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Discovering Umbria

Italy's secluded heartland is a verdant region full of vinous opportunities.

>>> BY MONICA LARNER

T

he only Italian region without access to either the sea or international borders, Umbria is a solitary and soulful world apart. Often overshadowed by neighboring Tuscany and Lazio, this lush and sparsely populated land is affectionately referred to as the "green heart of Italy."

The gentle temperament of its ancient indigenous tribe, the Umbri, evidently played forward over the centuries to pro-



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duce A-list religious celebrities, including Saints Benedict, Clare, Rita, Valentine, and most famous of all, St. Francis of Assisi.

A virtuous and dutiful approach is also part of Umbria's wine identity. While Tuscany nabs the glitzy accolades and other neighboring regions excel in volume production, Umbria offers an array of grape varieties, wine styles and price points. It's a compact,

cautious and focused region that has something special for every palate.

"They say 'good wine comes in small barrel,'" says Riccardo Cotarella, a founder of the Falesco winery and *Wine Enthusiast's* Winemaker of the Year in 2001. "Umbria, and the wine revolution it has experienced over the past 30 years, makes for big potential in a small package," he says.

Born near Orvieto, Cotarella is

among Italy's most celebrated enologists and has worked to improve the reputation of Umbria since the 1990s.

Vines grow in virtually every part of the territory, with 13 *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC) wines and two *denominazione di origine controllata e garantita* (DOCG) wines spread between the towns of Perugia, Spello, Bevagna, Montefalco, Todi, Spoleto, Terni and Orvieto.



Montefalco

The hamlet of Montefalco, with its medieval rampart walls and Romanesque churches, is located 1,550 feet above sea level, approximately 30 miles southeast of Perugia. The surrounding Colli Martani hills are covered with cordon-trained vines that enjoy soft breezes and long summers.

Extensive new plantings that saw the region under vine increase from 250 acres in 1990 to 1,750 acres in 2010 has forced producers to market aggressively, and some excellent values are now available to consumers.



Common Grapes

Sagrantino

Although its origin is a mystery, one theory suggests Franciscan friars carried the grape from Asia Minor. Once used primarily for sweet sacramental wines, 120 different clones have been identified. The grape offers spicy aromas of cinnamon and nutmeg, dark ruby color and thick texture. Its plentiful tannins are softened through modern techniques and oak aging.

Sangiovese

Umbria's principal red variety, Sangiovese's fresh berry flavors make it a perfect blending partner to the austerity and firmness of Sagrantino. The grape's historic ties to Montefalco (and Central Italy in general) likely predate those of Sagrantino.

Common Wines

Sagrantino di Montefalco DOCG (or Montefalco Sagrantino)

Considered a rising star among Italy's elite circle of ageworthy red wines, Sagrantino di Montefalco has attracted the curious eye of wine lovers around the world. Deep historic ties to the territory and microclimate of Montefalco also distinguish the DOCG wine.

"You can't separate the two," says producer Marco Caprai. "Sagrantino and Montefalco share an extraordinarily intimate bond."

That identity has been the wine's competitive edge in foreign markets curious about the new flavors offered by little-known indigenous grapes.

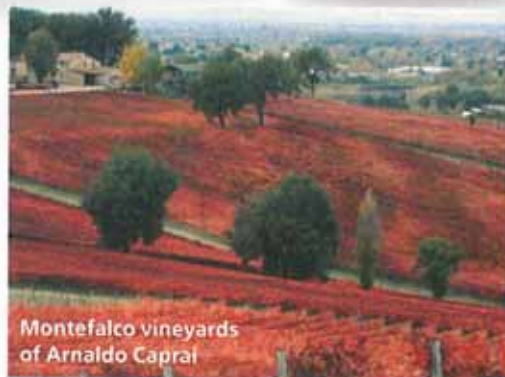
Sagrantino di Montefalco is a symbol of Umbria's winemaking excellence. "Umbria's two greatest mascots are Sagrantino and St. Francis," says Piero Fabrizi, a member of the Terre de' Trinci wine cooperative.

Rosso di Montefalco DOC

Less austere and powerful than Sagrantino di Montefalco, this red blend is generally made from 60–70% Sangiovese, 10–15% Sagrantino and 15–30% other grapes, often Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine shows bright berry flavors with enough structure to pair with lasagna, pork or grilled lamb shank.

Montefalco Sagrantino Passito DOCG

Made from 100% Sagrantino, this hearty dried-grape wine is a close cousin to the sweet ceremonial wines once made by local monks. Thick and viscous with an inky dark color, it pairs well with German chocolate cake.



Recommended Producers

Filippo Antonelli of Antonelli San Marco and Marco Caprai of Arnaldo Caprai have played important roles in the advancement and evolution of Sagrantino di Montefalco. Antonelli is a precision winemaker who consistently strives for the highest quality. Marco Caprai is an innovator and a savvy promoter credited with bringing this previously little-known wine to the global stage.

Other recommended producers: Benincasa, Cantina Tudernum, Cantine Novelli, Cesarini Sartori, Colpetrone, Goretti, Lungarotti, Madonna Alta, Paolo Bea, Peticiaia, Scacciadiavoli, Tabarrini, Tenuta Alzatura, Tenuta Castelbuono, Tenuta Rocca di Fabbri, Terre de' Trinci.

Torgiano

Located south of Perugia, Torgiano is a sleepy town with medieval walls and an impressive defensive tower located on a hill overlooking the Chiascio and Tiber rivers. It is located approximately 650 feet above sea level and is surrounded by tobacco fields and vineyards. Torgiano is home to Italy's most important wine museum, Museo del Vino Torgiano, founded by the Lungarotti family in 1974.



Common Grapes

Sangiovese

Recent scientific research suggests that the variety's true roots are in Southern Italy. It traveled north to Torgiano, where it enjoys ideal growing conditions in the alluvial soils of the river basin.

Canaiolo

With its big fruit flavors and soft tannins, this native grape is an ideal blending partner to Sangiovese.

Ciliegiolo

Named after the Italian word for "cherry," this native grape may have genetic links to Sangiovese. The two varieties are often blended together, but Ciliegiolo is sometimes bottled on its own in Umbria.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Borrowed from France, Cabernet Sauvignon shows an affinity for Umbria.

Common Wines

Bianco di Torgiano DOC

This easy-drinking white is 50–70% Trebbiano Toscano, 15–40% Grechetto and up to 15% other white grapes. In addition, the area is known for varietal expressions of Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Riesling Italico and even a sparkling wine called Torgiano Spumante, made from Chardonnay and



From left: Chiara Lungarotti, Maria Grazia Marchetti Lungarotti and Teresa Severini



Torgiano vineyards of Lungarotti

Pinot Nero. Umbrian whites are often vinified in stainless steel (not oak) and offer the crisp acidity necessary to pair with farro salad, grilled shrimp or baked fish.

Rosso di Torgiano DOC

Torgiano's red is a blend of up to 50% Sangiovese, 15–30% Canaiolo and up to 10% Trebbiano. The wine is freshly acidic, with bright berry flavors that would stand up to cheese omelets or mixed Italian appetizers. A rosé version is made from the same blend. Some Torgiano producers also make varietal wines from Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Nero.

Torgiano Rosso Riserva DOCG

The first wine to gain DOC (and later DOCG) status in Umbria, this sophisticated red is a

blend of 50–70% Sangiovese, 15–30% Canaiolo, 10% Trebbiano and up to 15% other grapes like Ciliegiolo or Montepulciano. The wines can age for 10 years or more, and they pair well with game, pork or sharp cheeses.

Recommended Producers

The main player in town is Cantine Lungarotti. This historic Umbrian family created the Torgiano wine identity and is its main ambassador. Founded by Giorgio Lungarotti in the early 1960s, the company is now run by daughter Chiara Lungarotti and stepdaughter Teresa Severini. They also manage Torgiano's biggest hotel, Le Tre Vaselle, and the family's celebrated wine and olive oil museums.

Other brands you may encounter include Antignano, Terre Margaritelli and Vignabaldo.

Orvieto and Lago di Corbara

Orvieto is the ultimate portrait of *bell'Italia*. Founded by the Etruscans in southern Umbria, 80 miles north of Rome, the town crowns the summit of a massive volcanic butte. Sheer tufa walls rise from the floor of the Tiber River Valley, eventually blending into the elegant city skyline and the massive Orvieto Cathedral. It's a powerful symbol of the joining forces of nature and mankind.

"All our wines show that Etruscan touch," says Bernardo Barberani from a perch near his family's winery. Overlooking a fog-covered Lago di Corbara, with Orvieto magnificent in the distance, he says, "We learned everything from them."



Common Grapes

Trebbiano

Locally known as Procanico, Trebbiano (also known as Ugni Blanc) is one of the most widely planted wine grapes in the world.

Grechetto

Grechetto has its origins in ancient Greece. It boasts thick skins, high sugars and late harvest times that make it suitable for dry and sweet wines alike.

Drupeggio

Also known as Canaiolo Bianco, this variety offers aromas of candied peach, honey and apricot. When attacked by *Botrytis cinerea*, or noble rot, it produces sweet wines similar to Sauternes.

Verdello

Known as Verdelho in Portugal, it is also used in Madeira production.

Common Wines

Orvieto DOC

The greater Orvieto production zone covers much of Terni province in Umbria and extends as far as



Viterbo in Lazio. The wine is available in various styles like *secco* (dry), *aboccolato* (slightly sweet), *amabile* (semisweet), *dolce* (sweet), *vendemmia tardiva* (late harvest) and *superiore*. Any one of these may appear on the label.

Orvieto Classico DOC

Classico refers to the coveted sub-region of the denomination where the best wines are made. Soil types that range from tufa and limestone to volcanic origins characterize this zone. Both Orvieto and Orvieto Classico contain at least 60% Trebbiano and Grechetto combined.

Rosso Orvietano DOC

A long list of red grapes are permitted in the local production of red wine. They include Aleatico, Barbera, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Canaiolo, Cesanese, Cilieggiolo, Colorino, Dolcetto, Merlot, Montepulciano, Pinot Nero and Sangiovese.

Muffa Nobile

As of 2010, producers have been allowed to use the phrase *muffa nobile* for dessert wines affected by botrytis.

Orvieto vineyards of Barberani



Lago di Corbara DOC

This up-and-coming region straddles Lake Corbara. Located on the course of the Tiber River between Orvieto, Baschi and Montecchio, the denomination applies solely to red wines similar in composition to Rosso Orvietano. The main varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Nero and Sangiovese.

Recommended Producers

Two of the most famous players include Riccardo Cotarella's Falesco (it makes wines from Umbria and Lazio) and the Antinori family's prestigious Castello della Sala property.

Other recommended producers from Orvieto and Lago di Corbara include Argillae, Barberani, Cantina Monrubio, Cantine Bigi, Decugnano dei Barbi, Palazzone and Tenuta di Salviano.