

The New York Times

THE POUR

TO FIND GREAT VALUES IN ITALIAN WINE, LOOK TO ABRUZZO

A new generation of exacting growers and winemakers has brought vitality to an Italian region known for its cheap wines. Excerpt from article by Eric Asimov, Feb 29th, 2024

The Abruzzo region of eastern central Italy, on the Adriatic coast, is home to Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, a popular red wine that paradoxically has been historically little known and rarely very good.

Its popularity owed to one main factor: It was a cheap wine that was usually good enough.

The last decade in the region, though, has seen a sea change. With the arrival of a new generation of ambitious growers and winemakers dedicated to conscientious farming and meticulous winemaking, Abruzzo's wine scene is exciting, and not just for its reds. Abruzzo is making some of the best whites in Italy, and its Cerasuolos d'Abruzzo, rosés dark enough to be light reds, are singular. Prices, with a few

important exceptions, are still reasonable.

This new wave includes small family producers like Tiberio in Cugnoli, Cirelli Wines near Atri, De Fermo in Loreto Aprutino, Colle Florido in Pianella and Antica Tenuta Pietramore in Controguerra.

These estates are relatively new and differ in philosophies and styles. Yet all are idealistic and share a goal of making wines that are not only delicious but true to the heritage and identity of their part of Abruzzo, a proud but undervalued region of stunning beauty, great food and welcoming people.

Abruzzo is long and narrow, influenced both by the sea and the mountains. The Adriatic is to the east. To the west, separating Abruzzo from Lazio and Rome, is the snow-capped Gran Sasso,



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a massif that is part of the Apennine range and rises to almost 10,000 feet.

In between are towns and villages where small farmers tended plots of montepulciano, trebbiano and pecorino. Like Riás Baixas in Spain, home of albariño, Abruzzo is one of very few regions that still typically employs pergola structures that train the vines overhead.

These farmers historically sold their grapes to cooperatives and big producers. With a few profound exceptions, like Emidio Pepe and Edoardo Valentini, whose expensive wines were among the best in Italy and illustrated the region's tantalizing potential, Abruzzo plodded on.

Ambitious, well-financed producers began to enter the picture in the 1980s and '90s. Their strategy too often, in the fashion of the times, was to put wine in new barrels of French oak, producing powerful, oaky wines that were never to my taste.

Abruzzo today seems a different, more creative place. Nobody embodies the new Abruzzo so much as Cristiana Tiberio, a dynamo who, when she is not home managing the Tiberio estate with her brother, Antonio Tiberio, tirelessly travels the world spreading word of Abruzzo's charms. More than anything, she believes in Abruzzo's culture and identity and wants to make wines that speak of both.

The Tiberio estate began in 2000 when her father, Riccardo

Tiberio, bought a vineyard containing old vines of trebbiano Abruzzese, a grape distinct from the more widely planted and inferior trebbiano Toscano. Confusingly, either grape can go into the wine, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo. But trebbiano Abruzzese can reach far greater heights.

She and Antonio took over from their father in 2008 and worked to restore the old vines. Since 2011, they have produced Fonte Canale, a Trebbiano d'Abruzzo bottling from this vineyard that is arguably among Italy's greatest white wines.

"The vineyard is our origin and why we are here," she said. "It shaped my mind in terms of viticulture and life."

Specifically, she said, it taught her the importance of massal selection, the practice of choosing the vines best adapted to a vineyard and propagating them, rather than the more common practice of selecting clones bred at nurseries.

"Nurseries try to solve problems, but problems are part of the identity of the plant," she said. "Should the terroir shape the vine? Or the nursery?"

The 2021 Fonte Canale is a brilliant wine, with an almost Chablis-like salinity and mineral tang yet with a texture all its own. You can enjoy a glass, close your eyes and contemplate.

New bottles can cost \$80 to \$100, but the less expensive Tiberio wines, around \$25, are all excellent as well, dry, refreshing, clear and precise.