

THE WINES OF MARCHE

Marche is an ancient Italian wine region, famed for its white Verdicchio. Yet for decades it's had a reputation as a source of cheap bulk wine. Michele Shah says as the need to export becomes more urgent, replanting and premiumisation is underway.



Il Pollenza in Macerata,
owned by Count Brachetti-Peretti

MARCHE AT A GLANCE, 2013

Total hectares:	17,453
Number of wineries:	14,190
Average hectares:	1.23 ha
Number hectares replanted:	400 ha
	in 2013
Percentage red wines:	50.7%
	(526,762 ha)
Percentage white wines:	49.3%
	(512,207 ha)
DOCG appellations:	5
DOC appellations:	15
IGT Marche:	1

SOURCE: IWT

The white wine Verdicchio, which came in a characteristic green, amphora-shaped bottle, put the region of Marche on the wine map decades ago. And as the amphora gradually went out of style, Verdicchio grew well beyond its role as an astutely marketed, simple fish wine to become one of Italy's most multifaceted and dignified whites.

It's not only the wine that has evolved. Marche - a region bounded by the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Apennine Mountains to the west - is increasingly being recognised for quality production, after decades where it was primarily known as a bulk wine producer.

Overview

Viticulture has been practised in the region for thousands of years, with Etruscans and Romans having taken a turn tending the vines. That historic diversity, plus the range of terroirs - there are both cool and warm zones - has meant a range of wine styles and traditions have evolved.

Verdicchio, however, still firmly dominates Marche's wine production. Neighbouring whites from this peaceful region between the Apennines and the Adriatic Sea are, for the most, part light and insubstantial, the main

exception being Bianchello del Metauro from its more northerly part and the increasingly 'trendy' white varieties Passerina and Pecorino from Offida in the Ascoli Piceno hills.

Control of harvesting time and vinification method can produce a crisp, youthfully lively wine with a succulent heart or a deep, rich, buttery one that develops slowly and ages with aplomb - or which offers various stages inbetween. Oak can bring additional nuances, too, for those who wish to use it. Yet quality rises in the larger appellation of Castelli di Jesi and smaller appellation of Matelica have generally outstripped price rises, so that Verdicchio remains a well-priced, healthy cut above the general level of Italy's popular whites.

Verdicchio, which covers 60% of total DOC/G plantings and can be made as a still, sparkling or passito wine, is typically able to age gracefully. "The UK market is coming round to the ageing potential of Verdicchio, while there is huge potential for the reds in the Conero area which are full bodied, yet supple on the palate," says Leo Addis, director of Eurowines Ltd, one of the UK's top Italian wine importers.

Reds are very much in second place when it comes to quantity, but production is often

quality-led. Rosso Piceno, based on Sangiovese, can show class as one of the true bargains in central Italy, with little exported outside the region. Rosso Conero, based on Montepulciano grown on the outskirts of Ancona, can reach even greater heights. More recently, producers have tended to use less wood on the reds to show the fruity, young, consumer-friendly style that the region is capable of producing. Much as wine aficionados may search out the weird and wonderful Lacrima di Morro d'Alba or the curious, sparkling red DOCG Vernaccia di Serrapetrona, these wines remain primarily local. Whether red or white, though, Marche's wines retain the flavours of local varieties.

Marche is still a region that traditionally sells wine in bulk to consumers. Most wineries, be they small or large, have a 'healthy' daily sale of wine at the cellar door, where demijohns are filled from the tank and sold at an average price of €1.50 to €1.75 per litre whether it be Verdicchio or Rosso Conero.

Francesco Ciculi, of Monte Torto in the Rosso Conero appellation, like many other small producers, sells some 250 hL at €1.70/L per month in bulk - 'sfuso' - from the cellar in order to help with his expenses. Ciculi exports 80% of his bottled production to northern Eu-

MARCHE WINERIES

This is a selection of regional wineries that have historically led in both value and volume.

Togni Spa (group includes Casalfarneto estate)

Total vineyard hectares:	43 belonging to Casalfarneto
Total production (bottles):	500,000
Wine sold in bulk:	none
Total exports 2013:	45% sparkling under Togni - 20% under Casalfarneto
Main markets:	Russia, Lithuania, China, Belgium, Holland
Total turnover 2013:	€47m, includes mineral water, sparkling wine, Casalfarneto production

Azienda Vinicola Umani Ronchi

Total vineyard hectares:	200
Total production (bottles):	3m
Wine sold in bulk:	none
Total exports 2013:	75%
Main markets:	Japan, Canada, Sweden, UK
Total turnover 2013:	€10.4m

Casa Vinicola Gioacchino Garofoli Spa

Total vineyard hectares:	50
Total production (bottles):	1.8m
Total exports 2013:	60%
Main markets:	Germany, UK, USA, Japan
Total turnover 2013:	€4.5m

Cantine Belisario

Total vineyard hectares:	290
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Total production (bottles):	800,000
Wine sold in bulk:	13,000 hL at €1.10/L
Total exports 2013:	25%
Main markets:	Germany, US, Belgium, Holland, UK
Total turnover 2013:	€4.5m

Colonnara Società Cooperativa Agricola

Total vineyard hectares:	190 (of which 120 belong to Colonnara cooperative and 70 to Marchedoc società cooperative, founded in 2014)
Bulk production:	6,000 hL; value €900,000
Total production (bottles):	1.15m (1m Colonnara + 15,000 La Morciola)
Total exports 2013:	12%
Main markets:	Finland, Belgium, UK
Total turnover 2013:	€3.7m

Azienda Vitivinicola Cù Cù

Total vineyard hectares:	180
Total production (bottles):	900,000
Sales of bulk 'sfuso' wine:	900,000 L @ €1.10/L
Total exports 2013:	30%, value €850,000
Main markets:	China, Japan, US, UK
Total turnover 2013:	€2.7m (bottled wine only)

Tenuta Cocci Grifoni

Total vineyard hectares:	50
Total production (bottles):	340,000
Total exports 2013:	38%
Main markets:	Canada, US, Japan, northern Europe
Total turnover 2013:	€1m



SOURCE: SUPPLIED BY WINERIES.

rope, yet he also enjoys the tradition of selling in bulk to local customers; however, given the chance he would happily increase his bottled production in exports.

In terms of production, 1,600 ha of vine-



Winemaker Riccardo Baldi, owner of La Staffa, is one of the region's emerging stars.

yards in Marche have been restored or replanted over the last four years. The choice to focus on indigenous varietals and produce better quality as opposed to quantity is tangible.

Marche's total production in value currently amounts to €136m (\$167m). In 2013, Marche's exports registered a noticeable increase of 36% on 2012 - to the tune of €68m. The value of Verdicchio exports amounted to €17m, equal to 25% of total exports, an increase of 41.6% in value and 10% in volume on 2012 exports, according to the Istituto Marchigiano di Tutela Vini (IMT).

Push to export

The Marche has always been a region to offer value for money, and cooperatives such as Colonnara have an important place in the

history of the region as quality producers since the 1970s and 1980s, when emphasis was still on quantity. Colonnara was seen as a model cooperative by the region and today still produces good-value, quality wines, including one of the region's top sparkling Method Champenoise, Ubaldo Rosi, made from 100% Verdicchio and highly awarded throughout Italy.

Il Pollenza in Macerata, owned by petrol magnate Count Brachetti Peretti, honorary president of Gruppo API, produces a premium Bordeaux blend. Brachetti Peretti expanded his estate some 16 years ago, investing €20m to date. Giacomo Tachis was consulted and the decision to plant 70 ha of international varietals came after carrying out a soil survey. Today Carlo Ferrini oversees production, which is almost entirely exported, mainly to China, Japan and the US.

Garofoli and Umani Ronchi are Marche's historic flagship wineries and most widely exported brands.

According to Brian Larky, founder of Dalla Terra in the US, Marche wines offer outstanding quality for excellent value. However, there is still a lot of work to do in building recognition for these wines and the Marche region in general - a comment which is often repeated by members of the international trade and consumers.

The IMT - the main body responsible for regulating production and promotion in Marche, headed by director Alberto Mazzoni - is well aware of the importance of branding. Beginning in 2009 and continuing up to 2015, IMT has laid down a plan of investment for promotion that will reach a total of €16m, to be spent on events both within the region and overseas in order to brand and expand the recognition of Marche and its wines.

It won't be easy, as many smaller producers still see potential in far too narrow terms. A lack of communication, of participation in international events and of joining forces over matters of production, along with the region's production fragmentation, is still widespread.

"Most wineries do not realise the importance of communication and marketing," says Michele Bernetti, CEO of Umani Ronchi. "They prefer to invest their resources in production instead of sales."

The US, which absorbs 60% of total exports, is the most important export market, followed Canada, Japan, and Europe. "There are many brands on the market and the wines are slowly acquiring the reputation they deserve as one of the Italian white wines made from indigenous varietals that have the ability to age and develop nice tertiary flavours and aromas in the bottle," says Leonardo LoCascio, founder and Chairman Emeritus of Winebow Group in the US. Sales however are slower than would be expected, which is a bit of a conundrum as the wines are generally well made and well priced. "A contributing factor to the slow pace of sales is the absence of restaurants that specialise in the cuisine of Marche, as well as the fact that the region remains off the itinerary



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Michele Bernetti,
CEO, Umani Ronchi

of most Americans visiting Italy."

Dalla Terra chose to import Garofoli not only for its reputation and in recognition of their quality production, but also because of a close partnership. The company has been working with them and their American customers to raise the level of understanding and recognition nationally.

"Garofoli also has a large following for its highly touted multiple award-winning Podium Verdicchio, which embodies Verdicchio's highest quality," says Larky. "The reds, both Rosso Cornero and Piceno, have solid followings as they too offer great value and a flavour profile that is identifiable; more rustic, with beautiful tannins, fruit and some pepper notes that are easily distinguishable from domestic and South American reds."

Turning to the northern hemisphere, Polish importer Jan Budzyński, based in Lublin, is a Marche aficionado. The wines of this region play an important role in his portfolio: Ciù Ciù, De Angelis, Piersanti and formerly Sartarelli and Conti di Buscareto. "For us, Marche wines have always played an important role in our Italian wine sales, so we focused on recommending and promoting them by educating a group of customers that appreciate these wines," explains Budzyński. "I think that Rosso Piceno, Verdicchio and Pecorino suit the Polish palate. The problem is that the region is unknown to the majority of customers (in opposition to Tuscany, Piemonte, Veneto and Sicily). Therefore, as a trader you really have to want to work with them, as it takes additional effort and time to promote these wines."

Scandinavia has proven to be one of Italy's best import markets, both in terms of value and volume, with total sales in 2013 reaching over 17m L.

Push for quality

In particular, organic wines have shown a significant increase in sales and popularity in Sweden, representing 9.1% of the total assortment. The Swedish monopoly Systembolaget has set a target for the entire assortment of wines from all over the world to reach a level of



10% organic wines by 2016 and 16% by 2020.

Organic is what some of the new emerging Marche wineries are focusing on. Talented 24-year-old Riccardo Baldi, winemaker and owner of La Staffa, is one of the region's youngest emerging stars with a firm conviction that there is great potential for the versatility of organic Verdicchio. "Producers need to be focused and conscious of their potential aiming for quality production," says Baldi.

Though not certified organic, Umani Ronchi, Marche's leading brand in terms of worldwide recognition, is also doing well in Sweden. "Umani Ronchi's Casal di Serra Verdicchio has had a long and successful span on the Swedish market," says Wilhelm Schultz, deputy CEO of Enjoy Wine & Spirits, one of Sweden's largest importers. "It's one of the longest-lasting listings at Systembolaget, regarded and respected as a benchmark wine for its high quality and price worthy ratio."

Marche has always been known for its high per capita consumption, second only to the Veneto, reaching an average consumption of 120 litres per capita in the 1970s and settling at the still high average of 56 litres per capita. "Wine is very much part of the local culture and local economy. Vino sfuso is bought from both large and small wineries; however, the trend is dying out slowly, especially concerning bulk wine sold and bottled outside the region," explains Bernetti.

Though Marche still plays second fiddle to other Italian regions, it is a region to look out for. Most tourists come here to bask on Adriatic beaches under Mount Conero, or to visit the historic wealth of Urbino, Loreto or Fabriano. Not to mention, the food of Marche is immediately likeable.

Like the wine or, for that matter, the people, it never lets you down. ■