

TURNING THE SHIP AROUND

How do you raise the profile of a region known for high-volume wines?
Michèle Shah considers the case of Colline Teramane.

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Compared with 20 years ago, many Italian wine regions and appellations have successfully revamped their image, from that of a volume producer of cheap and cheerful wines to regions renowned for wines of great status and elegance. Yet there remain a number of regions and appellations that, despite the quality of their wines, still struggle to attain a positive image.

Re-styling or re-branding has been easier for some regions than others. Regions such as Tuscany or the Veneto are widely known and appreciated for their cultural and other tourist attractions, as well as the quality-driven wines they produce. Other regions, which do not have that tourism pull, or which cannot boast of an important cultural inheritance, have to work harder for recognition and notoriety. One of these is Colline Teramane Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOCG, Abruzzo's only DOCG, which is still striving for quality recognition.

Smoothing out pricing

The Colline Teramane district can be found in the north of Abruzzo, between the Gran Sasso mountain and the Adriatic coast. Once part of the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC, it became a separate DOCG in 2003 and its name was changed to Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Colline Teramane in 2016. Yet establishing an identity involves more than simply changing a name.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo itself has something of an identity dilemma, as the region has seen recent increases in both the production and export of high volumes and cheap, fruity red wine, which is often bottled outside the region – or even shipped in bulk and bottled

outside Italy. But while 60% of the wine is bottled outside the region, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is also home to more aristocratic and higher-priced versions of the same wine, which show the region's potential for character, depth and structure.

The two styles of wine coexist uneasily, and it's this that Colline Teramane is pulling against. This small but elite DOCG in the province of Teramo, with vineyards in the hills overlooking the coast, is a prime example of how one of Italy's micro areas is fighting identity. Today it includes some 50 wineries and 135 ha of DOCG-designated vines, producing about 1.2m bottles.

In terms of quality status, Colline Teramane has a small number of reputed wineries such as Masciarelli, Nicodemi, Emidio Pepe and Illuminati. These historic wineries set the regional standard and this, together with new quality regulations imposed in 2016, should help to build the region's image. The regulations require that, unlike in

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, all Colline Teramane Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOCG wines be bottled in the area of production. This naturally adds a layer of expense, meaning there is a floor under which prices cannot fall. While the wines of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC start at €3.00 but can rise to €20.00, sowing confusion among consumers, Colline Teramane wines retail from €15.00 up, easily reaching €20.00 for a Riserva DOCG.

"The same wine with different prices is always difficult for the less experienced wine drinker," says Dieuwke Engelsma of Glandorf en Thijs, the importer for Abbazia di Propezzano wines in Amsterdam. "Luckily in a wine shop like ours, we can explain about the difference and people understand and trust us."



"We need to shake off the cheap and cheerful image and make sure regulations are followed."

Alessandro Nicodemi, president of the Consorzio di Tutela Colline Teramane DOCG and CEO of Nicodemi winery



Sofia Pepe, winemaker, Emidio Pepe

New regulations

The Consorzio Colline Teramane was founded in 2003, at the same time that the area became a unique DOCG, and it has imposed a set of growing and production protocols that are aimed at raising quality. Their efforts are also aimed at presenting the wines – made from the Montepulciano grape, of course – as a premium product. "It is a wine of many facets, which can differ in character depending on where it is planted," says Alessandro Nicodemi, president of the Consorzio di Tutela Colline Teramane DOCG and CEO of Nicodemi winery. "The message we want to get across focuses on the distinctive character of the Colline Teramane. We want to show how the territory is intrinsically linked to the character of the wine and this is why we insist that all our wines are bottled in the DOCG area."

There is some work to be done to change the image, because Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, both the DOC and IGT, is very well established, both at home and abroad. According to Stefano Illuminati, one of Colline Teramane's historic producers, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is the fourth strongest brand of Italian wine after Prosecco, Lambrusco and Chianti. That's not

necessarily a good thing: the over-production of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo in recent years has positioned it at the entry level, making it seem a cheap, high-volume wine.

Not only that, but the traditional style of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo was characterised by concentrated tannins and a tight structure, and was therefore not a very consumer-friendly style. "Between 1995 and 2005 the style was exaggerated, making it a highly extracted wine and difficult to drink," says Illuminati. "Today consumers are looking for elegant, structured wines with velvety tannins." He adds that it's important to produce rich but fine examples of the style, which can be exported to Abruzzo's major markets, such as Germany and the USA.

Its structure has meant that Montepulciano d'Abruzzo has also been considered a blending wine and one to be drunk at a youthful age. "My father, together with a handful of other producers from Abruzzo, has shown that this is not so. It is a wine that can age gracefully," says Sofia Pepe, joint winemaker with her father of the Emidio Pepe winery. "It's a wine that has enormous potential that shows its real character with ageing."

Paolo de Strasser agrees that pricing is a major issue. An Umbrian architect who owns a winery in Umbria, along with the beautiful eighth-century Abbazia di Propezzano – a property that comes with 20 ha of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOCG vineyards – he's one of Colline Teramane's emerging producers. So confident is he about the region's future that he wants to increase his current production from 30,000 bottles to 50,000, with a screw cap and modern label. "My prices are still quite low because I have to make a name for myself, and I also know that the DOCG recognition still has a hard and long road ahead," he says. "For now, the market is responding well, but in the long-term we producers need to take a closer look at adjusting and increasing our pricing." He's not the only one increasing volumes: between 2015 and 2016, the region increased its DOCG bottlings by 27%, according to Agroqualità.

"This is why we have been focusing on re-branding our image as a higher-quality product," says Alessandro Nicodemi. "We need to shake off the cheap and cheerful image and make sure regulations are followed." ■



Authenticity comes first.

A Montepulciano d'Abruzzo reserve with a prominent fruity bouquet containing notes of black cherry, wild berries and spices. Aged twenty-four months in oak and six months in the bottle, this important red wine improves over time and has won many awards.

Cantina Tollo s.c.a.
Viale Garibaldi, 68
66010 Tollo (Ch)
Abruzzo (Italy)

T. +39 0871 96251
Fax +39 0871 962122
info@cantinatollo.it
www.cantinatollo.it

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www.eurowines.co.uk
enquiries@eurowines.co.uk

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