

Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

That's Verdicchio!

A leader for whites in Italy's "next" place



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Michele Bernetti (right) tasting Verdicchio with his father, Massimo

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Michele Bernetti pauses in the shade of an oak tree overlooking the rippling landscape of the Italian Marche. The hills between the Adriatic Sea and the Apennine Mountains are covered with a patchwork of wheat fields, sunflowers, chickpeas and vineyards planted with the area's signature white, Verdicchio.

"Verdicchio is not a trendy variety," says Bernetti, 49, the athletically trim scion of the family that owns the region's leading winery, Umani Ronchi, and the official ambassador for Marche wines at the massive 2015 Expo Milano exhibition. "Also, it is complicated to pronounce."

Verdicchio had its moment of fame in the 1970s, when the Marche (pronounced *Mar-kay*) produced lots of inexpensive wine sold in glass amphorae and fish-shaped bottles and served in stateside Italian eateries.

In recent decades, the Marche has undergone a quality revolution with the rest of Italy. But today, Verdicchio—with its characteristic unctuous mineral feel, high acidity and a bitter-almond kick—is more popular in Northern Europe and Japan than in the United States, where it has fallen into relative obscurity, a niche wine represented on better Italian wine lists.

"Some people still consider Verdicchio an easy-drinking white wine," says Bernetti. "But it is one of Italy's most important varieties: It has personality, it has character, it has aging potential and it's very Italian."

Though heralded by travel writers for years as "the next Tuscany," the Marche has been slow to gain public recognition outside of Italy. Sprawling along 100 miles of Italy's eastern coast, the region is largely separated from Tuscany to the west by landlocked Umbria. Its Renaissance city of Urbino—birthplace of Raphael—holds one of the world's most prized painting collections. In summer, Italians flock to the Marche's beaches, where they drink Verdicchio with a bounty of seafood.

The hinterlands remain rustically authentic and agricultural, with vineyards climbing on clay-limestone slopes up to 1,500 feet around the communes of Jesi and Matelica, Verdicchio's centers. "In the Marche, we have our feet in the soil," says Bernetti.

The Umani Ronchi farm, in the heart of the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC's Classico zone, was taken over in the 1960s by engineer Roberto Bianchi, who entrusted his son-in-law Massimo Bernetti with the estate.

Massimo, now 79, believed in the potential of Verdicchio, expanding the winery's export markets, vineyards and lineup of wines. (The estate's symbol, a shooting star, comes from his family's aristocratic crest.) Michele joined his father at the winery in the early 1990s, after a youth spent as an accomplished elite junior skier and economics student.

In an effort to raise quality, for a time in the '90s, Michele's vineyard teams drastically cut vineyard yields and raised planting densities, but the formula didn't work for Verdicchio. "Verdicchio is already quite powerful; you don't need to increase concentration," he says. "You need to find balance."

Umani Ronchi now has about 500 acres under vine, farmed organically, in the Marche and the neighboring Abruzzo region to the south, source of some of its reds. Working with consulting enologist Giuseppe Caviola from Piedmont, the winery produces about 225,000 cases annually, spanning more than 20 wines, including Marche reds such as easy-drinking Lacrima di Morra d'Alba and Montepulcianos from Rosso Conero.

But the stars are whites whose names are difficult to recite. The flagship Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Casal di Serra Vecchie Vigne (2012, 90 points, \$35), from vines planted in the early 1970s, is aged in concrete vats, and the Castelli di Jesi Verdicchio Riserva Classico Plenio (2012, 90 points, \$35) is fermented and aged partly in large oak casks.

Despite its size, Umani Ronchi often acts like a small experimental winery. In recent years, the Bernettis have produced small quantities of lively *metodo classico* sparklers, blending Verdicchio with Chardonnay. Its bone-dry vintage sparkler, called La Hoz, is aged 52 months on lees.

From the Marche hills, the future looks bright. About 100 producers bottle estate wine in the Castelli di Jesi and Matelica appellations, many working with different vineyard *crus* for varied results and styles of Verdicchio.

"We are losing the idea that the area makes only one kind of wine," says Bernetti. "Now that a good number of producers have reached a good level, we can go to the next step."