October 31st, 2014
Circulation: 400,345 monthly

UMBRIA TIME

Led by a group of notable winemakers, Tuscany’s lesser-known neighbor is stirring up a scene in the heart of Italy

BY ROBERT CAMUTO PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANDRO MICHAHELLES
ith its perched medieval towns and its rolling hills covered with olive groves and vineyards, central Italy’s Umbria can look like a twin of its northwestern neighbor, Tuscany.

But there is no Florence here, no cultural icons to rival Michelangelo’s David or Brunelleschi’s Duomo. And Umbrian wines have yet to achieve the stature of Brunello or Chianti. For wine lovers, though, Umbria’s obscurity can be a good thing. The region, nicknamed “Italy’s green heart” more than a century ago by Tuscany’s Nobel Prize winning poet Giosuè Carducci is a bonanza of exciting diversity and excellent value.

Umbria is Italy’s heartland—the only region that doesn’t border the sea or a foreign country. The small region’s annual wine production is roughly a third of Tuscany’s.

As in Tuscany, Sangiovese is the most planted red grape, but here it is blended into wines that are generally more approachable than their Chianti counterparts. Umbria’s rippling landscapes and its dizzying number of microclimates also offer some dramatic surprises—from powerfully structured bottlings of indigenous Sagrantino to stellar white blends based on native Grechetto and Chardonnay.

“Umbria never reached the success it deserved,” laments Renzo Cotarella, an Umbria native and longtime managing director of Tuscany-based Marchesi Antinori, whose Castello della Sala near Orvieto makes the remarkable Cervaro della Sala, a Chardonnay-Grechetto blend. In terms of potential, Cotarella says, “it’s a wonderful area to produce great wines.”
In recent decades, high quality wines from Umbria have been shaped by the vision of a few strong-willed winemakers.

The first Umbrian town on the international wine map was Torgiano, 10 miles south of Perugia. Since World War II, the Lungarotti family has promoted Umbria to the world—turning out a long list of eclectic wines topped by their flagship Sangiovese blend, the Torgiano Rubesco Vigna Monticchio Riserva. (The most recent vintage, 2007, scored 90 points in Wine Spectator tastings.)

To the southeast, Montefalco is one of Italy’s most active wine scenes—and the cradle of one of the world’s most tannic grapes, black Sagrantino. Once used to make sweet passito wines, Sagrantino now produces some of Italy’s most potent reds. In the 21st century, the success and investment of Marco Caprai, of Arnaldo-Caprai, has inspired a boom, attracting scores of new wineries.

In Umbria’s southwest corner, bordering Tuscany and the Roman region of Lazio, the historic town of Orvieto lends its name to an appellation that has become a plentiful source of inexpensive white wine. But producers such as Castello della Sala are proving that world-class whites can also be made there.

Umbria’s wine scene is a compelling work in progress. Below are profiles of three main producers and the personalities who have shaped them.
LUNGAROTTI

For most of the 20th century, Umbrian wine’s foremost ambassador and transformative figure was Giorgio Lungarotti. The dapper, globetrotting bon vivant hailed from the tiny hilltop locale of Torgiano, at the confluence of the Tiber and Chiascio rivers.

Lungarotti, born in 1910, studied viticulture before inheriting his family’s vast farmlands of about 1,000 acres. Serving a stint as the town mayor after World War II, he managed the region’s transition from sharecropping, offering tenants a choice of livestock or land. Most chose the more valuable of the two: livestock. Lungarotti then consolidated his estate and turned his attention to wine.

“Since Roman times until the end of World War II, nothing changed in the vineyards and wineries of central Italy,” explains Chiara Lungarotti, 43, who took the helm of the family company after her father’s death in 1999.

In the postwar years, Chiara explains, most of the vines were still trained to climb and wrap around olive or elm trees, an age-old system that remains in place in some small vineyards in central Italy.

Giorgio Lungarotti introduced modern vine-training to make way for tractors. He planted the region’s historically cultivated grapes, the reds Sangiovese and Canaiolo, on Torgiano’s clay and sandy loam hills, while whites such as Grechetto and Trebbiano were grown on the alluvial plain below town.

In 1962, Lungarotti built a modern winery to bottle two signature wines: a white blend, Torre di Giano, and a red called Rubesco.
Chiana Lungarotti (right) took the reins of Cantine Giorgio Lungarotti after her father’s death in 1999. Today, she manages the estate with her half-sister, Teresa Severini (left).
Two vintages later, he produced a Rubesco Riserva from a selection of the best Sangiovese from his 30-acre Vigna Monticchio vineyards, just north of town.

“At the time, wine in Italy was still something of local production,” says Lungarotti, a trained viticulturist who seems to have inherited her father’s charisma and dynamic personality. “My father said, ‘Why shouldn’t I sell my wine in Italy and abroad?’”

Leading a visitor though her vineyards, she wears mud-caked hiking boots that contrast with fashionable red sunglasses atop her short blond hair. “He strongly believed he could make people aware of this place. And he believed Umbria was a great wine country.”

From the start, one of the keys to Rubesco was its bottle aging. After a year in barrels, it stays at least another full year in bottle before release. The Riserva is aged four to five years in bottle. “It’s in the bottle [that] our Sangiovese gives its best expression,” she says. “It’s in the bottle it gets its balance. It’s the bottle that takes off all the edges.”

Giorgio was an iconoclastic experimenter. He planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and other international varietals in the 1960s. In the ’70s, he began bottling a wider range, including Umbrian Chardonnay, and a “super-Umbrian” called San Giorgio, blended from Cabernet and Sangiovese. He even made a traditional-method brut sparkler from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

To draw more visitors to Umbria he opened Le Tre Vaselle, a hotel and spa, and created a wine museum. One of the top collections in
the world, it was meticulously curated by his wife, Maria Grazia.

Today, Chiara runs Cantine Giorgio Lungarotti with her half-sister, Teresa Severini. The family foundation runs the wine museum and an olive oil museum, both nearby.

In the years that followed her father’s death, Lungarotti reorganized the estate with the help of Denis Dubourdieu, a famed Bordeaux wine consultant and enology professor. Her modern team conducted extensive soil tests, changed rootstocks and vineyards, and expanded and reengineered the winery.

For her flagship Torre di Giano white, Lungarotti experimented with new blending grapes, opting for Vermentino because it keeps its fresh acidity in the Umbrian heat. For the Rubesco Riserva Vigna Monticchio, she brought smaller fermentation vats into the winery—allowing for parcel-by-parcel selection and fermentations of each of the vineyard’s six sections.

The Rubesco and Sangiovese remain objects of particular pride. “In Umbria, the hills are lower, rounder and smoother, and so is the Sangiovese,” she says. “Chianti Classico is sharper.”

To make her point, she pours a glass of 2009 Chianti Classico from the historic Tuscan estate Stomennano, owned by her husband, Matteo Lupi Grassi. “You can taste [that] it’s sharper, not as forward,” she says of the Chianti, as a guest raises a glass. The message of this strong-willed Umbrian is delivered without irony: Her Sangiovese is better than her husband’s wine. Basta—enough.

In her father’s last days, she discussed her plans to expand the family’s holdings to a new estate 20 miles southeast of Torgiano in Montefalco. “We talked about it the day before he died,” she remembers. “He was completely against it. He said, ‘It is not Torgiano. It is not us.’”

But she went ahead anyway, planting an organic estate with about 50 acres of vineyards. She also built a new winery, where she produces Montefalco Rosso and Sagrantino.

“I believe in the future of Umbria,” she says. “Umbria can’t be one place. It has many different expressions. And it’s important to know the different expressions.”
“Sagrantino is my first son,” says Marco Caprai, standing on a hill of his Montefalco estate with views over the rolling countryside to the Apennine foothills and the mountainside town of Assisi about 15 miles to the north. “There is nothing like Sagrantino.”

At 50, with a build as stout as the ferociously tannic local grape, Caprai is the undisputed father of Montefalco’s modern wine scene. Over 27 years he has helped resurrect Sagrantino, drawing on it to make one of Italy’s lushest dry red wines.

Working with the University of Milan, Caprai has selected and registered three of the four Sagrantino clones in current use and conducted some of Italy’s most extensive vineyard research. He created a Sagrantino wine route as well as a protocol for sustainable agriculture and has invested in broadcasting the wine to the world.

Today, Arnaldo Caprai makes a dozen wines: two dry Montefalco Sagrantinos, one passito, five other dry red blends and four whites. Yet pure Sagrantino remains the star. Ten Sagrantino releases from the 1998 vintage to the current 2008 have received scores of 90 points or higher in Wine Spectator tastings.

Over the past 20 years, the number of wineries in Montefalco and the four towns surrounding the appellation has skyrocketed—from fewer than 10 to more than 80—and in little more than a decade, annual production has doubled to 1.5 million bottles.

Some of those wineries are run by a new generation on family farms who are the first to bottle and export their wines. Among such notable winemakers is Giampaolo Tabarrini, who makes three single-vineyard Sagrantinos. (Each has scored more than 90 points in one vintage in the past decade.)
Marco Caprai (top) has steered his father’s estate, Arnaldo Caprai, for a quarter-century. He has focused on wines made from the difficult-to-manage Sagrantino. The vine trunks are knotted in order to limit yields.
“Without Marco [Caprai], we would still be selling our wine in bulk,” Tabarrini says.

Larger winemakers have followed Caprai across Italy. Among them is the Trento-based Lunelli family, best known for its Ferrari sparkling wines. “Caprai is the reason we are in Montefalco,” says Marcello Lunelli, of Tenuta Lunelli, which created Tenuta Castelbuono here in 2001. The Lunellis followed up in 2012 by unveiling the region’s architectural masterpiece—an underground winery covered by a giant tortoiselike shell, conceived by famed sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro.

Yet in 1971, when Marco’s father bought the family’s first vineyards and farmlands here, Montefalco wines were virtually unknown beyond Perugia; Arnaldo Caprai, a successful Umbrian textiles manufacturer, paid less than $3,500 for 100 acres.

Together with a handful of like-minded producers, he helped establish a DOC appellation for single-variety dry Montefalco Sagrantino, along with Montefalco Rosso, a Sangiovese-dominated blend with 10 percent to 15 percent Sagrantino and up to 30 percent other blending grapes.

Marco studied political science, but loved good food and wine. When his father suggested he try his hand at the winery, Marco ran with it. He arrived in 1987, and soon became fascinated by Sagrantino, a vigorous vine that requires lots of hand care and does not lend itself to mechanical pruning or harvesting. He volunteered as president of the local growers consortium where he set out to increase Montefalco Sagrantino’s official status to DOCG, Italy’s highest (the status was conferred in 1992). Beginning in 1989, Marco partnered with the University of Milan to study Sagrantino. From that research, Caprai recalls, “We began to understand something was not OK.”

Vineyard yields were far too high, Caprai learned, and grape quality was uneven, often leading to bitter, astringent wines. A big part of the problem was the high-yielding threepier palmette (or hedgerow) system used for training Sagrantino.
Marco planted new vineyards, using shorter, modern, lower-yielding training systems to produce better grapes. To adapt his palmette-trained vines, he had his crews lop off the two top tiers of the plants.

“When my father saw the vineyards cut, he thought someone had done this to us!” Marco says with a grin. “When he found out it was me, he wanted to kill me.”

Caprai began extensive green harvests to limit Sagrantino’s leafy exuberance, then introduced French barriques for aging his Sagrantino. In 1996, he released a wine that turned him into a star in Italy: Sagrantino di Montefalco 25 Anni, aged two years in barrel.

Success drove Caprai even deeper into his studies. With university researchers, he went to rare lengths to collect and select Sagrantino grapes seeds from vineyards, private gardens and even monasteries. From those seeds, he created a vineyard of about 7,000 vines planted on their own roots. From his “bank of Sagrantino,” researchers have selected about 100 clones that Caprai calls “the new blood for Sagrantino.”

Leading a visitor through this vineyard he points out a bizarre cultivation technique aimed at limiting Sagrantino’s vigorous growth, which amplifies without rootstock: The vine trunks are formed into a knot, which forces them to put down deep roots. “We have to choke the vine”—Caprai dramatically holds a hand to his throat to illustrate.

An influx of new winemakers and changing consumer tastes have triggered a debate on Sagrantino’s future. While Caprai, Tabarrini and other producers embrace the power of Sagrantino, another camp, including Adanti (one of the first to put Sagrantino in bottle, from 1972), Lungarotti and the Lunellis, is trying to tame the grape’s tannins to make softer Sagrantinos.

“We are working... to make a more drinkable Sagrantino,” says Marcello Lunelli. “I don’t know how much that is possible. It’s the challenge.”
Among others who believe that a less aggressive character would improve Sagrantino wines' reception with consumers is influential enologist Riccardo Cotarella (brother of Antinori's Renzo Cotarella), who is both winemaker at Falesco, his family's Umbrian winery, and a consultant to Montefalco producer Colpetrone. “Sagrantino is a wine that needs to be revisited,” agrees Cotarella, who himself has been experimenting with ways to reduce tannins in the monster wine, including limiting sulfites during vinification.

For his part, Caprai is going full speed in the other direction—testing Sagrantino's limits. Back at his winery, he sets down a glass containing a sample of 2006 Sagrantino that has stayed in barrel. The wine tastes as if it has found a mellow balance, but Caprai won’t release it until next year, as a limited-edition wine after nine years in barriques. He calls the wine “our Vega Sicilia.”

“Today, we don’t know all the possibilities for Sagrantino,” Caprai says. “Sagrantino is a new world. We are just in the beginning.”

CASTELLO DELLA SALA

Orvieto, sprawling atop a volcanic cliff in southwestern Umbria with its mosaic-covered Gothic cathedral and antique papal palace, is one of central Italy’s most picturesque sights. It is also synonymous with one of Italy’s least-respected whites.

“Orvieto has a problem,” says Antinori’s Renzo Cotarella. “It became almost a commodity wine. Now you have a few producers trying to rebuild the image and working for more quality.”

As a young agronomist in 1978, Cotarella was recruited by Piero Antinori to help improve Orvieto at Antinori’s historic Umbrian property, Castello della Sala. The 14th-century castle is surrounded by hundreds of acres of hillside vineyards with seashell-laced sedimentary soils, at the northern edge of the Orvieto Classico appellation. “We realized we were not just in a place to produce wine, but a special place,” says Cotarella, 59.

Antinori and Cotarella shared the goal of generally improving Orvieto wine, which traditionally had been a sweet or off-dry wine desiccated by botrytis.

One of the biggest problems Orvieto faced was its blend. His-
historically, Grechetto was a major part of the white blend: Thick-skinned and tannic, it provided a backbone of structure along with minerality and acidity. The Grechetto was mixed roughly equally with Procanico, a subvarietal of the blander but highly productive Trebbiano; smaller amounts of local Verdello, Drupeggio and Malvasia were added to the blend as well.

But during the 1960s, Grechetto was largely replaced by increasing amounts of higher-yielding Procanico. Cotarella led a group of like-minded producers who selected and replanted Grechetto and tried to make it the prominent grape in Orvieto. “Grechetto has more personality,” Cotarella says.

But that proved a tough sell, as the grape was difficult to cultivate and when unripe produced hard, rustic wines. Today, Orvieto’s rules are a loose-fitting compromise, requiring only that the combined
Grechetto and Procanico content be at least 60 percent of the finished wine.

In his early days at Castello della Sala, in addition to Grechetto, Cotarella planted Chardonnay and other grapes to try blending in his Orvieto. At the same time, he experimented with what were then considered radical winemaking techniques, such as cold macerations on skins and fermentations on lees, to produce more intense wines. “Our idea was to create an ageworthy white, which meant a wine that would last not 10 years but even just one year,” Cotarella laughs.

Then Cotarella, who became estate manager of Castello della Sala in 1981, had a moment of awakening the same year while on a trip to France. “I drank a 1971 Corton-Charlemagne white Burgundy, and it was unbelievable,” he recalls. “When we realized it was possible to create a white wine that could age with freshness and minerality, we discovered another world. I decided I wanted to produce a wine like this at Castello della Sala.”

Chardonnay became his star. After a few years of experimentation, Antinori released its first barrel-fermented white, a Chardonnay blend with Grechetto playing a supporting role: Cervaro della Sala 1985 (90 points) was the first in the series of bottlings that have become Umbria’s iconic white—as close as central Italy comes to Burgundy. The amount of Grechetto varies, but may constitute up to 20 percent of the blend—providing acidity in hotter vintages.

Antinori today produces four other Umbria IGT wines by way of Castello della Sala: a pure Chardonnay; a Sauvignon Blanc-dominated blend with Sémillon; a botrytized blend of local and international varietals; and a Pinot Noir made from the estate’s highest vineyards.

The estate’s sole appellation wine is San Giovanni Orvieto Classico Superiore. The 2013 vintage is an easy-drinking blend of 40 percent Grechetto, followed by portions of Viognier, Procanico and Pinot Blanc.

But Cotarella is not satisfied. “The future of Orvieto requires some different choices with Grechetto as the base of the wine,” he says, and insists he is working on cultivating Grechetto for 70 percent of the blend.
The idea of a stellar Orvieto is somewhat unconventional. Orvieto doesn't have the aromatic bouquet or focused elegance of other world white wines. But a dedicated group of producers is reaping the benefits of their own work with Grechetto.

Among them are the Barberani brothers, Bernardo and Niccolò. They use organic methods to cultivate the hilltop estate established by their grandfather above Lake Corvara in 1961. The best of their series of Grechetto-dominated whites is their Orvieto Classico Superiore Castagnolo, a blend with Procanico, Chardonnay and Riesling.

They have also worked with botrytized grapes to produce a sweet blend: the Orvieto Classico Superiore Calcaia Muffa Nobile Dolce. With the 2008 vintage, the brothers launched a new flagship, called Luigi e Giovanna. It contains a small percentage of botrytized grapes and is fermented and aged in oak casks. “In every area of Umbria,” says Bernardo Barberani, “you have real winemakers working to bring their philosophy and message out.”

Outside Orvieto, near the Tuscan border, the 100-foot-tall stronghold tower of Castello della Sala looks out over a deep green countryside and manicured vineyards. Here, Renzo Cotarella ponders the future of his native Umbria and its wines.

As the wines speak more of their locales, he and other Umbrian wine leaders are trying to better brand the region. A small but symbolic step is their current proposal to Italian wine authorities to allow appellation producers—such as those in Torgiano, Montefalco and Orvieto—to print “Umbria” on their labels. A decision from the authorities is expected late this year.

“Umbria has a lot of appeal to people as something wild and unique,” says Cotarella. “It is less developed [than Tuscany]—it has remained a region with much more soul.”
# RECOMMENDED WINES FROM UMBRIA

WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

## RED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WINE</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABARRINI Montefalco Sagrantino Colle alle Macchie 2009</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>$80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARNALDO CAPRAI Sagrantino di Montefalco 25 Anni 2009</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROCCA DI FABBRI Montefalco Sagrantino 2009</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>$36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABARRINI Montefalco Sagrantino Colle Grimaldesco 2009</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>$55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANTONELLI Montefalco Sagrantino Chiusa di Pannone 2006</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>$70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENUTA BELAFONTE Montefalco Sagrantino 2009</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>$53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOCALE DI VALENTINI Montefalco Sagrantino 2010</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>$38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALESCO Montefalco Sagrantino 2008</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUNGarOTTI Torgiano Rubesco Vigna Monticchio Riserva 2007</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>$42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOCALE DI VALENTINI Montefalco 2010</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>$24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERTICAIA Montefalco 2010</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECUGNANO DEI BARBI Umbria Villa Barbi 2012</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUNGarOTTI Torgiano Rubesco 2010</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## RED (CONTINUED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WINE</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GORETTI Sangiovese-Merlot Umbria 2012</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITIANO Merlot-Sangiovese-Cabernet Sauvignon Umbria 2012</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>$13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## WHITE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WINE</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANTINORI Umbria White Cervaro della Sala 2011</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANTINORI Chardonnay Umbria Castello della Sala Antinori Bramito del Cervo 2013</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>$23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARNALDO CAPRAI Grechett Colli Martani Grecante 2013</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANTINA ALTAROCCA Orvieto Classico Bramito del Cervo 2013</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>$18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECUGNANO DEI BARBI Orvieto Classico Superiore Il Bianco 2012</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAOLO E NOEMIA D’AMICO Orvieto Noe dei Calanchi 2012</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>$9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SETTERÈ Orvieto Classico 2012</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANTA CRISTINA Umbria White 2012</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>