

LIBATIONS

Explore Abruzzo's affordable, fruity reds



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Wine, Etc.

When it comes to tourism, Italy's Abruzzo region doesn't command the sterling reputation of Tuscany, Piedmont or heavily traveled coastlines. Yet there it is just east of Rome, nestled between the Apennine mountain range and the Adriatic Sea, waiting to be discovered for its local cheese, olives, pasta and wine.

Although grape growers have planted vineyards in the rugged and often rocky hills since the 18th century, the wines have struggled to gain footing because producers have been slow to embrace quality. They can't agree on a bottle shape, use old trellising systems and have a confusing array of DOCs and subregions. But a recent wine tasting we did with Davide Acerra, president of the [Consorzio Tutela Vini D'Abruzzo](#) and wine educator Susannah Gold, shows some promising improvement. Many producers have adopted sustainable farming, new trellising systems and different fermenting tanks.

The region's relative obscurity and emerging improvements make Montepulciano d'Abruzzo a great value for consumers looking to discover an eminently quaffable, fruity red wine. These medium-bodied wines are perfect

matches to simple foods, such as pizza, burgers, chili, barbecue and stews. The flavor profile of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo varies from lighter notes of boysenberry and plum with spice, herbs, licorice to an animal overtone that some may find offensive. These wines have silky tannins and low acidity.

Not to be confused with the town of Montepulciano that makes vino Nobile from sangiovese and other grapes, montepulciano as a grape variety is second only to sangiovese in terms of production. In Abruzzo, montepulciano must account for 85 percent of the wine to achieve DOC status. All of the wines we tasted were made entirely of montepulciano, a trend that is associated with the wine's improved quality. However, we wonder if the introduction of international grapes like cabernet sauvignon and merlot wouldn't help the blend as they did in Tuscany.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo producers cling to tradition and one has to admire that. Not only are they wedded to indigenous grape varieties, but most growers are still using a pergola trellising system. Forced on them in the 1970s by government regulators, grapes are grown on arbors high enough for tractors and pickers to pass underneath. Some argue that this avails the grapes to disease,

but Gold said that grapes grown on arbors get more sun exposure and are easier to harvest.

One traditional practice that winemakers are willing to change is the fermentation vessel. Producers in Abruzzo are finding interesting success with cement eggs and even ancient amphoras.

An additional layer of quality came with the 2003 introduction of the Denomination of Controlled and Guaranteed Origin. To earn a DOCG stamp, the wine has to meet more stringent

criteria and be approved by a licensed panel of judges.

These wines are not the insipid Montepulciano d'Abruzzo served in pizzerias and cheap Italian restaurants:

Casal Thaulero Orsetto d'Oro Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC 2017 (\$16.50).

A cooperative named in honor of a well-liked, 16th century German family, the Thaulero has luscious mouthfeel, silky tannins and sour black cherry fruit flavors with a hint of spice.

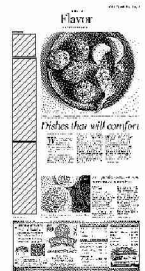
Feuduccio Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC 2017 (\$25). Red fruit flavors with hints of vanilla and sweet tannins. Very silky on the palate, it was one of our favorites.

Cirelli Anfora Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2018 DOC (\$30).

This wine is fermented in locally made amphoras, a large terra cotta clay pot. Cirelli embraces organic, bio-dynamic practices and uses natural yeasts. We enjoyed the boysenberry and plum notes in this wine and its long finish. Trellising is on the emerging guyot system and wine is aged one year in bottle before it is released.

La Valentina Spelt Riserva DOC Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2016 (\$17). Fermented in stainless steel tanks and aged in Slavonian oak casks and large barriques, this vegan wine is more full-bodied than the others. Dried herb aromas and layered fig, dark fruit and mineral flavors. Certified organic since 2016.

Ciavolich Fosso Cancelli 1853 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC 2015 (\$50). Fermented and aged in concrete tanks, this aged wine has more



texture with raw meat, rich black fruit and spice notes. Full-bodied, it calls for steak and demonstrates what this grape is capable of producing in the right hands. Ciavolich built the first winery in front of his house in 1853. Its underground cellars hid German tanks during their retreat. The family fled but returned in the 1960s to make this great wine. The small-production wine spends three years in bottle before it is released.

Wine picks

Blackbird Vineyards Dissonance Sauvignon Blanc 2019 (\$20). This is a luscious blend of sauvignon blanc (87 percent) and semillon in a true Bordeaux style. Classic grapefruit flavors of the sauvignon blanc mingle with soft apricot flavors of the semillon. Hints of lime and pear combine with bright acidity to make this an excellent sipper.

Tamarack Cellars Firehouse Red 2018 (\$19). This quite a kitchen-sink blend: cabernet sauvignon, syrah, merlot, cabernet franc, mourvedre, grenache, counoise, sangiovese, petit verdot and nebbiolo. We don't know how the winemaker kept them straight, but the result is

a decent, medium body wine with broad red fruit flavors and a kiss of oak.

Paraduxx Candlestick Valley Red Wine 2017 (\$60). Duckhorn Wine has a lot of fun with its exquisite blends. We like this Rhone-like blend of grenache and syrah for its concentrated black cherry and plum flavors with floral and licorice aromas. We also like the 2017 Paraduxx Howell Mountain Red Wine that brings syrah together with cabernet sauvignon. Blackberry flavors with hints of mocha and pepper.

Primus The Blend Chile 2017 (\$18). From the new DO Apalta region, this is a broad and seamless

blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, carmenere, petit verdot and cabernet franc. As one would expect from this recipe, the flavors are expansive with red and dark fruit, spice, and dried herbs. Long finish and soft texture make it an easy wine to drink.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing about wine since 1985. Tom is the retired publisher of Capital Gazette and lives in Florida. Patrick is in retail sales for an Annapolis wine store. Both have traveled extensively to wine-growing regions in Europe and the United States.



A farmer in Abruzzo, Italy, picks grapes to be made into Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine. **ANDREW PINI/GETTY**