

FOOD

Lively and Refreshing Wines at the Right Price

Wines of The Times

By ERIC ASIMOV JULY 13, 2017

Several little-known red grapes of Italy have achieved some small measure of renown beyond their home territories in the last 15 years, but montepulciano has not been among them.

Unlike aglianico, nerello mascalese and frappato, montepulciano did not burst on to the scene, leaving behind a frenzied Instagram trail of fervent sommeliers and impassioned wine merchants. While those grapes have all deservedly had their moments, montepulciano has largely been ignored.

I don't argue that it should have been otherwise. The other grapes, at least, have their champions, star winemakers whose successes demonstrated great potential and carved plausible paths for others to follow.

The two most esteemed Montepulciano d'Abruzzo producers, Valentini and Emidio Pepe, are beloved more for their rare and gloriously idiosyncratic wines than for presenting benchmark Abruzzo wines that could be imitated on a wider scale.

Beyond the wines from those two producers, montepulciano is thought to be “generally a workhorse grape,” as Ian D’Agata put it in his excellent “Native Wine Grapes of Italy,” though he also suggested it had “thoroughbred potential.”

Montepulciano is popular enough to be the fourth-most-planted grape in Italy, after sangiovese; trebbiano, a white found all over Italy solely in Sicily. Most of the montepulciano is found along the Adriatic Coast, largely in Abruzzo but also in Marche to the north and Puglia to the south.

This is the less-traveled coast of Italy, at least among Americans, who seem far more acquainted with Rome, Naples and the Amalfi Coast than they are with the Adriatic cities of Ancona and Bari. Maybe this unfamiliarity contributes to the lack of general enthusiasm about Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, but in my experience, it has been the style of the wines themselves that limits the enthusiasm.

In the recent era, when wine critics worshiped at the altar of power and density, many montepulciano producers tried to prove their thoroughbred bona fides with opulent richness and an overreliance on new oak barrels. It was a disastrous equation that resulted in jammy, oaky, tannic wines that for me, at least, were not worth seeking out.

But Montepulciano d’Abruzzo has a longer tradition of juicy, inexpensive wines that are uncomplicated and cheap. Often, these wines were made by the large cooperatives that dominated the region. But in recent years, more small, serious producers have appeared, and the overall quality of the wines has risen.

It is obligatory at some point to distinguish between our subject, Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, a wine made of the montepulciano grape, and the very different wine Vino Nobile di Montepulciano made of sangiovese grown in the vicinity of the Tuscan town Montepulciano. Confusing, I know.

To get a better sense of the state of Montepulciano d’Abruzzo today, the wine panel tasted 20 bottles from recent vintages. The tasting included ordinary bottles from 2013, ’14 and ’15, and riservas, which require longer aging before they can be released, from 2011 and ’12.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two guests, Marika Vida-Arnold, who has a wine consultancy, Vida et Fils, and Francesco Grosso, beverage director at Marea on Central Park South.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the wines in our tasting divided largely into two styles: those that were fresh, fruity and tannic, and others that were overbearing, oaky and tannic. If by no other characteristic, you could sense the difference between the styles in the quality of the tannins.

The montepulciano grape has plenty of astringent tannins in its skins, which give the wines, even the simple ones, a robust structure. The grape tannins also have a clean freshness that seems a natural part of the wine.

But new oak has tannins, too. When the wines have seen too much new oak, you can sense it in the tannins, which have a woody, bitter, drying quality, even if the wine does not have overt flavors from the oak.

“Montepulciano can be easily manipulated,” Francesco said. “Fresh, fruity wines can be turned into international oak bombs,” though he allowed, as a good sommelier would, that this style was not necessarily unattractive to certain palates.

“When you try to make more expensive wines, you lose what made montepulciano attractive in the first place,” Marika said.

I would say the problem is not necessarily charging more for the wines. The montepulcianos of both Valentini and Pepe are considerably more expensive than anything that was in our tasting, and well over our \$100 a bottle cap. The problem is making wines in styles perceived to be popular among big spenders, which could require costly investments in new oak barrels.

Indeed, of the six bottles in our tasting that cost more than \$25, only one, the 2011 Contesa riserva at \$38, made our top 10, at No. 3. This was a powerful wine, and powerfully tannic, yet it was beautifully balanced, floral, spicy and fruity. Our other favorites topped out at \$25.

No. 1 was the superb 2014 Ode from CantinArte, lively, fresh and pure. “This is montepulciano,” Marika said.

Our second favorite was the structured, spicy 2015 Modo Antico from Annona, a recent project from the New York sommelier and restaurateur Joe Campanale, who is making wines in both Abruzzo and Campania.

Both of these wines were notable for the absence of oakiness, which allowed the purity of the fruit to show. The Ode was fermented and aged in steel tanks, and the Modo Antico in concrete. While I don't mean to say that these are the best methods for making montepulciano, these bottles suggest that the best methods are those not intended to add tannins or flavors to what's already in the grape.

Other wines well worth seeking out include the vibrant, fresh 2013 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo from Italo Pietrantoni; the earthy, lively 2015 from Valle Reale; the zesty, herbal 2014 Malandrino from Cataldi Madonna; and the pretty, floral 2015 from Fantini Farnese. Each of these wines cost less than \$20.

It should be said that all of our favorites were relatively simple wines, even the \$38 Contesa riserva. They did not offer much in the way of complexity, intrigue or mystery. But they are lively, pure and refreshing, which is important. They are also good values, and they are versatile with meats and tomato-based sauces.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo may not have much in the way of star power, but you'll get a good drink of wine.

Tasting Notes: Montepulciano d'Abruzzo

BEST VALUE

★★★ CANTINARTE MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO ODE 2014 \$22

Lively and pure, with chewy tannins and fresh flavors of red fruit. (Grand Cru Selections, New York)

★★★ ANNONA MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO MODO ANTICO 2015 \$25

Tight and structured, floral and pure, with spicy flavors of dark fruits. (Third Leaf, Bridgeport, Pa.)

★★½ CONTESA MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO RISERVA 2011 \$38

Tannic and balanced, with spicy, lingering flavors of red fruits and flowers.
(Vinifera, Ronkonkoma, N.Y.)

★★½ ITALO PIETRANTONJ MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO 2013 \$16

Vivacious and well balanced, with chewy tannins and flavors of fresh red fruits.
(Bon Vivant Imports, Boise, Idaho)

★★½ VALLE REALE MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO 2015 \$14

Lively and fresh, with earthy flavors of dark fruits. (Leonardo LoCascio
Selections/Winebow, New York)

**★★½ CATALDI MADONNA MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO
MALANDRINO 2014 \$19**

Earthy and zesty, with flavors of red fruits, herbs and minerals. (Vias Imports,
New York)

★★½ FARNESE FANTINI MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO 2015 \$14

Pretty and well balanced, with aromas of flowers and herbs. (Empson USA,
Alexandria, Va.)

**★★ TENUTA I FAURI MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO OTTOBRE
ROSSO 2015 \$16**

Lively, tannic and earthy, with flavors of herbs and cherries. (Wineberry
America, Valley Cottage, N.Y.)

**★★ LA VALENTINA MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO RISERVA
SPELT 2012 \$20**

Lingering flavors of sweet red fruits and herbs. (Della Terra, Napa, Calif.)

★★ **MASCIARELLI MARINA CVETIC MONTEPULCIANO**
D'ABRUZZO RISERVA 2011 \$24

Big, dense and oaky, with flavors of fresh red fruit and discernible oak tannins. (Masciarelli Wine, Weymouth, Mass.)

Recipe Pairing: **Striped Bass all'Amatriciana**

Bucatini all'amatriciana is a classic pasta dish from Lazio, the central Italian province that abuts Abruzzo, the source of the sturdy red wines in our latest tasting. Amatrice, the town that is home to the dish, is on the border of the two regions. (It was near the epicenter of a devastating earthquake last summer.) The sauce, made with canned San Marzano tomatoes, onions, garlic and the fatty cured pork cheek called guanciale, is a fine match for a glass of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. But instead of tossing thick strands of bucatini with spicy tomatoes, I used the sauce to coat meaty fillets of striped bass, quickly baking the fish and finishing the dish with a shower of fresh basil instead of the usual pecorino cheese. You may wonder why the recipe calls for canned Italian tomatoes, and not specimens right off the vine, at this time of year. The answer is that the robust amatriciana sauce is never made with fresh tomatoes, and by using canned tomatoes, you greatly simplify the preparation and reduce the cooking time. **FLORENCE FABRICANT**

Follow NYT Food on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest. Get regular updates from NYT Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.

Correction: July 13, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the type of vessel used to age the 2015 Annona Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Modo Antico. It is a concrete vat, not a steel tank. EMAIL asimov@nytimes.com. And follow Eric Asimov on Twitter: [@EricAsimov](https://twitter.com/EricAsimov).