaire growing fruit and vegetables.

Three decades after Vietnam started moving away from a socialist-led farm economy towards manufacturing of big-brand textiles and electronics, some of its top firms are carving out opportunities in its US\$37 billion agriculture and seafood sector and looking to expand overseas.

"We'll have global food shortages by 2050. If we invest fundamentally and correctly, this market is infinite," said Nguyen Duy Hung, chairman of Vietnam's top brokerage, Saigon Securities Incorp, who has a side business he's expanding into rice, seafood and supermarket produce.

Vietnam is among the world's top exporters of rice, coffee, cashew nuts, seafood, pepper and rubber and it shipped US\$24.5 billion of farm and fisheries produce last year.

But the World Bank says the value of its agribusiness is just 1.2 times that of its primary agriculture, compared with 2.7 times in South Korea. And the country still relies on billions of

US\$24.5b

The worth of farm and fisheries produce that Vietnam exported last year. Vietnam is among the world's top exporters of rice, coffee, cashew nuts, seafood, pepper and rubber.

dollars of foodstuff imports.

Hence the unlikely interest in food from industrial firms such as steelmaker Hoa Phat Group, which has converted its minerals unit to livestock and animal feed.

It has built a new feed plant with annual capacity of 300,000 tons, aiming for 1 million tons, and wants to be raising a million pigs a year by 2020.

"Although this new sector is extremely competitive, just as much as the steel industry, we firmly believe we will be successful," CEO Tran Tuan Duong told shareholders recently.

Vietnam's only billionaire, Pham Nhat Vuong of Vingroup, is piling into private schools, hospitals and shopping malls. But his latest move is a US\$91 million investment in growing fruit and vegetables.

And on the home page of real estate firm Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL), it's grazing cows rather than condominiums that meet the eye: it has just listed a cattle and rubber unit with a market value of US\$1.1 billion, bigger than the parent.

HAGL predicts nearly half the group's revenue this year will come from cows. It wants to tap milk demand that has grown 36 times over in the past quarter-century.

It is also investing in cattle to meet growing demand for beef: imports from Australia have surged 52 times in the past two years to 181,000 cows in 2014. That means potential in animal feed, too, currently supplied 42 percent by imports. It's a business sector worth US\$7 billion but dominated by foreign players such as Thai giant CP Group.

Vietnam is aggressively pursuing free trade agreements, another factor attracting local tycoons to the farm sector. Agreements were reached recently with South Korea and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and deals are edging closer with the European Union and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which will cover 12 countries with a combined GDP of US\$28 trillion, among them Australia, Japan and the US.