

WINESOFITALY

Enchanting Abruzzo

A lesser known wine region that is finally coming into its own, Abruzzo is on the Adriatic coast in central Italy. *Alessandra Piubello* waxes eloquent about its natural beauty and many charms

Abruzzo knows how to enchant. Geographically as well as historically and culturally in the centre of Italy it is, to a large extent, linguistically linked to southern Italy. Simple and discreet, Abruzzo lives modestly and silently, delving into an ancient past, hiding incomparable treasures waiting for the visitor to discover.

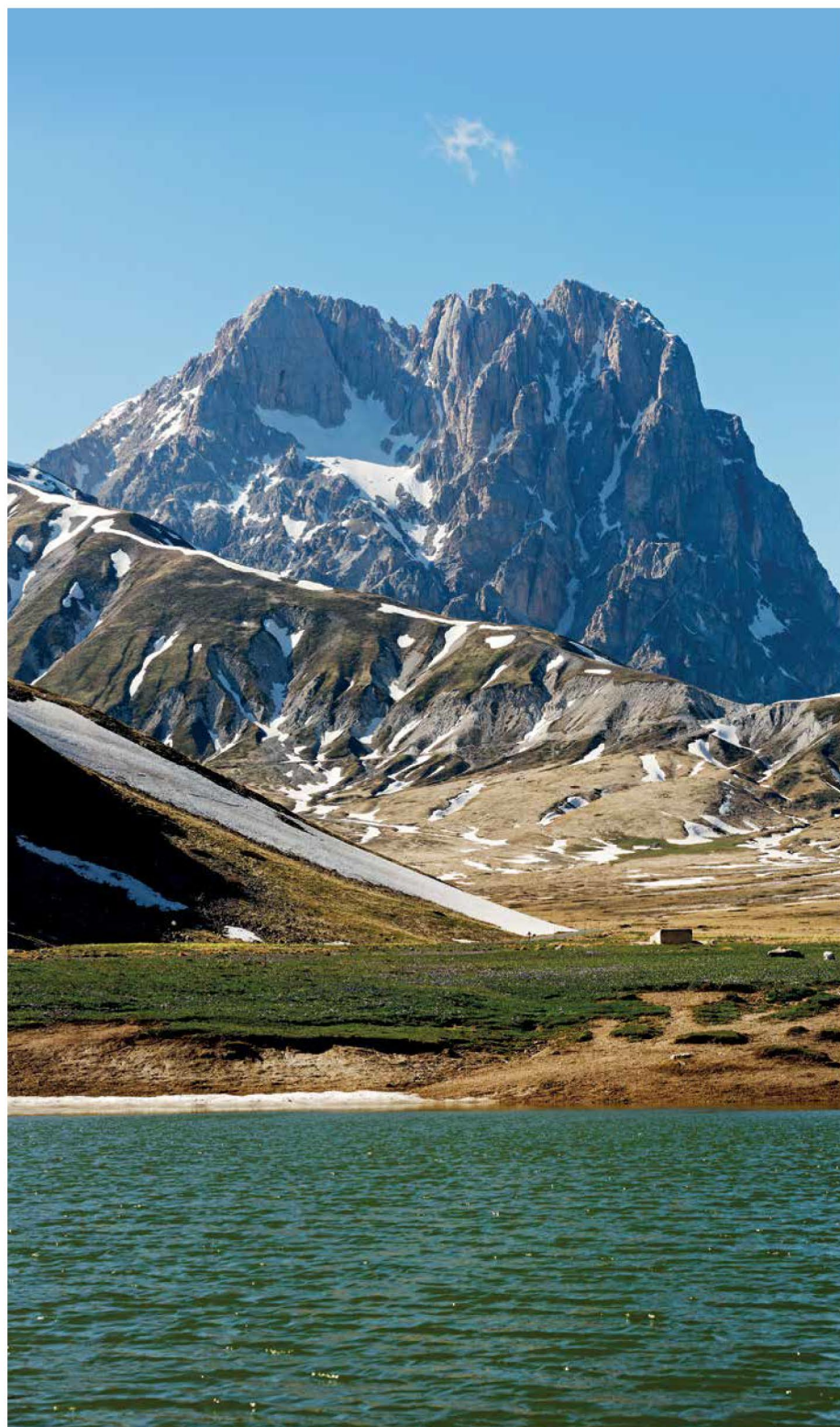
It is a territory brimming in history and culture as its numerous monuments, museums, Romanic castles and ancient necropolises dotted throughout the region prove. Splendid medieval hamlets – some of Italy's most beautiful – are set into the mountains keeping the architecture and charm of stone intact. The traditions, produce of the land and local cuisine are all proof of a noble, age-old history remembered in the folklore of this region, where emotions are also evoked through historical re-enactments in costume, local rites and festivals that recall the models of a life gone by. A region that marches ahead at a brisk pace while always remembering the past, where livestock moved with the seasons along tiring walks leading the herds to pasture. In winter, the majestic mountains with modern ski resorts offer every type of winter sport can be practised.

Abruzzo also has 130 kms of extremely beautiful coastline with a good 13 “blue flags” awarded for the quality of the water. The coast can be divided into two parts: wide and sandy beaches in the north while little bays and cliffs alternate in the south with Mediterranean vegetation and typical *trabocchi*, unusual wooden piers suspended over the sea between San Vito and Fossacesia, which are evidence of ancient fishing activities with some *trabocchi* converted into seafood restaurants.

Abruzzo has been called “the greenest region in Europe” due to over 30% of the territory being protected reserve and parkland – rich in woods and mountains with a vast variety of flora, and unique fauna living in a natural habitat of incomparable

A view of Abruzzo vineyards and the Gran Sasso mountains in the background. With over 30% of protected reserve and parkland, Abruzzo has been called “the greenest region in Europe”





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Beauty, history, nature, landscape and wine are inseparable elements when speaking of Abruzzo, a land that is still not fully explored



beauty. After Tibet, Abruzzo boasts the highest concentration of monasteries built on inaccessible mountains; an oasis of spirit in which to walk and take possession of our most intimate essence.

WINE-PRODUCING TERRITORY

Abruzzo is naturally inclined to viticulture being located between the Adriatic Sea and the Gran Sasso and Majella mountain ranges, which play an important part in protecting the eastern side of the region from wintery, cold weather. In summer, on the other hand, and especially in the internal areas and the foothill zone, decisive temperature differences favour grape ripening and intensify characteristic aromas.

Beauty, history, nature, landscape and wine are inseparable elements when speaking of Abruzzo, a land that is still not fully explored. There are, in fact, around 200 wineries dotted cross the varied Abruzzo landscape, between the sea and mountains, vineyards and hills, disseminated from the *trabocchi* coast to the Aquila highlands. A perfect circuit that must



Far left and above: Clusters of the native Montepulciano grapes and rows of vines with pergola trellising

absolutely be seen and experienced. The beauty of the Abruzzo hills is a patchwork of pergola vineyards with rows of vines set amidst Mediterranean scrub and vast olive groves. All enriched by the presence of the blue Adriatic Sea, which kisses the generally cloudless sky and the sun works in favour of the lush Abruzzo lands.

The mountainous inland area makes up over 65% of the entire region, while the coastal area with its hilly backdrop is bordered by the Adriatic Sea. The limestone-clay terrain of the hills is caressed by breezes from the Apennines and the sea. These soils are particularly ideal for producing structured wines and give grapes like Montepulciano d'Abruzzo every opportunity to express their potential. The sandy-clayey soils on the hilly area next to the coast where the climate is milder, are especially good for cultivating white grapes such as Trebbiano d'Abruzzo..

Over 83% of wine production is in the province of Chieti. The provinces of Pescara and Teramo produce about 10 and 6% respectively, while the province of L'Aquila, the region's capital, only produces 1%. Chieti is quite a

large province featuring lush vineyards while the hilltops and valley floors that approach the sea from west to east abound in Mediterranean scrub and an extraordinary number of wild animals. Pescara is an authentic slipway plunging towards the sea from the mountains. It features a fertile plain that climbs between Italy's two highest non-Alpine mountains. The soils vary in composition and give the products of this area extraordinary overtones.

Teramo is the region's gastronomic cradle, a land of wonderful raw materials and famous dishes where the people have always been able to transform and process the produce of this generous province. The almost 3,000 metres of the mighty Gran Sasso mountain protects the underlying crops, sweeping away the clouds and sternly overseeing the incessant work of the farmers. And then there is L'Aquila, a proud capital that hides exceptional wonders within its surroundings: Marsica with the Fucine Valley, a fertile and productive area with what remains of an enormous lake that man has reclaimed; Peligna Valley at the foot of the Majella and



Church interior with its altar and *prie dieu* or low benches for kneeling. Below: After Tibet, Abruzzo boasts the highest concentration of monasteries built on inaccessible mountains

Velino-Sirente mountain ranges is a cradle of culture (Ovid, the most sophisticated and elegant Latin poet, was born here) and is the land of origin of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.

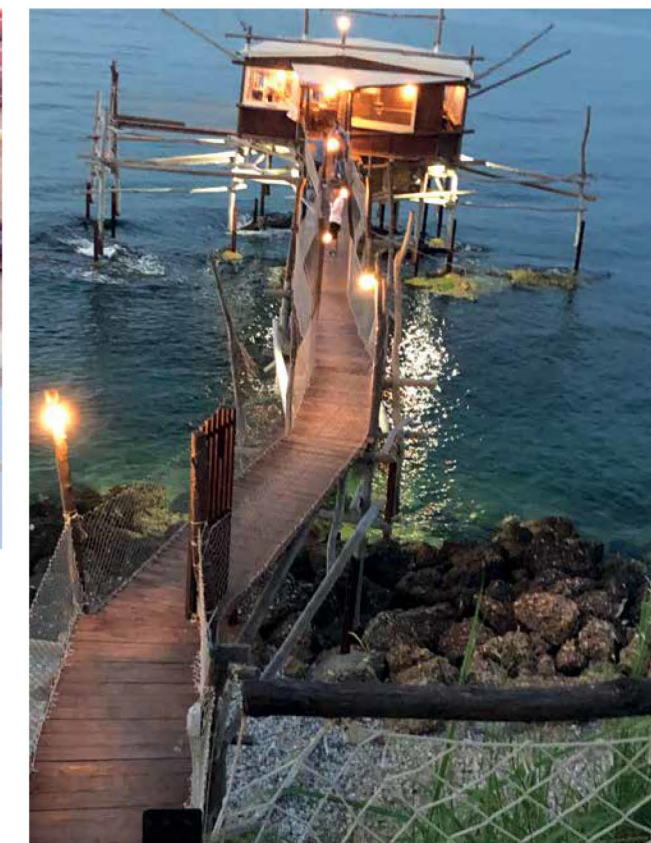
The most widespread native vine is **Montepulciano**, subdivided into five sub-zones and cultivated on about 17,000 hectares with a constantly growing trend. It is now grown on about 50% of Abruzzo's vine-planted surface. The wine produced from it is corpulent and strong, dense and intense due to the power it expresses on the nose and palate. The producers know how to make more ready-to-drink versions but it is actually in the refining that Montepulciano softens and it is, in fact, an age-worthy wine.

Next comes **Trebbiano d'Abruzzo**, a vine with a long history in the Abruzzo region. To the nose, the wine is light and discreet and can also be highly balanced in the mouth, which makes it suitable for a number of combinations, accompanying dishes with extreme versatility. **Pecorino** is the most fashionable Abruzzo wine at the moment. A typical characteristic of



Produce of the sea and land form the basis of the local cuisine. Right: Little bays and cliffs are dotted with typical *trabocchi*, wooden piers used for ancient fishing activities, now converted into seafood restaurants

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Pecorino grapes is that, during the final ripening stage, the acidity curve remains constant rather than turning downwards. This particularity allows the wines to have considerable acidity together with good structure and longevity.

Other native grapes are **Passerina**, which gives a fresh and simple wine; **Cococciola** with a high, almost acerbic note and perhaps the best sparkling wine in Abruzzo (even if Pecorino and Passerina are close contenders); **Montonico**, which, with its lively and rather inconstant productive behaviour, produces a well-structured, delicate and slightly sharp wine with sensations of white, pulpy fruit and aromatic herbs. The typical rosé is **Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo**, obtained from Montepulciano grapes by limiting the fermentation period on the skins to just a few hours followed by white wine-making.

What better way to conclude than to quote Pescara's famous poet, D'Annunzio, who said, "Abruzzo is the most beautiful place on Earth: I promise." ♦

