



Italy, Marche: A Spotlight on Umani Ronchi

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| Vintage | Wines | RP |
|---------|---|-----|
| 2016 | Umani Ronchi Conero Riserva Campo San Giorgio | 95 |
| 2016 | Umani Ronchi Pelago | 94+ |
| 2015 | Umani Ronchi Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Centovie | 93 |
| 2018 | Umani Ronchi Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Vecchie Vigne | 93 |
| 2016 | Umani Ronchi Conero Riserva Cùmaro | 93 |

[View All Wines](#)

The audiobook I am listening to now as I take my sunset walk each evening of this never-ending pandemic is *The Places in Between* by Scotsman Rory Stewart. It details the author's journey, completed entirely by foot, across Afghanistan in 2002 soon after the fall of the Taliban. One passage towards the start of his adventure offers a glimpse of what may have motivated Stewart to set out on his epic trek:

"I thought about evolutionary historians who argued that walking was a central part of what it meant to be human. Our two-legged motion was what first differentiated us from the apes. It freed our hands for tools and carried us on the long marches out of Africa. As a species, we colonized the world on foot. Most of human history was created through contacts conducted at walking pace, even when some rode horses. I thought of the pilgrimages to Compostela in Spain; to Mecca; to the source of the Ganges; and of wandering dervishes, sadhus, and friars who approached God on foot. The Buddha meditated by walking and Wordsworth composed sonnets while striding beside the lakes.

"Bruce Chatwin concluded from all this that we would think and live better and be closer to our purposes as humans if we moved continually on foot across the surface of the earth. I was not sure I was living or thinking any better."

That nomadic angst rang familiar as I tasted this flight of wines from Le Marche's Umani Ronchi wine estate. At the end of August 2016, I set out to walk across Italy from the Adriatic Coast, over the Apennine Mountains to the Tyrrhenian side of the peninsula. Much of my trip would take me through Le Marche, starting at Ancona, before crossing Umbria and lastly Tuscany where I was to finish at Orbetello.

A "marche" (from the German "mark") was the word for a borderline province or hinterland during the Holy Roman Empire. As a region further away, that's where Le Marche gets its name.



Le Marche on Italy's Adriatic flank sees marly-arenaceous sea bluffs and the distinctive Monte Conero promontory. The Umani Ronchi winery is based in the little town of Osimo.

This sun-kissed side of Italy at the foothills of the Apennines offers enormous beauty with softly rolling hills covered in vines, little yellow flowers between the rows and a very luminous quality of light that comes as the morning sun reflects off the surface of the sea.

Le Marche has important sites of antiquity, prehistoric archeological digs, ancient amphitheatres, temples, churches and abbeys. Delightful art cities Ascoli Piceno, Loreto, Pesaro, Ancona, Urbina and the university town Macerata dot the landscape.

Le Marche is home to Urbino, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the birthplace of artist Raphael di Sanzio. The city was one of the major capitals of the Renaissance, attracting artists, scholars and nobility from across Europe. Today, the city walls, the Ducal Palace, bastions and cathedral remain beautifully intact. Urbino is said to take its name from the Latin root *urbis* for "city," eventually morphing into "urban."

Distances, destinations and cities in Le Marche are built to the measurements of mankind. The cities are accessible and within walking distance. In fact, Le Marche is one of Italy's best destinations for long-distance walkers because hotels, restaurants and resting spots are numerous and evenly spread. Everything in Le Marche is graciously calculated to human scale.



Vineyards planted to the Verdicchio grape (Photo courtesy of the Umani Ronchi winery)

Roman legions were said to march from 25 to 30 kilometers per day along the ancient trade route *Salvia Gallica* that cuts through Le Marche from Rome to the north. The guidebook I was using when I set out on my walk aimed for 20 kilometers of walking per day, although my averages were in fact much closer to 10 or 15 because I stopped often to take pictures or read about my surroundings. My dog Tappo came along and was a surprisingly good sport during these first few days of our big adventure. His little paws navigated the hottest parts of the asphalted roads.

Our journey would be cut short, however. On the evening of August 23, 2016, just a few days into my walk, I checked into a hotel not far from Osimo. At 3:36 a.m., I was jolted from bed. I grew up in Southern California and earthquakes are a familiar sensation. I think I recognized the quake by the sound you hear moments before the shaking starts. When the tremor struck, I knew it was bad, and I could feel that it was very shallow and violent. I knew what this meant for all the remote, stone-built villages of the Apennines. The hotel guests on the floor above me screamed, doors banged and the ceiling lamp swung widely. Tappo's black eyes were shiny in the darkness of the room.

The 6.2-magnitude earthquake killed 299 people, injured 388 and left 4,500 homeless. The epicenter was in a mountainous area near the borders of Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo and Le Marche, about 150 kilometers inland from where I slept. The towns I had planned to walk through were heavily damaged that terrible night, and the main roads cutting through Central Italy were closed to allow for the passage of emergency vehicles only.

The towns of Amatrice, Accumoli and Pescara del Tronto were largely reduced to rubble and broken rock. As Italy went into national mourning, Tappo and I found a train back to Rome. Each tiny station we passed along the way was crammed with families and people fleeing the devastation with their belongings and hastily packed suitcases.

I tell this story for two reasons: The first is because I am forever touched by the courage and resilience of those who suffered that terrible earthquake in 2016, and the second reason is because I feel a special, more intimate connection to Le Marche because I walked across so much of it. Walking is most certainly a central part of what it means to be human.



The Monte Conero promontory can be seen in the distance. (Photo courtesy of the Umani Ronchi winery)

Umani Ronchi is one of the leading wineries in Le Marche. Gino Umani Ronchi founded the company in 1957 in the small village of Cupramontana. Roberto Bianchi and his son-in-law Massimo Bernetti became main partners in 1968, and five years later, Massimo Bernetti would take charge. His son Michele Bernetti, who runs the winery today, joined in 1990.



Massimo and Michele Bernetti (Photo courtesy of the Umani Ronchi winery)

With the help of Tuscan Consulting Enologist Giacomo Tachis, the winery introduced Pelago, a blend of 50% Montepulciano, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Merlot that was revolutionary for the region when it was first made in 1994. By 2000, Umani Ronchi had a new state-of-the-art winery in Osimo. In 2001, Umani Ronchi began its commitment to organic farming, thanks to a 30-hectare project in neighboring Abruzzo. Today, it cultivates 210 hectares of vines across two regions, Le Marche and Abruzzo.



Michele Bernetti tells me the 2016 vintage was cool with big shifts between day and nighttime temperatures. Yields were generous and the vintage saw intense and pure aromas, especially in the white wines. The 2018 vintage was excellent for both whites and reds, and it was also considered cool, rendering crisp acidity and lower alcoholic content to the wines. The late-ripening Montepulciano grape did very nicely in this growing season, showing easy color extraction and integrated tannins. The 2019 vintage was unusual, with mild spring temperatures followed by a very cold and wet month of May. The growing season got off to a late start but was pushed forward by heat in July. Ripening was balanced, with a little less fruit weight in the red wines.



Local cuisine is heavily influenced by both surf and turf. Brodetto Marchigiano is a seafood stew. Macerata is famous for thinly layered lasagna called Vincisgrassi, and meat-stuffed olives from Ascoli Piceno are a popular dish found in Le Marche and beyond.



I set out to walk across Italy (starting from the Adriatic side of the peninsula in Le Marche to the Tyrrhenian side in Tuscany) but was forced to stop when a devastating earthquake struck in the early hours of August 24, 2016.



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