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WINESOFITALY

ABRUZZO

A Diverse & Scenic Region

Pacentro is renowned for its springs and fresh mountain water that comes from the snow of the Majella

A lesser known wine region, situated on the Adriatic coast east of Rome, Abruzzo is diverse and scenic and worth visiting for its amazing wines and native grapes, writes [Michèle Shah](#)

Best known for its dramatic mountain scenery, Abruzzo's landscape is surprisingly diverse with 65% of its land designated to national parks, such as the Gran Sasso and Parco della Majella. No other region in Italy or Europe can boast such extensive protected areas or diversity. For example, it's possible to pick up live scampi from the coast at Giulianova, in the province of Teramo and within 40 minutes, at a distance of 30 km, you can reach the snowy peaks of the Gran Sasso, while stopping on your way to collect some truffles in Campli in Teramo.

In a world of climate change, Abruzzo is able to seek out cooler areas for new plantings. Its viticulture can 'climb' the mountains and dig its new roots into virgin habitats and uncontaminated soil, untouched by the industrial activity of modern society. In a sense the 'undeveloped' aspect of Abruzzo has benefitted its agriculture.

The region has three main, historical DOCs, including the red Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and white Trebbiano d'Abruzzo. The third DOC of Controguerra also produces wines based on Montepulciano and other native grapes,

Punta Aderci – From sandy beaches along the Adriatic Sea to snowcapped mountains, Abruzzo is known for its scenic landscape

Photo: Renato Cieri



The Torre di Cerrano stands out clearly on the horizon on a small hill close to the beach.

Photo: Lorenzo Sgalippa





Above: Luigi Valori in the vineyard with his 55-year-old vines. Below: Bottles of Valori Pecorino and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo



Pecorino's revived attraction lies in its freshness and high acidity as well as structure and slightly higher alcohol levels which give it good smoothness

although a small percentage of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc is permitted in the blend. Some of the most historic wines come from the Teramo area, where the DOCG exists for Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Colline Teramane, while some classic rosé wines, known as Cerasuolo, are under their own DOC appellation.

The Montepulciano grape has gained a substantial following for its fruit-forward, approachable reds. The Trebbiano grape is best known for dry, light and easy drinking wines with subtle citrus flavours. However, quality Trebbiano and Montepulciano can both produce complex age-worthy wines.

A second DOCG appellation Terre Tollesi or Tullum DOCG area was created more recently in 2019. This historic area with ancient Roman roots is mainly planted to the indigenous white grapes, Pecorino and Passerina with the pergola training system which is the most widespread trellising system in Abruzzo, representing more than 80% of vineyards in the region, whereas new vine training systems are planted to rows of spurred cordon or guyot.

There is a definite trend and revival of Pecorino vines which due to its early ripening and scarce production almost disappeared and were replaced by Trebbiano. Pecorino's revived attraction lies in its freshness and high acidity as well as structure and slightly higher alcohol levels, which give it good smoothness.

"Trebbiano is an amazing variety but you need to reduce the yields. Abruzzo was a poor region with a lot of wine and in the face of poverty, we couldn't throw anything away," explains Luigi Valori of Valori, a medium sized winery with 20ha of vines exporting 80% of production. "I don't produce any Trebbiano now, I am a Pecorino freak. It was a challenge because when I planted Pecorino some 10 years ago no one, or very few, believed in it as production was lower with high acidity."

Valori is an organic viticulturalist by training, and his 55-year-old Vigna Sant' Angelo, single

vineyard, produces excellent Montepulciano Riserva. According to Valori, the thick vine trunks on these old vines contain all the necessary nutrients for the plant to survive, even in stressed climatic conditions, with roots that go down seven metres deep where they find water in the sandy soils. "Sandy soils are poor soils, therefore good for phenolic development and a long vegetative ripening, producing elegant wines," says Valori.

Abruzzo's production with an average vineyard property of one or two hectares has a history of cooperatives, which today counts for 80% of its production and include medium to large cooperatives, Bottled wine is a fairly new concept in Abruzzo. Until the 1980s most wine was sold in bulk by large cooperatives, which still produce large amounts of bulk wine, alongside a wide range of well-priced bottled wines.

One of the largest cooperatives is a group of nine consortiums in the area of Chieti under



the gigantic Consorzio Citra with 7,000ha and a production of 18m bottles. Established in 1960, Cantina Tollo with 780 members is very much tied to Abruzzo's cooperative history. It controls some 3,000ha of vineyards planted to indigenous varietals such as Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, Pecorino, Passerina and Cococciola.

Cantina Miglianico a historic cooperative founded in 1961 by the priest, Don Vincenzo Pizzica to help local producers, has 200 members and 500 ha, producing 1.8 million bottles under its own brand, plus 300,000 for a private label.

"Today, we are looking at a new reality here in Abruzzo," says Davide Acerra who manages the marketing and development of the Consorzio Vini d'Abruzzo "We have backbench producers of great value with highly respected and award-winning wines and we have a solid belt of cooperatives which absorb the smaller grape growers giving breath to export markets, while more recently we have a new generation

Di Sipro Estate tasting room at the beautiful 35ha Di Sipro Estate, in the province of Chieti, a farmstead of stature



of small to medium winemakers that are producing some really exciting, quality market driven wines, as well as natural, biodynamic and organic production. The bottom line is we have different kinds of wines that cater to the market in quality, price and style,” explains Acerra.

The history of Abruzzo’s wine production is not merely limited to cooperative production, however. The region represents important historic names connected to Italy’s viticultural elite. Historical producers such as Francesco Valentini, famous for top quality traditional Montepulciano d’Abruzzo and Trebbiano d’Abruzzo wines, along with Emidio Pepe, known for his biodynamic production of Montepulciano d’Abruzzo and Trebbiano d’Abruzzo are considered among Abruzzo’s best producers. Other premium names include Illuminati with 135ha and Cataldi Madonna with 30ha.

Valentini established in 1600 has some 65ha of vineyard yielding annually between 20,000 to 50,000 bottles of Trebbiano, Montepulciano and the lighter, ‘rosato’ Cerasuolo, depending on the vintage. Francesco Valentini, an artisan at heart, doesn’t release his Montepulciano d’Abuzzo if it is not a good vintage. His exports are only 5% of his production, the rest goes to his historic clients in Italy. Valentini’s vines are traditionally planted to a pergola canopy, which according to him is the best kind to protect the grapes from the strong Abruzzo sun.

In Valentini’s opinion the main change over the last 10 to 15 years has been a noticeable improvement in producing quality wines in Abruzzo. “Our region is amongst the greenest regions of Europe,” says Valentini. “Our biodiversity is one of the oldest and was known to the Greeks and Romans. We have 26 cultivars of olives that have survived over the centuries, like our grape varieties that are strongly adapted to the region and yield age-worthy wines.



Nat Colantonio from Controguerra DOC uses the appellation name, meaning ‘against the war’, as a play of words on his packaging with the ban the bomb symbol

Francesco Valentini, an artisan at heart, doesn’t release his Montepulciano d’Abuzzo if it is not a good vintage. His exports are only 5% of his production

Medium sized wineries such as Tenuta Masciarelli with 300ha of vines are also known for traditional grapes in addition to the growing popularity of Pecorino. “Abruzzo is a land which offers plenty, where organic and biodiversity are a natural way of life,” says Marina Cvetic of Masciarelli estate. “The production of Trebbiano can at times be tricky due to its productive potential, however, Montepulciano has the ability to express with greater ease its deep tannins and intense colour, which is what has singled it out for its great appeal.”

Over the last 20 years a growing ‘nouvelle vogue’ and a new generation of producers represent the future of Abruzzo wines. The scenic Fattoria Bruno Nicodemi, in the Colline Teramane DOCG area, managed by brother and sister team, Alessandro and Elena Nicodemi exports 80% of its production which includes the classic wines of Abruzzo as well as establishing new trends for the region as ‘cocciopesto’ wines, a project which started in 2017.



Nic Tartaglia, pictured in his vineyard, is probably the only producer in Abruzzo experimenting with a sparkling Riesling and a barrel fermented Chardonnay

“This is a unique Trebbiano d’Abruzzo style made with grapes from a 50-year-old vineyard, vinified in cocciopesto, which goes back to Roman times,” explains Elena. The whole bunch grapes are fermented in the cocciopesto amphora with indigenous yeasts. Following a 10-day maceration the skins and stalks are removed and the wine left in the cocciopesto to finish fermentation, producing an elegant and delicate Trebbiano d’Abruzzo with a decidedly mineral character.”

The smaller gems of production may be difficult to find, as roads in Abruzzo are often small and winding up and down hilly terrain, while distances can be difficult to calculate. Although the sea-shore is always a good reference to follow especially when in Controguerra DOC. Its very name is an enigma, meaning ‘against the war’, a symbol that Nat Colantonio of Bossanova winery has featured on his packaging. This small 9ha and 43,000 bottle production of natural winemaking uses spontaneous fermentation,

indigenous yeasts and whole bunch pressing, as well as maceration on the skins. Here too, many of the grapes originate from 35- to 40-year-old vines, which over the years have gained balance from lower yields, producing wines that show great purity and individual character.

Like many wineries in Abruzzo, Nic Tartaglia’s small 12ha vineyard and winery in Alanno, in the province of Pescara, was passed down from generation to generation. Yet, few can boast such a wonderful legend as that of the ‘golden calf’, a Roman relic apparently found by Nic’s great-grandfather in an abandoned cave in the countryside, which he sold to purchase 100ha of land, planting vineyards which later were divided among his four sons, each one to his own. Nic Tartaglia is probably the only producer in Abruzzo experimenting with a sparkling Riesling and a barrel fermented Chardonnay.

The rise to riches story of success can be summarized by the beautiful 35ha Di Sipio Estate, in the province of Chieti, a farmstead of stature which was bought some 20 years ago by the son of one of its former farm labourers. Nicola di Sipio renovated the entire estate, no expenses spared, and handed it as a gift to his father who had dedicated his life to the estate as a farmer. Di Sipio started with a production of *metodo classico* sparkling wine from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and today produces a wide range of excellent wines including a powerful, age-worthy Montepulciano aged for five years before releasing it to the market.

Abruzzo has tremendous potential to emerge as a quality region with significant exports and a solid platform of well-recognized quality estates. Promotion is of course the necessary tool for communicating quality and the diversity of the region. Abruzzo is only beginning to touch on these issues by promoting its wines and tourism internationally. ❖

www.abruzzowineexperience.com

