

Abruzzo

Nestled between the azure Adriatic sea and snow-topped Apennine mountains, this verdant eastern-central region is an area of climatic opposites, and a varied treasure trove of indigenous vines. It deserves to be better known, says our expert

STORY ALESSANDRA PIUBELLO

Abruzzo is often described as a ‘miniature Italy’: in just a few square kilometres it encapsulates a world of bucolic landscapes, nature, parks, pristine villages, waterfalls, castles and historic cities, offering a blend of tradition and modernity, and is still largely undiscovered by international tourists. The region boasts 130km of coastline; to the north, the beaches are flat and sandy, while the southern area known as the Costa dei Trabocchi (trabocchi are traditional fishing platforms) has long stretches of rocky cliffs.

Geographically, this is central Italy. The regional capital, L’Aquila, is an hour and a half by car from Rome (120km) and one hour (100km) from Pescara’s international airport on the Adriatic coast. It’s a region of incredible variety and contrasts, with a vast range of soil composition and climate conditions, and striking biodiversity. The natural landscape is mostly untouched and, with three national parks, one regional park and numerous other protected nature reserves, Abruzzo has earned itself a well-deserved reputation as ‘the green region of Europe’.

All this is reflected in the wines: there’s not one style of Trebbiano d’Abruzzo or Pecorino whites, Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo rosato or Montepulciano d’Abruzzo red – these wines often showcase very different styles, methods and organoleptic properties, and their finest examples are strongly rooted in the homegrown tradition which has remained impervious to external influences.

THE TERROIR

Hillside vineyards in Abruzzo, bordered by the mountains to the west and the coast to the east, account for 96% of the region’s vineyard plantings, according to the Assovini association. They feel almost suspended between the sea and the imposing Maiella and Gran Sasso peaks, the two giants of the Apennines which provide shelter from the humid air masses rolling across from the Tyrrhenian sea. These create dramatic temperature shifts which, combined with the bright light, caressing breezes from both the Apennines and the Adriatic, and well-suited limestone-clay soil, create the perfect habitat for vines.

This terroir is ideal for producing structured wines and allows the region’s main variety, Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, the chance to express

its full potential. Vineyards can be found, too, in areas defined as mountainous, at altitudes of 600m–800m. Although currently just 4% of the region’s plantings are in the mountains, the high-altitude sites are bound to attract more interest in the future with climate change threatening warmer growing seasons. Meanwhile, the sandy-clay soil in the hilly coastal strip, which enjoys a Mediterranean climate, is particularly suitable for white grapes.

SUBSTANCE AND NUANCE

Research in the region has shown that the Italic peoples began growing grapes in Abruzzo around 1,000 BC. The Greek historian Polybius wrote in his Histories that Abruzzo wines helped Hannibal and his troops regain their strength after their victory at Cannae [in Puglia]. Major archaeological finds have provided evidence of winemaking in Roman times. And the Roman poet Ovid, who was born in Abruzzo, described his native region as fertile ground for grapes.

The first historical written record of Montepulciano d’Abruzzo dates from 1792. The grape originated in the Valle Peligna (near L’Aquila) at the foot of the Maiella and ▶

Vineyards outside the fortified hilltop town of Capestrano, on the edge of the Gran Sasso national park in L’Aquila province



Sirente-Velino mountains; it later migrated to the hills inland around Pescara. It has been grown throughout the coastal hills since about 1950 and accounts for more than 80% of Abruzzo's denomination wines, and it is among the top three DOC wines produced in Italy (by quantity).

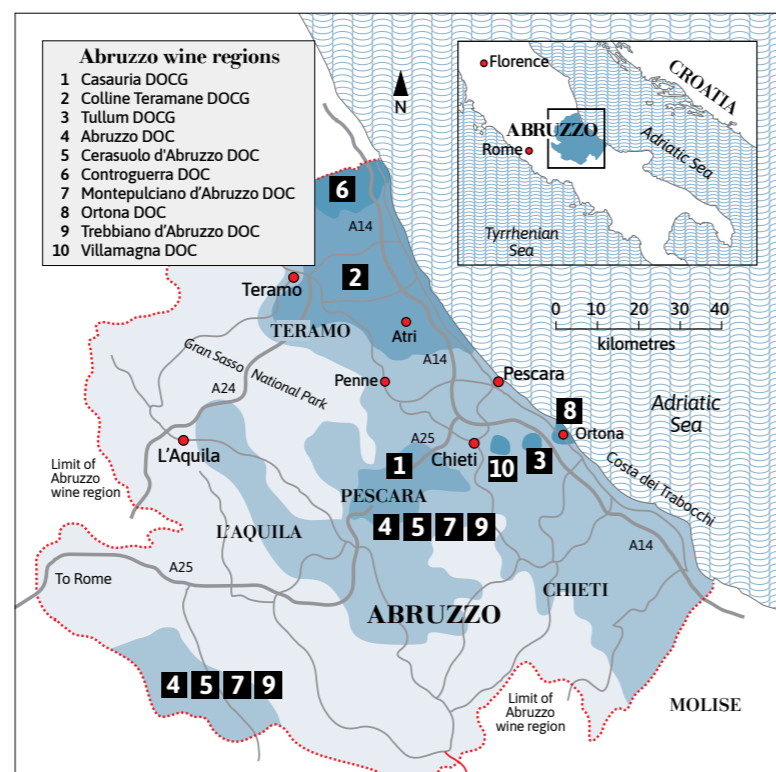
Generous, versatile and malleable, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo can be interpreted as a wine that is concentrated, structured, muscular and potent, often bearing strong signs of oak ageing. Alternative styles, meanwhile, accentuate freshness, elegance, easy drinking and intensity, without compromising on the grape's typical grit and character: these wines are aged in steel or concrete vats, or even terracotta amphorae. In northern Abruzzo, the Colline Teramane have been a DOCG zone for 20 years; the hills benefit from their specific elevation and geology which, combined with the silty-clayey soil and temperature swings, give the Montepulciano grown here substance and sheer energy.

Abruzzo's other emblematic variety is Trebbiano d'Abruzzo. For years, it has been giving wine lovers immensely rewarding results with complex, long-lived, subtly nuanced wines, gaining a reputation as a prestige Italian white. And while credit for this breakthrough should be given to some pioneering producers, today there's a whole new generation producing fresh interpretations of Trebbiano d'Abruzzo that are focused on – and respectful of – the terroir, and differ according to the growing areas. The Loreto Aprutino commune is renowned for its special soil and climatic qualities, and Trebbiano d'Abruzzo from here has an international reputation for being among the world's best whites.

VARIETAL CALLING CARDS

Today's trendiest variety in Abruzzo is Pecorino, which is increasingly widespread in the region. Conscious of its unfulfilled potential, Abruzzo producers are now focusing on this white grape, the qualities of which were rediscovered in the 1990s. To achieve excellent results, early-ripening Pecorino prefers fresh areas with extreme temperature swings, producing well-structured wines with marked acidity. In terms of taste, Pecorino displays differing levels of sapidity depending on the soil, making it a very versatile white. Other indigenous varieties grown in Abruzzo include Passerina, which produces a fresh, fragrant, not overly structured wine; Cococciola, which has pronounced citrus notes; and Montonico, which gives a wine of bright acidity and floral aromas.

The region's traditional 'peasant' wine has always been Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo, a fruit-forward wine which combines the easy-drinking nature of



Abruzzo at a glance

Area planted 32,000ha
Production About 140m bottles (DOC & IGT)
Denominations DOCG Casauria, Colline Teramane, Tullum; DOC Abruzzo, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo, Controguerra, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Ortona, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, Villamagna
Main denomination Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC, planted across 19,000ha and typically producing 100 million bottles annually (70% of which is exported)

SOURCE: CONSORZIO TUTELA VINI D'ABRUZZO, 2022

rosé with the punch of a red. Made from the region's quintessential grape Montepulciano, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo is pleasingly multi-faceted and highly complex in its own way, with a strong identity and possessing everything it takes to become one of Abruzzo's flagship wines. Indeed, this characterful wine would be impossible to reproduce in any other region of Italy: a rosé capable of delivering lively freshness, generous fruit and remarkable structure all at once is a rare feat, even in the diverse panorama of rosé wines.

PACE OF CHANGE

Metodo classico sparkling wines from Abruzzo have been around since the 1980s, the regional consorzio says, while some local producers have been making Charmat method wines since the late 2000s. To meet the growing demand for bubbly, the Abruzzo consorzio decided to establish a collective regional brand, Trabocco, to spotlight all the Charmat method sparkling wines – white or rosé – produced there using Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, Pecorino, Passerina, Montonico, Cococciola and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes.

This fast-evolving, dynamic region is a hive of activity: new estates are springing up, and older producers are stepping back or working alongside the youngbloods. A new 'Abruzzo model' will come into force this year, leading to a reorganisation of the region's wine production, simplifying the different denominations at an administrative level, and aiming to highlight the distinctive identities of local zones.



Emidio Pepe's vines in Torano Nuovo, looking towards Gran Sasso National Park

ABRUZZO: THE NAMES TO KNOW

Some key figures have shaped Abruzzo's winemaking history. **Edoardo Valentini** set out to champion Trebbiano d'Abruzzo and highlight its worth in the 1950s. He died in 2006, and today, his son **Francesco Paolo Valentini's** Trebbiano d'Abruzzo offerings are world class, reflecting his vision of an authentic, true-to-type wine: one can literally taste the sense of place and tradition (+39 085 829 1138). Since the late 1960s, **Emidio Pepe** has introduced the world to the potential of Trebbiano d'Abruzzo and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. His wines (emidiopepe.com) have the power to move with their quirky character, vibrating with disarming inner energy. Sadly no longer with us, **Gianni Masciarelli** (who died in 2008) and **Giovanni Faraone** (2019) were two other pioneering titans of winemaking in Abruzzo whose influence should not be overlooked.

Today's Abruzzo wine scene is abuzz with innovation. In 2019, 30-year-old oenologist **Giulia Cataldi Madonna** took over the family business (cataldimadonna.com) from her father **Luigi**, yet another of the region's



Giulia Cataldi Madonna



Francesco Paolo Valentini

innovators who is reputed as the first in Abruzzo to plant Pecorino. Giulia is the young, determined face of the generational shift. She has an aura of pure energy, which she pours into her wines, infusing them with vitality and tension on the palate.

Siblings **Valentina** and **Luigi Di Camillo**, with their winery **I Fauri** (tenutaifauri.it), are young oenologists born into a family of winemakers. As keen experimenters and researchers, they produce wines that are light, fresh, juicy, characterful and immensely quaffable.

Fausto Albanesi and his wife **Adriana** founded **Torre dei Beati** (torredeibeati.it) in Loreto Aprutino about 25 years ago. Fausto

is a tireless ambassador for the terroir of the region, and their wines underline an expressive, local identity born out of an ethical, minimalist approach.

Young oenologist **Fabio Di Donato** founded his winery **Cingilia** (vinicingilia.it) 10 years ago. His wines show an increasingly lively, strong identity, showcasing the fruits of a well-suited terroir and the gentle hand that has drawn out their powerful expressiveness.

Emilio Rapino took over his father's winery in 2014. His wines (cantinarapino.it) have a big personality and are remarkably true to type, with a clear expression of the terroir and respect for the variety. ▶

Pick and mix: Piubello's 10 wines to showcase the region's styles

① **Valentini, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo 2019** 96

£95-£105.83 (ib) **Ideal Wine Co, Mann Fine Wine**
The Valentini family have been winemakers since 1650 and follow nature, not fashion: their Trebbiano d'Abruzzo enjoys international cult status but is released only when ready. In 2019, this eminently cellarable white produced elegant, pure results. The complex, clear bouquet leads to a profound palate, with subtle saline undertones. Substance and freshness in superb harmony: simply unforgettable. **Drink 2023-2033 Alcohol 12%**

Cataldi Madonna, Frontone Pecorino, Terre Aquilane 2020 94

£74.25 **Astrum Wine Cellars, Sociovinio**
This certified-organic estate covers 30ha divided into three vineyards, the main one close to the winery in a broad valley at about 400m, with dramatic temperature shifts. Luigi Cataldi Madonna chose this, the Frontone vineyard, for Abruzzo's first-ever Pecorino planting. Vinified and matured in stainless steel only, its signature freshness and racy acidity make it taut and vertical, yet still sapid and lively. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12.5%**

Emidio Pepe, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo 2021 94

£40 (ib)-£90 **Dynamic Vines, Falcon Vintners**
Pepe's respect for Abruzzo's wine-growing traditions and his certified organic and biodynamic techniques all result in wines with a genuine character. Trodden by foot, this is fermented in concrete vats where it ages for two years. Broom, golden plum and white pepper lead to a full, savoury palate, vibrant with vintage charm and pleasing balance. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**

Terraviva, Ekwo Pecorino, Abruzzo 2022 92

£25 **Uncharted Wines**
These 22ha are a pristine corner of paradise: a gently sloping windswept plot on clay soils. The Topi family chose a certified organic approach, also introducing biodynamic techniques. This Pecorino, produced in stainless steel with indigenous yeasts, displays a citrusy bouquet with hints of camomile and yellow-fleshed fruit.

Savoury, energetic and dynamic with a long finish. **Drink 2023-2027 Alc 12.5%**

② **Cirelli, Anfora, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo 2022** 92

£29.50-£34 **Provisions London, The Great Wine Co, The Umbrella Project**
Francesco Cirelli founded his certified-organic farm about 20 years ago, giving 6.5ha over to vineyards. His amphora wines are quite staggering for their intensity and expressiveness. This rosé macerates for no more than six hours before ageing in amphorae for about 12 months. Medicinal, herbal, fruity and floral notes with grip and sapid-acidic vigour on the palate, finishing long and juicy. **Drink 2023-2026 Alc 13.5%**

Rapino, Gira, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo 2020 92

£19.50 **D Vine Cellars**
After years working alongside his father Rocco, Emilio took over the winery in 2015 and shook things up. He made technical and structural changes both in the vineyard (certified organic) and the cellar, letting the wines age for longer. This is a traditional, floral and fruity Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo with a hint of pepper. It has well-integrated tannins and is brightened by its intense, juicy verve. **Drink 2023-2026 Alc 13%**

③ **I Fauri, Ottobre Rosso, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2021** 94

£16.85 **York Wines**
I Fauri's 32ha are split over several plots, with soil and climate characteristics that allow for careful selections at harvest. At its certified-organic estate, the Di Camillo family ages almost all wines in concrete. Ottobre Rosso has a deep bouquet with notes of herbs, sour cherry and sweet violet. Its trademark, characterful palate is supple, with well-integrated tannins and a fruity finish. **Drink 2023-2033 Alc 14.5%**

Torre dei Beati, Mazzamurello Riserva, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2020 94

£45 **Matthew Clark**
Fausto Albanesi is the pillar of this winery, founded with his wife Adriana Galasso around 25 years ago. A 2ha vineyard planted with vines more than 50 years old at



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about 250m produces this Montepulciano, which ages for 20 months in barriques. Dark berries, flowers, spice and blood orange aromas are followed by compact, balanced tannins and a lively streak of freshness. Organic. **Drink 2023-2033 Alc 14.5%**

④ **Valle Reale, Vigneto Sant'Eusanio, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2021** 93

£40 **Passione Vino**
In 1999, Leonardo Pizzolo chose this spot, nestling in an unspoiled valley, to focus on wine-growing at altitude. This characteristic wine comes from Sant'Eusanio, his highest vineyard: 20-year-old vines on lean, pebbly soil. Handling in stainless steel only in the winery draws out herbal and fruity aromas of Morello cherry and forest fruits. An elegant palate, balanced acidity and structure. Organic. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 13%**

Masciarelli, Iskra Riserva, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2019 92

£30-£40 **Les Caves de Pyrene, Millésima, Petersham Cellar, Vinvm**
This winery, founded by Gianni Masciarelli 42 years ago and now run by his wife Marina Cvetic, has earned international renown. The grapes for Iskra come from a vineyard in the Colline Teramane DOCG. It ages for 18 months in new barriques, which gives the nose spice, tobacco and balsamic undertones. It has a structured palate, with enough softness to smooth the assertive tannins, and good ageing potential. **Drink 2023-2034 Alc 15%** **D**