



Abruzzo might be the fifth-biggest region of production in Italy, but it's one of the least well known. Michèle Shah takes a look.

Seated in the mountainous region of central Italy, and bordered by the Adriatic Sea, the landscape of Abruzzo is, not surprisingly, diverse. With 60% of its land designated to national parks – those of the Gran Sasso and Parco della Majella – no other region in Italy (or Europe) can boast such an extension of ‘protected areas’ or diversity. To give you an idea, it’s possible to pick up live scampi from the coast at Giulianova in the province of Teramo and within 40 minutes be at the snowy peaks of the Gran Sasso, having stopped along the way to collect some truffles in Teramo.

With the Apennines running along its western border, Abruzzo can out-manoeuvre climate change, because its viticulture can climb upwards into the mountains and dig new roots in virgin habitats and uncontaminated soil, untouched by modern industrial activity.

“Our region is amongst the greenest regions of Europe,” says Francesco Valentini of renowned producer Valentini. “Our biodiversity is one of the oldest, known already 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.”

At a glance

The region has three main historical DOCs, the two most important of which are the red Montepulciano d’Abruzzo and white Trebbiano d’Abruzzo. The Montepulciano grape has gained a substantial following for its fruit-forward, complex-yet-approachable reds, while Trebbiano is best known for dry, light and easy drinking wines with subtle citrus flavours. Quality Trebbiano and Montepulciano can, however, be made into complex age-worthy wines. The third DOC, Controguerra, is for

wines based on Montepulciano and other native grapes, although a small percentage of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc is permitted in the blend. Some of the best wines come from the Teramo area, where a single DOCG exists for Montepulciano d’Abruzzo Colline Teramane, while some classic rosé wines – known as Cerasuolo – are now offered under their own DOC appellation.

“We do very well with wines from the Abruzzo. Our sales of Abruzzesi wines are up by 42.4% this year on last year,” says David Gleave MW, CEO of Liberty Wines UK. Liberty imports basic Montepulciano d’Abruzzo from Farnese Fantini to make their own Montepulciano, which is then shipped to Verona, where it is bottled and sold under the Il Faggio brand. “Montepulciano d’Abruzzo is appealing as an everyday generous quaffing wine. But we also do well with Pecorino and with smaller quantities of Colline Teramane.”

Abruzzo’s production has historically been dominated by cooperatives, which today account for 80% of its production. Bottled wine is a fairly new concept, as until the 1980s, most wine was sold in bulk by large cooperatives. Today, while large amounts of bulk are still produced, well-priced bottled wines have also emerged.

One of the largest producers is a group of nine consortiums in Chieti – under the umbrella of the gigantic Consorzio Citra – which has a production of 18m bottles, drawn from 7,000 ha. Another major producer is Cantina Tollo, established in 1960 and with 780 members, which controls some 3,000 ha of vineyards planted to indigenous varieties such as Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, Trebbiano d’Abruzzo, Pecorino, Passerina and Cococciola. In 2015, Cantina Tollo’s turnover reached some €37.5m (\$42m) and production reached 13m

bottles, all of which is bottled in the region. Its global exports represent 32% of their bottled production, with their award-winning wines having strong market appeal in Scandinavia, Germany, the UK, the US and Canada.

Other important producers include Gruppo Farnese, a leader in the production of southern Italian wines with multiple wineries. Farnese made substantial investments in Abruzzo in the late 1990s, buying 15ha of organic Montepulciano d’Abruzzo Colline Teramane DOCG and renting 120 ha of vineyards owned by local farmers, but rigorously controlled by Farnese’s team of agronomists.

“What convinced us to invest in Abruzzo was its optimum climatic conditions, its vineyards, varieties and its diversity,” says Valentino Sciotti, the president of Gruppo Farnese. “We were well aware that we would have tough competition from the main cooperatives, as well as from local producers.” He said the appeal was the fragmentation in production, the number of small farmers with one to two hectares of vineyard, and the overall low cost of production. “In Abruzzo we are the largest producer in value but I am not sure if we are the largest in volume.” The company’s 2015 turnover reached €50m, although this included not just production in Abruzzo, but in other regions as well.

Storied names

The history of Abruzzo’s wine production is not merely limited to cooperative production, as it counts important historic names among its productions.

One of the most significant names is Valentini, established in 1600, which has some 65 ha of vineyard yielding between 20,000 to 50,000 bottles annually of Trebbiano, Montepulciano

and the lighter 'rosato' Cerasuolo, depending on the vintage; Francesco Valentini, an artisan at heart, doesn't release his Montepulciano d'Abruzzo if it is not a good vintage. His exports are only 5% of his production, with the rest going to his historic clients in Italy. In his opinion, the main change in the region over the last 10 to 15 years has been the noticeable improvement in quality wine production. Valentini's vines are traditionally planted to pergola canopy, which, according to Valentini, is the best way to protect the grapes from the strong Abruzzo sun.

"The pergola, or 'tendone', canopy system can be particularly productive," agrees Walter de Battè, winemaker of the Contado Veniglio estate, originally part of the Nicodemi estate in the Teramo hills. "If one prunes away too much to lower the yields, we create problems both for the vine and for the quality of the grapes. With a more generous yield we obtain excellent quality," says de Battè. "Quality Montepulciano d'Abruzzo needs to age both in cask and bottle in order to gain complexity."

Medium-sized wineries such as Ciccio Zaccagnini and Masciarelli, with 300 ha of vines each, are also known for producing traditional grapes, including the increasingly popular Pecorino. "Abruzzo is a land which offers plenty, where organic and biodiversity are a natural way of life," says Marina Cvetic of Masciarelli. "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."

Other famous producers include Emidio Pepe, known for his biodynamic production, the 135-ha Illuminati, and the 30-ha Cataldi Madonna.

Over the past 20 years 'nouvelle vogue' producers such as Torre dei Beati and Valle Reale have brought with them new entrepreneurial skills and new investment, while respecting traditions. Leonardo Pizzolo of Valle Reale in Popoli, in the province of Pesaro, moved from Veneto to Abruzzo with the intention of working in his family's trout farm in Popoli. He got side-tracked, and fell in love with the family's old pergola vineyard. Today, he has 49 ha of



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vineyard producing up to 280,000 bottles, 80% of which are exported worldwide. Pizzolo, like many of the 'new' generation of producers, aims to enhance the image of Abruzzo by producing high quality wines, and steering away from the purely economic commercial image with which it is currently perceived in global markets.

The region emerges

There are signs that Abruzzo's image is improving. "Abruzzo's wines are gaining popularity, with some really well-known brands such as Emidio Pepe, Valentini, Illuminati and Masciarelli that you find in many places around California and the US market," says Cristian Valbruzzoli, purchasing manager for San Francisco-based importer Lyra Wine. "Varieties such as Montepulciano and Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, as well as Pecorino, are really a perfect fit for the \$15.00 by-the-glass programme," as the wholesale price is \$8.00 to \$12.00 a bottle, he explains.

There is still some way to go before Abruzzo wines are a staple on wine lists, however. Fausto Albanesi, owner of certified organic estate Torre dei Beati, is another who wants to see Abruzzo's image move away from that of a region of 'cheap and cheerful' wines. He says the problem is deeply rooted in the appellation legislation. "Over the years many, for political reasons and for lack of commercial initiative, large cooperatives and suppliers of bulk ignored the need to create a sound network of exports," he says, arguing that they preferred the 'easier' solution of selling in bulk, whether grapes or wine, and sending them with a certificate of origin to bottlers outside the region. Unfortunately local producers had no control over the end quality that would reach consumers.

According to Albanesi, 70% of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo DOC and other regional IGT appellations, such as Pecorino, are legally bottled outside the region or even outside of Italy and sold at low prices with huge markups, thus affecting the image and price points of the end wines.

"Abruzzo takes a marginal role in our activity, representing only two estates, Torre dei Beati and

Abruzzo DOCG wine appellations:

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Colline Teramane

Abruzzo DOC wine appellations:

Abruzzo
Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo
Controguerra
Montepulciano d'Abruzzo
Ortona
Terre Tollesi or Tullum
Trebbiano d'Abruzzo
Villamagna

Abruzzo IGT wine appellations:

Colli Aprutini
Colli del Sangro
Colline Frentane
Colline Pescaresi
Colline Teatine
Del Vastese or Histonium
Terre Aquilane or Terre de L'Aquila
Terre di Chieti

Valentini," says Ueli Schiess of Caratello Weine AG importer in Switzerland. "Yet if you look at wine lists in restaurants all over Switzerland and further afield, you rarely find Abruzzo listed, except as one of the cheapest under Montepulciano d'Abruzzo."

According to Schiess, selling wines like those of Torre dei Beati is hard. "They are compared immediately to the cheap Montepulciano and we have to explain the differences, and once the sommelier is convinced, he has to explain to his customers," says Schiess. The fact that Torre dei Beati is certified organic natural wine helps, and offers a point of difference when compared to the usual 'cheap' Montepulciano. This is why organic production from Abruzzo is becoming more significant even if, according to Schiess, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo can at times be a little too 'rustic' and not to everyone's taste.

For Abruzzo to emerge as a quality region such as Tuscany or Piedmont, there needs to be recognition of quality estates. Promotion is, of course, a necessary tool for communicating quality and the diversity of the region. Abruzzo is only beginning to exploit its assets by promoting its tourism, which has plenty to offer, as well as being a good promotional tool.

In the opinion of Valentino Sciotti, president of Farnese Vini, Abruzzo has all the qualities for success: biodiversity, sustainability and tradition, plus the potential to produce some of the best wines in Italy. There just needs to be better unity among producers and better promotion. ■