

Edible Jewels In The Umbrian Crown

Pasta - They have pasta in Italy? Sure do. And it would be stretching the truth to say that the Umbrian variations are wildly different from the pasta found else in the country. One of the better known pastas is *umbrici* (or *umbricelli*), a thin spaghetti eaten as a first course with tomato ragu, pecorino cheese sauce or as a specialty dish with lamb or truffle. The thick, square spaghetti known as *stringhozzi*, according to kindly Lionello of the University, is also called *stranghozzi* or *stronghozzi* and is 'optimal' served with a pulped tomato sauce and sprinkling of fresh basil. If you happen to invite a clergyman to dinner, it might be tactful not to serve up Spoleto's wide, flat pasta called *strozzapreti*, priest stranglers.

Mushrooms are utilized in many Umbrian recipes. The pride of Umbrian mushrooms is the *Boletus edulis* or *funghi porcini* in Italian. They have a rich, musty taste ideal for side-dishes, sauces, soups and risotto. Fresh porcini can be prepared by careful washing, brushing any dirt from the caps and trying not to allow water to enter the underside of the mushrooms. Dark parts of the mushrooms can be removed and caps with many worm holes should be discarded. Apart from use in specific dishes, porcini mushrooms can be served simply by slicing and frying in oil or butter. A variation is to dip them into beaten egg and breadcrumbs before deep-frying.

The market and many supermarkets have fresh porcini, also even packets of dried mushrooms suitable for taking home to your own planet. Dried porcini should be re-hydrated by soaking in warm water for fifteen minutes. They can be then be squeezed 'dry' although the mushroom liquid is a useful flavour ingredient in its own right.

Olive Oil is a universal Italian addiction. Stefania, who researched local oil as part of her work at the hospital, says that Umbrian olive oil is among the best in the world in terms of its health-preserving properties. If you are really serious about the health side, buy only cold-pressed (*spremuta a freddo*), extra-virgin olive oil in dark glass bottles. Don't be put off by bottles of oil that have a large amount of opaque sediment because it's a natural aspect of the product. Afficionados can take bus 5 to Torgiano to visit the Olive Oil Museum for displays on the cultivation and manufacturing cycle and tastings of local oils. Olive trees are believed to have been brought to central Italy by Greek settlers as long ago as the seventh century BC; in various parts of Umbria there are trees up to a thousand years old.

Truffles are found mainly in the eastern part of Umbria. Norcia, named after the Etruscan goddess of fortune *Nortia*, is home to the black truffle (*tartufo nero*). These delicacies are in season from March to November and can be sampled either raw or as the prime flavour ingredient in several traditional dishes. Norcia's truffle festival at the end of February is a good time to see and taste the wide range of uses although the town has many specialty shops carrying truffle products throughout the year. White truffles (*tartufo bianco*) are harvested from October to January in the forests around Gubbio and near Orvieto and can command astronomical prices. These truffles are always eaten raw, usually grated over pasta or as a condiment with bread and oil.

Freshwater fish make up part of the traditional Umbrian diet. River and lake fish such as trout, carp and catfish, eels, tench, crabs and freshwater prawns are prepared mostly fresh but also occasionally sun-dried. *Tegamaccio*, a potent casserole of various fish and eels from Lake Trasimeno, was allegedly responsible for the food-poisoning death of Pope Martin IV, although he probably ate far too much; Dante condemned him to Purgatory as a glutton. In Perugia your best bet for fish is the upper floor of the *Mercato coperto*, the covered market off Piazza Matteotti.

Legumes and cereals are another food of historical, cultural and commercial note. *Farro*, a close relative of barley, has been a staple food source for thousands of years and a ceremonial bread consumed at weddings is made from its flour. The lentils (*lenticchie*) grown at altitude on the Grand Plain near Castelluccio are considered the finest in Italy for their flavour, colour and texture. *Risina*, a type of bean grown around Lake Trasimeno and the unusually-shaped *cicerchie* are both local legumes rarely found elsewhere in the country.

Pork products have for centuries been the prime ingredients in Umbrian cooking. Roast whole pig cooked in a wood oven, ham cured with aromatic herbs, salt-cured meat and salami are not just festive foods but part of the daily diet. You do not need to look far to spot ubiquitous porchetta vans selling roast pork in crisp buns, probably the Umbrian snack food per excellence. The town of Norcia even has its name immortalized in *norcineria*, the term used throughout Italy to denote a shop specializing in the preparation of pork-

derived products such as *prosciutto* and sausages. Umbrian prosciutto, usually made from the black pigs found in the region, is prized for its relatively low fat content

Torta al Testo is an unleavened bread that has been around since Etruscan times as evidenced by pottery on display in the archaeological museum. Originally baked on a ceramic but now usually metal plate, ie. the *testo*, the *torta* is a thick, flat bread that is then filled with ham, cheese, rocket, or grilled vegetables. If only the Earl of Sandwich had tried one of these first! *Torta al testo* can be bought from supermarkets and bakeries for you to fill fantastically at home. Many restaurants have *torta* on the menu if you prefer to let the local experts do the job for you.

Cheese comes in many styles although Italian classics such as *parmigiano* and *mozzarella* are definitely not of Umbrian origin. Many specialties are difficult to find so try the gourmet shops rather than the supermarkets. *Pecorino umbro* is produced in the north half of the region and usually aged for six months to give it a stronger flavour. Norcia offers both aged *ricotta* and truffle-flavoured cheese, usually a kind of *caciotta*. *Formaggio ubriaco*, drunk cheese, is laced with a good dose of Montefalco red wine. Around Fossato di Vico and Costacciaro they make a cheese which is aged in an underground pit for up to two years. Città di Castello's *raviggiolo* is a goat and sheep milk cheese wrapped in fern leaves to impart a particular aroma. The best way to get a quick feel for the range of Umbrian cheeses is to order a cheese platter in a restaurant or sniff your way to a food fair that has cheese tastings. Most delicatessens are happy to offer you a taste of what they sell if you are a serious customer.

Desserts of Umbria are generally similar to those found across central Italy although with names which differ from town to town. One specialty is sweet maccheroni, a Christmas Eve treat flavoured with cinnamon and walnuts, and *stinchetti*, marzipan sticks said to resemble human shin-bones. A real Perugian favourite is the snake-like *torciglione*, often to be seen staring with glaze-cherry eyes from the windows of city pastry shops. Seasonal sweets include *torcolo di San Costanzo*, an almond-cake in honour of the saint's big day out on January 29, *fritelle di San Giuseppe* cinnamon donuts for similar reasons on March 19 and dove-shaped *colomba* sweet-bread for Easter. Year-round, meals are often finished with slices of the almond and aniseed bread called *tozzetti* accompanied by a glass of sweet *vinsanto*.

Wines - This is the accompaniment par excellence to the food of Umbria. Wine-production has taken place in the region since Etruscan times and is still an important industry today. Various types of wine within Italy are classified into DOC labels where only those made to a certain formula and style are entitled to identify with traditional names. DOCG is an even stricter level of classification, hence these wines are usually of a higher quality and carry a price tag to match. In Umbria there are several wine producing areas, DOC and DOCG wines, as follows:

Colli Perugini - includes the towns of Deruta, Marciano, Fratta Todina, Monte Castello di Vibio, and the hills of San Venanzo in the province of Terni. The main basis for red wine is Sangiovese, Barbera and Merlot, for white wine Trebbiano and Malvasia. Colli Perugini wines have not built up a great reputation so tend to be a little cheaper. The red really requires cellaring for a couple of years.

Colli Martani - includes the towns of Perugia, Gualdo Cattaneo, Giano dell'Umbria, Todi, Massa Martana, Monte Castello di Vibio, Montefalco, Castel Ritaldi, Spoleto, Bevagna, Cannara, Bettona, Deruta and Collazone. Reds are also Sangiovese-based with variations including Canaiolo, Barbera, Montepulciano, Ciliegiolo and Merlot. For white wine the staples are Trebbiano and Greco vines, but also Malvasia Bianca di Candia, Malvasia Bianca del Chianti, Garganeca and Verdicchio. Top pick here is undoubtedly *Greco di Todi*; dry, full, fresh and rounded.

Colli del Trasimeno - includes the lakeside towns of Castiglione del Lago, Città della Pieve, Paciano, Panicale, Corciano, Magione, Passignano sul Trasimeno e Tuoro sul Trasimeno. The main basis for red wine is the traditional Sangiovese vine but also Gamay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Ciliegiolo and Merlot. Whites are produced from Trebbiano, Grechetto, Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco and Pinot Grigio. Again, Trasimeno wines are not among the region's finest but are steadily improving. Some of them once carried the Lamborghini label - the designer of arguably the world's hottest sports cars turned to wine-making here in his retirement - although we haven't seen them around recently.

Orvieto - centres on the town of Orvieto and vineyards stretched out along the Paglia and Tiber Rivers. Orvieto's white wines are probably the most famous of Umbrian wine exports: dry and semi-sweet wines are based on Procanico, Verdello, Grechetto, Drupeggio and Malvasia. The proudly namedly *Orvieto Classico* is the standard-bearer here.

Colli Altotiberini - includes northern Umbrian towns of Umbertide, Città di Castello and their surrounding areas along the Tiber valley. Reds are based on Sangiovese and Merlot, whites on Trebbiano. The *Rosato* from this area is one of its more interesting wines.

Montefalco - includes the towns of Montefalco, Gualdo Cattaneo, Giano dell'Umbria, Castel Ritaldi and part of Bevagna. Red wines are made from Sangiovese and Sagrantino, whites from Trebbiano and Grechetto. The *Sagrantino di Montefalco* (a DOCG wine) is close to legendary and deserves to be sampled at least once. Intriguingly-named is the tasty and versatile red wine *Scacciadiavoli*, the Devil Chaser.

Torgiano - focusses on the town of Torgiano. The main basis for red wine is the traditional Sangiovese vine but also Canaiolo and Pinot Black, while the whites use Trebbiano, Grechetto, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio and Riesling Italico. The main winemaker is Lungarotti who, in the words of an English wine importer, "simply doesn't know how to make a bad wine". Chilled *Trebbiano* makes an excellent picnic wine in summer while *Rubesco* (DOCG) is the most esteemed of the reds.

Assisi - includes the towns of Assisi, Perugia and Spello. The main basis for red wine is the traditional Sangiovese vine and Merlot while whites rely on the ever-reliable Trebbiano and Grechetto. Assisi is not a prolific wine area though of note is the dulcet *Vinsanto*, so-called because it is prepared in the period leading up to Easter. *Vinsanto* is traditionally an after-dinner drink in Umbria, served at room temperature with slices of sweet almond bread called *tozzetti*. Once *Vinsanto* was made with naturally sweet, semi-dried grapes, but the modern commercial variety is usually a fortified wine. Try the Cantine Adanti label for the real thing.

Curiosities - Try fresh, young *Novello* wines around November, especially for the festival of San Martino. Desert wines are produced in limited quantities around Umbria but look out for *Canaiolo*, *Sagrantino di Montefalco* and the now-rare *Visciolato* made from sour cherries. A liqueur produced from aromatic herbs collected around Gubbio is called *Liquore Monte Ingino* or sometimes *Liquore Sant'Ubaldo* after the town's patron saint. A regional oddity which has never quite taken off is *Amaro al Tartufo* from Norcia, a strong liqueur flavoured with truffle essence.

Major Umbrian Winemakers and Labels - Madrevite, Goretti, Chiorri, Cantine Adanti, Antonelli, Cantine Terre de Trinci, Arnaldo Caprai, Di Filippo, Rocca di Fabbri, Spoleto Ducale, Fanini, Pieve del Vescovo, Villa Po' del Vento, Duca della Corgna, Il Poggio, Ruggeri, Madonna Alta, Lungarotti, Sportoletti. Many of these cellars have their own websites so happy searching if you are a wine fan eager for all the juicy details!