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Is The Adriatic Coast Home To Italy's Best Under-The-Radar Wines?



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I cover what's interesting in wine, spirits, food and travel.



The pecorino vineyards of Italy's Adriatic coast--facing the Apennine Mountains KATIE KELLY BELL

Deep in the reaches of Eastern Europe, somewhere near Croatia, a chill wind starts its journey, bobbing and weaving like a downhill skier towards the Adriatic where it skims the sea's surface, and pushes its way up the rolling hills that carpet Italy's Marche region—cooling the tender grape skins of Montepulciano and Verdicchio grapes. Here, in this quiet slice of Italy, wedged between mountains and sea, “is the perfect place to make wine,” says Michele Bernetti, third generation winemaker of the family-owned Umani Ronchi.



Michele Bernetti, CEO of Umani Ronchi wines standing in their Verdicchio vineyards KATIE KELLY BELL

This dual dose of climatic (and scenic) perfection makes it all the more astonishing that wine lovers remain unaware of the quality of the wines and the destination. The Marche (pronounced “MAR-kay”) and its southern neighbor Abruzzo, sit a few hours’ drive south of Venice. Both regions are hemmed in by the Apennine Mountain chain to the west and the Adriatic Sea to the east. The sea’s cooling breeze and the Apennines—which run down the center of Italy like a granite spine, create a unique climate dynamic for winemaking. It is not entirely clear why these two regions have remained underappreciated by international tourists—however, the Italians know better and after you are done reading this, so will you. Marche and Abruzzo are (for now) quiet, under-the-radar gems brimming with terrific wines.

Today In: Lifestyle



Wildflowers growing amongst the vines in Abruzzo—where polyculture is abundant. KATIE KELLY BELL

Bernetti, who is CEO of Umani Ronchi, has long been a champion of the potential within this slice of Italy. His family started in the wine business over a half century ago and Bernetti exhibits a special devotion to his less famous—but no less impressive—wine regions. He and his viticulturist Luigi Piersanti are my tour guides through this land of remarkable texture and variety. Piersanti spends his days like a wine gypsy visiting roughly 500 acres of vines over ten unique terroirs. It’s a lot to cover, emphasizing his point Piersanti sweeps his arm in a large arc, pointing to the mountains and the sea, “this is one of the few places you can ski and see the ocean at the same time.” In between is a countryside of breathtaking variety, dotted with olive orchards, corn and sunflower fields, as well as groves of peach, plum, and cherry. Polyculture and biodiversity define the region.



View of the Adriatic Sea from Umani Ronchi Vineyards KATIE KELLY BELL

When nature tosses together ocean breezes, mountainous influences, and biodiversity it sets the stage for successful winemaking, and industry critics show much admiration for these wines, especially Verdicchio, but consumers have not yet caught on. Bernetti concedes that quality was not always a priority in either the Marche or the Abruzzo. Decades ago Verdicchio was best known as the white wine in the fish bottle. In Abruzzo, large wine cooperatives valued quantity over quality. But, adds Bernetti, in fair defense of his own dedication to premium wines using only organic farming practices without irrigation, “Quality has improved significantly. In Abruzzo for example, just 15 years ago we had very few single family producers making wine—just big corporations who wanted quantity. Now the attention has been growing and quality has grown with it. We are one of those quality-minded companies who invested here to push level higher to raise the quality bar because of this region’s potential.” And, the region still delivers tremendous value, as Piersanti notes, “One hectare of land here costs 20x less than land in Piedmont or Tuscany.” The wines reflect that value—delivering incredible complexity and flavor for a lot less money than Italy’s more popular wines.

Now is the time to stock up—before these wines become more expensive and harder to find, below is a shopping list to get you started (but if you want to taste the sparkling you’ll have to fly it Italy):

Marche & Abruzzo Whites—Better than Your Chardonnay

Umani Ronchi Vecchie Vigne Verdicchio dei Castelli

di Jesi (Marche): This is an exquisite white composed of 100% organic Verdicchio from a single estate in Montecarotto. The combination of old vine complexity (vines are over 40 years old) and extended aging lend this wine its verve and richness. Break up with your current white and try this—racy, but rich with botanical edges and a core of freshness. Says Bernetti of Verdicchio: “Verdicchio is a challenging grape to cultivate but the rewards have been plentiful- wine critics see Verdicchio as one of the most interesting Italian white varieties —the market isn’t aware yet but critics love it.”

Umani Ronchi Plenio Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi

(Marche): Aged in large oak barrels, this expression of Verdicchio shows ample power and a tropical richness. The stunning finish lingers –perfect with creamy pasta dishes.

Centovie Colli Apruntini ICT Pecorino (Abruzzo):

Made from 100% organic Pecorino grapes and aged in oak and concrete, this Abruzzo white reflects the mineral nature of Pecorino with a crisp saline edge tempered by lemon cream and floral notes.

Marche & Abruzzo Reds—Better than Your Pinot Noir

Campo San Giorgio Conero Riserva (Marche): This bottle looks like a grand cru burgundy, and it has overtones of one as well. Made from 100% organic Montepulciano grapes, the wine is aged 12 months in small oak and 12 more in larger casks. The palate shows red cherries and spice tucked into a silky tannic grip. Supple, complex and straight-up delicious.

Pelago Marche Rosso, IGT (Marche): This densely fruited complex red blend is composed of organic Montepulciano, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The take-no-prisoners palate of power, depth and complexity shows blackberry, black plum and cassis over warm spices and vanilla. Yum, bring on the roasted meats.

Centovie Montepulciano D’Abruzzo DOC (Abruzzo):

Made with 100% organic Montepulciano grapes aged (partly) 12-14 months in smaller oak barrels. Black cherry and warm spices on the palate give way to a balanced finish of earth and warm spice. Decadent but polished—delightful.



Plenio Verdicchio--from 1999, proof that these wines are cellar-worthy. KATIE KELLY BELL

ONLY on LOCATION: The sparkling wines of Umani Ronchi are reason enough to travel to Marche and Abruzzo. Made in the method champenoise style, these bubblyies show masterful skill with fine pearly bead, layers of complexity and refined mouthfeel. Some of the best Italian sparklings I have tasted—in the same league as Ferrari Trento from Italy’s Trentodoc.

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