

A TALE *of* TWO CITIES

In Italy's Umbria, wine culture flourishes around the hilltop towns of Orvieto and Montefalco **By Alison Napjus**

Most travelers to Italy's heartland region of Umbria are familiar with its capital city of Perugia or the pilgrimage town of Assisi. But for wine lovers, the excitement is found in Orvieto, about two hours' drive south of Tuscany's Florence, and Montefalco, just over an hour northeast of Orvieto.

Producers in these two areas make red and white wines in a spectrum of styles. In the past year, I've reviewed approximately 120 wines from Umbria, from light, crisp whites to rich, tannic reds, and everything in between. But while this diversity gives consumers a wealth of choices, there is no crash course to understanding what's in the bottle.



SANDRO MICHAELLES

Marco Caprai of Arnaldo Caprai led the revitalization of the local Sagrantino grape as a dry red.

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—MARCELLO LUNELLI, TENUTA CASTELBUONO

It takes time to explore all that Umbria has to offer.

The most compelling locale in the Umbrian wine scene right now is Montefalco, home to densely structured reds made from the indigenous Sagrantino grape. The area's rolling hills of clay and sand have supported wine production for centuries, with Sagrantino previously made as a dessert wine (small amounts are still produced today). But the grape lost favor with local growers after World War II, and by the mid-1980s it had begun dying out.

The growing recognition of Sagrantino's modern iteration as a dry red wine is thanks largely to the efforts of Marco Caprai, who joined his father's Arnaldo Caprai winery in 1987. He saw potential in the variety and partnered with researchers at the University of Milan and elsewhere in Italy to study Sagrantino. Wide-reaching collection and clonal selection along with experimentation with planting densities and vineyard management helped tame this vigorous grape into a vine that could yield rich, concentrated reds.

Caprai also worked alongside other historic producers of Sagrantino, such as Adanti, Antonelli and Scacciadiavoli, to promote the Montefalco Sagrantino appellation to DOCG status in 1992. This momentum has grown the number of producers in the area from just a handful at the end of the century to close to 100 today.

“The world of Sagrantino is small, but it's growing,” says Caprai. “[Today's new producers] start from a different point—there's more press, more attention. So even new producers can make an impact.”

This report's highest-rated wines, from a trio of producers, show the heights that Montefalco Sagrantino can reach. At 95 points, Paolo Bea's Cerrete 2007 (\$120) is beautifully aromatic and finely balanced, while Tabarrini's Colle alle Macchie 2012 (\$75) is like a stallion for its marriage of power and grace. At 94 points, Caprai's Spinning Beauty 2006 (\$300), a new bottling debuted late last year, is rich and focused. It shows no sign of decline after almost nine years of aging in French oak *barriques* before release.

Finding balance can be a challenge given Montefalco Sagrantino's typically impenetrable wall of tannins, but it is an impression of overall harmony that recommends these top bottlings and that will allow them to age gracefully. How Montefalco's winemakers achieve balance in their wines marks something of a divide among the styles available in the market today.

Some Montefalco Sagrantino producers stick with more structured versions, which often necessitate aging beyond the legally required 37 months before release

and which might benefit from time in the consumer's cellar to boot. But the best ones are well worth the wait, as showcased in a recent non-blind tasting of older vintages from several producers. Even the oldest wine, Caprai's 1996 Sagrantino di Montefalco 25 Anni, was still vibrant and expressive and could easily carry another 10 or 20 years of aging.

Other producers are working, in both vineyard and winery, to bypass some of the wine's structure in order to produce a more accessible, earlier-drinking style of Montefalco Sagrantino. “The challenge is to produce a Sagrantino with fruit character without the aggressivity of the tannins,” says Marcello Lunelli. The Lunellis, known for their high quality sparkling wines from northern Italy's Trento DOC under the Ferarri label, are relative newcomers to the Montefalco area with their 2001 purchase of 75 acres of vineyards and the founding of the Tenuta Castelbuono estate.

“This area needs another philosophy of Sagrantino, to keep the characteristic of the grape but with a new drinkability,” argues Lunelli, whose Tenuta Castelbuono Montefalco Sagrantino Carapace Tenute Lunelli 2010 (91 points, \$38) stood out in my tastings for its balance and accessible, plush tannins, without forsaking density or flavor range.

“More than any other variety, Sagrantino reflects the winemaker, whereas Sangiovese reflects the territory,” says Chiara Lungarotti, referring to Umbria's other red. Lungarotti works with her sister Teresa Severini to manage the family's newer estate in Montefalco (established in 1999) and their historic property in the neighboring town of Torgiano.

Byond Montefalco Sagrantino, Umbria offers a variety of reds. Sangiovese is the most widely planted grape overall. It is frequently blended and typically shows a rounder, less acidic profile than versions from neighboring regions, such as Chianti.

Lungarotti's father, Giorgio, helped to put Umbria on the map in the 1960s and '70s with his Sangiovese-dominant Rubesco and Rubesco Monticchio Riserva bottlings from the Torgiano DOC, about 30 minutes northwest of Montefalco. The Torgiano Rubesco Vigna Monticchio Riserva 2009 (91, \$58) continues to be a flagship for the winery, an elegant and richly aromatic blend of 70 percent Sangiovese with Canaiolo.

Sangiovese is also the base for wines designated as Montefalco Rosso and Rosso Riserva DOC, which are legally defined as blends of 60 percent to 80 percent Sangiovese with the addition of smaller amounts of Sagrantino and other allowed red varieties. These bottlings can be a good introduction to Montefalco's reds, although they are distinct in style and weight from pure Sagrantinos.

“We don't want to make a Rosso that's a Sagrantino. For us, they are two different wines [despite the inclusion of Sagrantino in the Rosso blend],” notes Alberto Pardi of Fratelli Pardi. And while





Light-bodied and minerally whites are produced from the Trebbiano Procanico and Grechetto vines surrounding the historic hilltop town of Orvieto.

the Rosso *riservas* are priced around \$30 to \$50 a bottle, the classic Montefalco Rossos are often very good values. Look for Tabarrini's bright Montefalco Bocatone 2013 (90, \$23), Rocca di Fabbri's juicy Montefalco 2013 (89, \$17) and Scacciadiavoli's aromatic Montefalco 2013 (88, \$20).

Red wines from international varieties have also shown success, particularly toward the western side of Umbria. Although red wine production is approved for a handful of DOCs in and around Orvieto, most of these bottles are labeled with the basic Umbria IGT.

Among those to try is the Umbria Il Rosso from Decugnano dei Barbi. Claudio Barbi founded this winery in 1973, and today his son Enzo heads the estate. The 2013 (90, \$28), comprising 40 percent Syrah, is supple, with rich fruit and savory undertones.

Southern Umbria's Falesco winery also offers a collection of reds based on international varieties. Perched on the Lazio-Umbria border, and with vineyards in both regions, Falesco was originally established in 1979 in Lazio, by brothers Renzo and Riccardo Cotarella. With the purchase of more than 600 acres in Umbria in 1999, they moved operations across the border, completing a new winery in 2005.

Falesco's Umbria Marciliano (2013; 90, \$50) is an elegant and expressive blend of Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc. Single-variety bottlings under the Tellus line offer good value, including the aromatic Cabernet Sauvignon Umbria Tellus 2014 (88, \$16) and the well-spiced Merlot Umbria Tellus 2014 (87, \$16).

"The style of this area is drinkability," says Bernardo Barberani, who manages his family's namesake winery about 20 minutes outside of Orvieto with his brother Niccolò. "It's important to us that even Barberani's most structured wine keeps the drinkability." Barberani's Umbria Foresco 2014 (88, \$20), a blend of Sangiovese, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, is bright and fruit-forward.

Although Umbria offers a burgeoning selection of quality reds today, white wine was the dominant player for much of the region's history, and Umbria is still best known for its white Orvieto wine.

The city of Orvieto and its medieval cathedral sit dramatically atop a steep volcanic butte, and surrounding vineyards provide grapes for a white blend based on at least 60 percent Trebbiano Procanico and Grechetto, with other allowed white varieties. The larger Orvieto area includes more than three-quarters of Umbria's vineyard acreage, planted to soils with a generally calcareous base laced abundantly with fossil sediments.

Unfortunately, in the 1960s and '70s many Orvieto producers fell prey to commercialization and the lure of profits on bulk bottlings. New technology was more often used to increase yields on the already vigorous Trebbiano Procanico grape than to improve the overall quality of the wine. The resulting wines were tart and fairly flavorless, a past and a style that Orvieto producers are still recovering from.

"Orvieto doesn't have a big reputation, now," says Francesco Gobbo, a young winemaker at Palazzone, a 60-acre estate owned by the Dubini family. "In the '70s much was bought by big groups and sold very inexpensively; this image remains, especially in Italy." But a number of dedicated producers, such as Palazzone, are working to reverse that perception.

Wine lovers looking for light-bodied, crisp and minerally whites will enjoy the efforts of these producers. Decugnano dei Barbi's Orvieto Classico Superiore Il Bianco 2014 (89, \$28) is sleek and smoky, with melon and lemon parfait flavors. For good value, find the zesty Palazzone Orvieto Classico Superiore Terre Vineate 2015 (89, \$16) or the snappy La Carraia Orvieto Classico 2015 (87, \$10).

In the Montefalco area, single-variety bottlings of Trebbiano

Spoletino or Grechetto are richer and usually fuller-bodied than the blended Orvieto, with fruit-forward character and juicy acidity.

Trebbiano Spoletino (which tends to show more personality than Orvieto's Trebbiano Procanico) from the recently established (2011) Spoleto DOC is picking up momentum. Trebbiano is also bottled from the Colli Martani DOC, but Grechetto from this area often steals the spotlight. Enjoy the fresh, herb-laced Grechetto Colli Martani Grecante 2015 from Arnaldo Caprai (90, \$20) or the lively, spiced Trebbiano Spoletino Spoleto 2015 from Perticaia (90, \$25).

International whites have found a niche in Umbria as well. One of the first to shine a spotlight on the potential of international varieties here was Tuscany's Antinori family.

In 1979, Piero Antinori brought Umbrian native Renzo Cotarella to the Antinori family's historic Castello della Sala estate. Cotarella began planting international varieties, hoping the addition of French varieties to the Orvieto blend would make a more distinctive wine. He quickly realized the potential for Chardonnay in the area, envisioning the creation of an Umbrian white that could age.

The result was Cervaro della Sala, a blend of roughly 80 percent Chardonnay with Grechetto. Probably aided by the Antinori name, the wine garnered attention right away (the first vintage was 1985),

for both the winery and the possibility of high quality white wine from Umbria. "We were in a lesser-known area, with a variety that was not grown in the area at that time," explains Cotarella. "It showed you could be positive about new areas and varieties."

The 2014 Umbria White Cervaro della Sala (91, \$50) is bright and deftly knit, with rich fruit and spice character. The winery also bottles a range of whites from both native and international varieties. A solo bottling of Chardonnay, the Chardonnay Umbria Castello della Sala Bramito 2015 (90, \$23) pairs vibrant acidity with rich notes of glazed apple and chopped hazelnut, while the Orvieto Classico Superiore Castello della Sala San Giovanni 2015 (88, \$25) is a lithe and mouthwatering blend that introduces Pinot Blanc and Viognier to the traditional Orvieto mix of Grechetto and Trebbiano Procanico.

Whether it's revitalizing a forgotten grape, building on the success of innovators who explored uncharted territory, or restoring the good name of a classic Italian white, winemakers in Umbria are diligently working to showcase all that their rich region has to offer. "We know we need to do more, to get everything we can out of every single vineyard," says Barberani. "It's a beautiful place here in Umbria, and we consider ourselves very lucky to be here."

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

Alison Napjus' Recommended Wines From Umbria

More than 120 wines were tasted for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/043017. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
PAOLO BEA Montefalco Sagrantino Cerrete 2007 Aromatic, with rose petal and exotic spice, baked raspberry and espresso flavors and a mineral hint. Tannic frame firms the finish.	95	\$120	SCACCIADI AVOLI Montefalco White 2015 Lively and medium-bodied, with tangy acidity and flavors of dried cherry, Creamside and crushed almond. Grechetto blend.	90	\$20
TABARRINI Montefalco Sagrantino Colle alle Macchie 2012 Marries power and grace, layering crushed black raspberry, herbes de Provence, mocha and ground spice with dense, ripe tannins.	95	\$75	TABARRINI Montefalco Bocatone 2013 A bright red, with grippy tannins and an appealing mix of ripe black cherry, tar, blood orange zest and fragrant spice notes.	90	\$23
ARNALDO CAPRAI Montefalco Sagrantino Spinning Beauty 2006 Rich and powerful, with black cherry coulis, tobacco, cocoa powder, loamy earth and licorice snap. Fresh, with silky texture.	94	\$300	ANTONELLI Trebbiano Spoletino Spoleto Trebium 2015 A sleek white, showing racy acidity to the flavors of poached pear, lemon curd, almond skin and fleur de sel, with a fresh finish.	89	\$21
ROCCA DI FABBRI Montefalco Sagrantino 2011 A core of dried fig, graphite, black olive and herb is knit to firm, dusty tannins and tarry minerality. Bright and balanced.	93	\$32	PALAZZONE Orvieto Classico Superiore Terre Vineate 2015 An elegant, light- to medium-bodied white, with poached apricot, kumquat and saline flavors carried by racy acidity.	89	\$16
LUNGAROTTI Montefalco Sagrantino 2010 Features a beautiful nose of wild cherry, spice and violet, with dense tannins, dark and brambly flavors and hints of leather and mineral.	92	\$24	ROCCA DI FABBRI Montefalco 2013 This expressive red offers a juicy mix of wild strawberry, red licorice, spice and graphite flavors, with tarry underpinning.	89	\$17
ANTINORI Umbria White Cervaro della Sala 2014 Elegant, with oak spice and vanilla accents to the baked pineapple, almond skin and lime blossom notes. Chardonnay with Grechetto.	91	\$50	FALESCO Cabernet Sauvignon Umbria Tellus 2014 Aromatic and chewy, showing hints of tar and dried mint to the mix of crushed currant and plum fruit, with smoke and spice notes.	88	\$16
ARNALDO CAPRAI Grechetto Colli Martani Grecante 2015 Thai basil notes lace a creamy mix of Asian pear, white peach, stone and lemon zest flavors. Light- to medium-bodied, with a savory finish.	90	\$20	FRATELLI PARDI Grechetto Colli Martani 2015 A balanced and accessible white, offering melon and white peach fruit and anise, preserved lemon and chalk hints, with a clean-cut finish.	88	\$15
DECUGNANO DEI BARBI Umbria Il Rosso 2013 Delicate herb and mocha accents add aromatics to the boysenberry puree, fig cake and black olive tapenade flavors. Syrah blend.	90	\$28	CASTELLO DELLE REGINE Umbria Rosso di Podernovo 2012 Fresh and elegant, layering fine tannins with subtle sun-dried cherry, thyme, singed orange peel and loam notes. Sangiovese blend.	88	\$18
PERTICAIA Trebbiano Spoletino Spoleto 2015 A well-cut white, light- to medium-bodied and creamy, offering honeydew, white peach, chamomile and pickled ginger notes.	90	\$25	LA CARRAIA Orvieto Classico 2015 Snappy, with petrol and wax accenting poached pear and lemon curd.	87	\$10
			VITIANO Umbria White 2015 Light and bright, with kiwifruit, lime granita and stone notes.	85	\$12