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BOLGHERI: ITALY'S HOTTEST WINE REGION

Sassicaia
Leads The Way

BAROLO 2013:
CLASSIC VINTAGE,
GREAT WINES

EXPLORING
ITALY'S MARCHE

CALIFORNIA RHÔNES:
WHAT TO BUY

GREAT VALUES
OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Nicolò Incisa della
Rocchetta and daughter
Priscilla of Sassicaia



Massimo (left) and Michele Bernetti's pioneering estate, Umani Ronchi, has long been at the forefront of quality winemaking in Marche.

Marche Time

TUCKED BETWEEN THE ADRIATIC SEA AND THE APENNINE MOUNTAINS OF CENTRAL ITALY, THE REGION IS AN UNCHARTED SOURCE OF QUALITY WINES

By Alison Napjus

Italy's Marche wine region has flown under the radar of most U.S. consumers. Small and relatively isolated, Marche draws more Italian tourists than international travelers to its pristine beaches and hilly terrain, meaning the area's producers have largely missed the chance to introduce outsiders to their wines. But it's an area worth seeking out as quality continues to rise and producers explore export markets.

The heart of Marche lies about 100 miles southeast of Florence as the crow flies, bordered by the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Apennine Mountains on its western flank. This varied topography is one of the keys to the region's growing success with quality wine production. The Apennines form a protective barrier for vineyards against more aggressive weather, while winds from the mountains provide

abundant ventilation, particularly in the northern half of the region, where a more continental climate prevails. Vineyards to the south enjoy a Mediterranean climate; they're more strongly impacted by the Adriatic Sea, including the cooling fog that's a regular presence in these sites. Only 3 percent of Marche's surface area is flat, so hillside vineyards are a given, and calcareous, clay and/or limestone soils dominate, depending on the appellation.

This diversity of *terroirs* is reflected in the region's broad range of wine styles. Marche boasts five DOCG appellations and 15 DOCs, whose wines are subject not only to geographical delimitations of vineyards and grape sources, but also to regulated percentages of specified grape varieties, yields, alcohol levels, aging regimens and more. However, a third of these DOCGs and DOCs were established

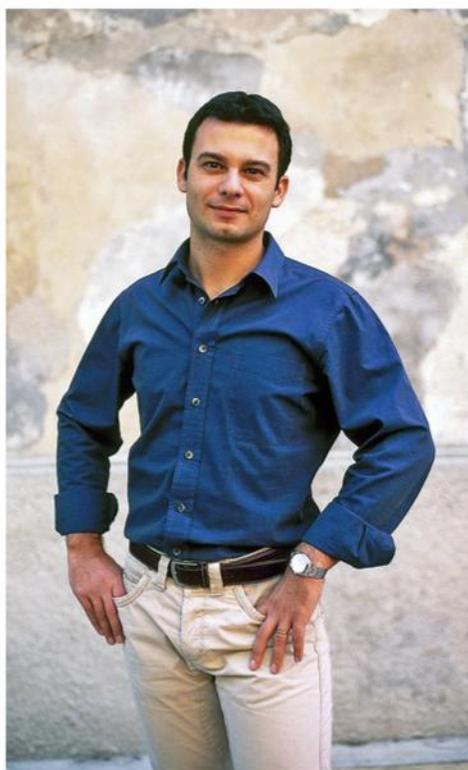


Vineyards surrounding the ancient town of Jesi, not far from the Adriatic Sea, yield distinctive versions of Verdicchio, Marche's most important white grape. *Riserva* bottlings from the area have been recognized with their own DOCG.

only in the past 10 to 20 years, emphasizing Marche's accelerated path toward identifying and highlighting the best from the region, as wine production moves from the area's quantity-focused past.

Still, in 2016 about 65 percent of the region's 11-million-case production was labeled as Italy's "anything goes" *Vino da Tavola* or the slightly more regulated Marche IGT, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). Most bottlings of *Vino da Tavola* don't leave the country, and of the two categories, U.S. wine drinkers are more likely to find Marche IGTs on retail shelves and restaurant wine lists. As in most Italian regions, the IGT category in Marche gives producers a lot of leeway, allowing for a range of styles (including sparkling and dessert wines) from a long list of approved grape varieties sourced from vineyards throughout the region.

As a result, the best of these IGT bottlings span everything from ambitious high-end projects that don't fit DOC or DOCG regulations or delimited vineyard areas to well-made, easy-drinking values. Domodimonti's dense Marche *Passione e Visione* 2012 (91 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, \$80), from 100 percent Petit Verdot, and Il Pollenza's Marche 2011 (90, \$115), a fragrant Bordeaux blend (Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot with Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot), are examples of the former. Saladini Pilastrini's Marche *Pregio del Conte* 2015 (89, \$20), an herbaceous blend of Aglianico and Montepulciano, and



Left: Gianluca Garofoli represents the fifth-generation at his family estate, which makes excellent wines from vineyards across Marche. Right: The cellar at Il Pollenza is more than 20 feet below ground, where the winery ages its highly rated reds in French oak *barriques*.

Garofoli's Marche Rosato *Kòmaros* 2016 (85, \$13), a creamy rosé, are samples of the latter.

Beyond the Marche IGT, the region's historic wine appellations shine while offering clearer definition in terms of what to expect in the bottle. As a whole, white wine makes up more than 50 percent of the region's production. In recent years, the local *Passerina* and *Pecorino* white grapes have been gaining momentum. They show particularly well from the *Offida* appellation, which achieved DOCG status in 2011. But the traditional flagship from Marche is wine produced from the local *Verdicchio* variety. The region's reds are traditionally based on the *Montepulciano* grape.

~ VERDICCHIO ~

Marche's signature white variety yields crisp and mineral, lemon- and herb-laced wines that pair beautifully with the region's seafood. *Verdicchio* is a vigorous grape, and the best producers utilize pruning, green harvests and cover crops between vine rows to control its tendency to overproduce.

"The big effort with *Verdicchio* is to make it not 'too big,'" says Michele Bernetti, of his family's *Umani Ronchi* winery. "It can be very generous—especially the sugar levels right before harvest. ... It can be overdone and become excessive, and when this happens you lose the freshness, the ageability, the drinkability."

DNA profiling has proven that *Verdicchio* is genetically identical to Veneto's *Trebbiano di Soave* variety, but vineyards around



TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: SIME/STOCK PHOTO

the Marche towns of Jesi and Matelica impart distinctive local character to Verdicchio bottlings, based on their differing *terroirs*.

The Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC consists of rolling inland hills of clay-dominated soils set just west of Marche's port capital of Ancona. These bottlings are typically light- to medium-bodied and open-knit, framed by sleek acidity. By contrast, whites from the Verdicchio di Matelica DOC, from vineyards set on the Apennine foothills located at the western edge of the region, are often creamier, with a fuller mouthfeel. (Both appellations additionally allow the production of sparkling and dessert-style wines, which are also produced from a minimum of 85 percent Verdicchio.)

In capable hands and from top vineyard sites, Verdicchio shows good potential for aging. With five to 10 years in the bottle, the best versions begin to exhibit characteristics akin to those of aged Chablis: a baseline of petrol-tinged minerality and a creamy texture, along with complex accents of straw or chamomile to the baked or dried fruit notes. In recognition of this potential, two DOCGs were established in 2010 for *riserva* bottlings from the Jesi and Matelica DOCs: Castelli di Jesi Verdicchio Riserva and Verdicchio di Matelica Riserva, each of which requires at least 18 months' aging prior to release. Several of Marche's top whites are labeled under these DOCGs.

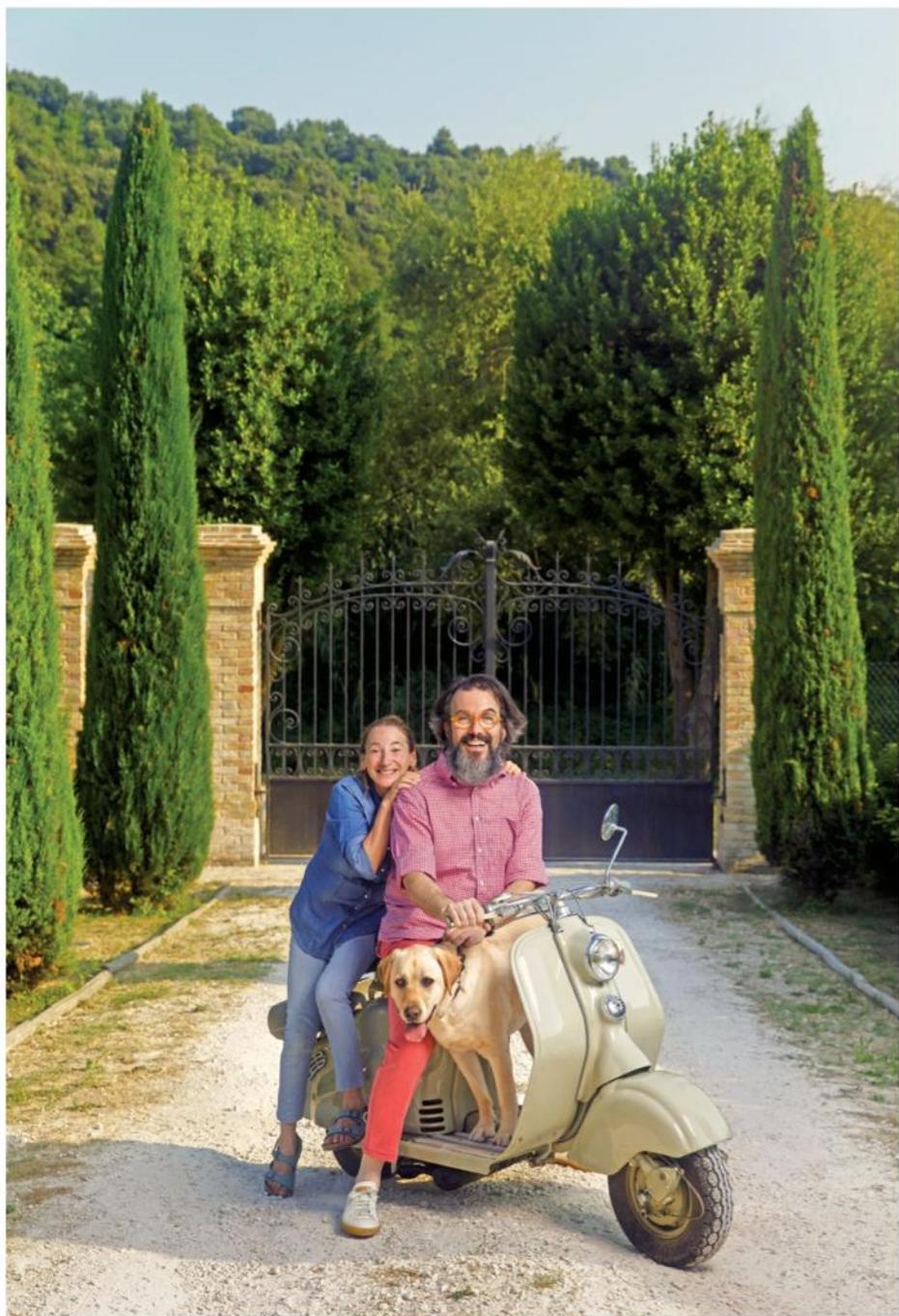
MONTEPULCIANO

High-yielding and late-ripening, Montepulciano begets robust and sometimes rustic wines in various areas across central Italy, most prominently the Abruzzo region, directly to the south of Marche, where the variety enjoys greater fame. But the wines find more elegance in Marche, which is the northernmost limit for plantings of the grape. Neither region's Montepulciano, however, should be confused with the Sangiovese-based *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* from Tuscany.

"Montepulciano [in Marche] represents a challenge to be something more than the norm, to show many different styles," says Federico Curtaz, winemaker at Fattoria Le Terrazze, which is owned by the Terni family. "Ripening of Montepulciano is slow, so very risky. Harvest is at the end of October, even the start of November. But to find wines of harmony, we need to wait until the grapes are entirely ripe, even if we're on the edge of the weather by the middle of October."

Fattoria Le Terrazze is located in the Rosso Conero DOC just south of Ancona, one of the best areas for Montepulciano in Marche. The appellation's hilly, seaside vineyards are largely planted in chalk- and clay-laced soils, yielding wines that are typically medium-bodied, with supple tannins and flavors of dark fruit and berry accented by woody spice.

As with Marche's Verdicchio DOCs, Rosso Conero encompasses the Conero DOCG, a *riserva* bottling from the area. Both Rosso Conero and Conero require a minimum of 85 percent Montepulciano, but whereas Rosso Conero allows a number of different grape varieties to make up the remainder of the blend, the Conero DOCG



Based in the coastal area of Cupra Marittima, Eleonora Rossi and Marco Casolanetti of Oasi degli Angeli have won acclaim for their ripe-style red called Kurni, made from Montepulciano.

specifies that only Sangiovese (15 percent maximum) may be blended in. Rosso Conero also has no aging requirement, while the *riservas* must be aged for at least two years before release.

South of Rosso Conero, the larger Rosso Piceno DOC, encompassing the southeastern corner of the Marche region, offers an easy-drinking introduction to Montepulciano blended with Sangiovese. Typically produced in greater quantities, bottlings of Rosso Piceno may be more readily available than those from Rosso Conero and Conero; stylistically, they offer berry, herb and spice notes with brighter acidity, as well as softer tannins.

The chart that accompanies this story highlights some of the best examples of the diverse wines from Marche. An even better understanding of the region can be gained from exploring its beautiful scenery and historic cities firsthand; for a traveler's guide, see "New Frontier," beginning on page 70. Marche is a hidden gem among Italy's many treasures, worthy of a spotlight to capture the attention of wine lovers and let the region's wines shine.

Senior editor Alison Napjus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Marche.

Alison Napjus' Recommended Wines From Marche

Nearly 75 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/043018. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
UMANI RONCHI Conero Campo San Giorgio Riserva 2012 A lovely nose of sandalwood and tea rose leads to a finely meshed range of juicy, sun-dried black cherry, fig cake and dried marjoram flavors in this red, while the sculpted tannins form a supple frame.	92	\$87
DOMODIMONTI Marche Passione e Visione 2012 A balanced red, with dense, velvety tannins and fleshy layers of crushed blackberry, woody spice, fig cake and dried mint notes. Clean-cut and minerally on the finish. Petit Verdot.	91	\$80
OASI DEGLI ANGELI Marche Kurni 2013 A well-spiced red, in a ripe style, this verges on a sweet dessert character, but the bright acidity, sculpted tannins and savory notes push it back into red wine territory. Montepulciano.	91	\$120
UMANI RONCHI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Casal di Serra Vecchie Vigne 2015 This white shows fine balance, with sleek acidity married to flavors of melon, dried apricot and lemon curd. A bright, creamy and medium-bodied version, with a lasting, minerally finish.	91	\$38
DOMODIMONTI Marche Il Messia 2012 Hints of dried mint and star anise lace the pure black cherry and cassis fruit in this elegant, medium- to full-bodied red, which is stylish but not over-the-top. Merlot and Montepulciano.	90	\$30
GAROFOLI Conero Grosso Agontano Riserva 2012 Blackberry coulis and black raspberry fruit flavors are ripe and tangy in this well-knit, medium-bodied red, underscored by fragrant hints of tarry mineral, licorice snap and violet, with good balance.	90	\$35
GAROFOLI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Podium 2014 An elegant, creamy white, backed by sleek, citrusy acidity, this shows a subtle mix of poached pear, grated ginger and stony mineral flavors, accented by hints of crushed almond.	90	\$25
IL POLLENZA Marche Cosmino 2011 Hints of graphite and <i>garrigue</i> accent the rich flavors of crushed black currant, dried marjoram and star anise in this finely meshed red. Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc.	90	\$54
SARTARELLI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Balciana 2015 Rich with hints of butterscotch and smoke, this lightly fleshy white frames flavors of baked apple and spice with enough soft acidity for balance. Medium-bodied, with a lingering, creamy finish.	90	\$38
FATTORIA LE TERRAZZE Conero Sassi Neri Riserva 2013 A harmonious red, with supple tannins married to a subtle mesh of crème de cassis and blackberry clafoutis flavors that show aromatic accents of dried thyme, graphite and fresh, loamy earth.	90	\$36
UMANI RONCHI Marche Pelago 2013 An elegant, medium- to full-bodied red, offering sleek tannins layered with subtle flavors of currant, mulberry, dried thyme, fig cake and smoke. Cabernet Sauvignon, Montepulciano and Merlot.	90	\$56
VELENOSI Offida Ludi 2013 A balanced red, with flavors of red and black currant fruit, woody spice, singed orange peel and fresh thyme. Montepulciano with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.	90	\$65
VELENOSI Rosso Piceno Superiore Roggio del Filare 2013 High-toned notes of violet and pomegranate seed accent dark crème de cassis, tarry smoke and melted licorice flavors in this creamy red, which is well-knit and supple, with a lingering finish.	90	\$55

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BISCI Verdicchio di Matelica Riserva Senex 2010 A lovely, harmonious white, svelte with a vibrant backbone of acidity, showing detailed flavors of melon, chamomile, almond and lemon.	91	\$22
BISCI Marche Villa Castiglioni 2011 This elegant red is fragrant, with ripe cherry, sandalwood, dried raspberry, citrus and licorice notes. Sangiovese with Merlot.	90	\$19
BOCCADIGABBIA Ribona Colli Maceratesi Le Grane 2016 There's a zesty, mineral-tinged underpinning to the creamy flavors in this fresh, balanced and light- to medium-bodied white.	89	\$15
TENUTA DI TAVIGNANO Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Misco 2016 This fresh white shows flavors of poached apricot, fresh tarragon and lemon meringue that are layered with bright acidity.	89	\$19
BOCCADIGABBIA Rosso Piceno 2014 An easy-drinking red, with light, chewy tannins framing dark and brambly flavors of blackberry, woody spice, dried fig and licorice.	88	\$18
CASALFARNETO Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Fontavecchia 2016 This white is well-cut, with mineral and spice notes accenting flavors of crunchy pear and preserved lemon.	88	\$17
GAROFOLI Rosso Conero Piancarda 2014 An elegant red, light- to medium-bodied, with a vivacious mix of ripe mulberry and plum fruit that shows graphite, herb and allspice hints.	88	\$16
VELENOSI Rosso Piceno Superiore Brecciarolo 2015 A chewy, medium-bodied red, showing dusty herb and spice notes layered with dried currant and black raspberry fruit.	88	\$16
VELENOSI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico QuerciAntica 2016 A dry and tangy white, with flavors of candied lime and lemon zest, pink grapefruit and fresh herb. Lively and balanced.	88	\$16
GAROFOLI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Macrina 2016 Citrusy verbena and lemon peel flavors are layered with crunchy white peach and mineral notes in this lithe white.	87	\$14
SALADINI PILASTRI Falerio 2016 A lively white, showing pineapple, star fruit and melon notes layered with accents of stone, basil and ground ginger. Chardonnay blend.	87	\$10
SALADINI PILASTRI Rosso Piceno 2016 Crushed black raspberry and fig cake notes are lightly spiced in this clean-cut, chewy, medium-bodied red.	87	\$13
SARTARELLI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 2016 A fresh and fragrant white, with orchard blossom and spice notes wafting through flavors of yellow apple, slivered almond and saline.	87	\$18
CANTINA COLLI RIPANI Passerina Offida Ninfa Ripana Gold 2016 Fragrant on the nose and more subtle on the creamy palate, this white shows hints of white cherry, crushed hazelnut and peach yogurt.	86	\$15
UMANI RONCHI Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Villa Bianchi 2016 A light-bodied white backed by crisp acidity, showing poached pear, lemon curd and stone notes, with a pleasing plumpness.	86	\$14
GAROFOLI Marche Rosato Kòmaros 2016 This pale rosé is the color of ballet slippers, offering a creamy palate of wild strawberry, watermelon, fresh ginger and stone.	85	\$13