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**EXPLORING
ITALY'S MARCHE**

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Nicolò Incisa della
Rocchetta and daughter
Priscilla of Sassicaia

New Frontier

An aerial photograph of Ancona, Italy, taken at sunset. The city is built on a hillside overlooking the Adriatic Sea. The harbor is filled with ships, including a large Blue Line ferry. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, and the water reflects the light. The city's architecture is a mix of traditional stone buildings and modern structures.

LANDSCAPE BY SIME/ESTOCK PHOTO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEFANO SCATÀ

Marche's capital city of Ancona, located on central Italy's easternmost edge, is one of the main harbors of the Adriatic Sea.

A BOUNTIFUL AND BEAUTIFUL PROVINCE ON
ITALY'S ADRIATIC COAST AWAITS DISCOVERY

By Robert Camuto



Marche, a small province on Italy's Adriatic coast, is one of the country's least-visited regions. All the better, then, for adventurous travelers.

With more than 100 miles of coastline, Marche (pronounced "MAR-kay" and sometimes referred to as Le Marche) features a range of beaches, from rugged natural preserves to sandy city lidos. The warm, emerald-hued waters, among Italy's most abundant in terms of sea life, produce a dazzling variety of fish and crustaceans that are served up in abundance at local beach shacks, trattorias, and fine restaurants with long wine lists.

In the sparsely populated interior, softly rounded hillsides planted to patchworks of wheat, olives and vineyards climb up toward medieval and Renaissance towns perched high, some harboring artistic treasures. The agricultural bounty includes artisanal pastas, deep-green olive oil and olives, fresh produce, local salumi and an array of pecorino (from ewe's milk) and other cheeses, not to mention a constantly improving array of white and red wines. (For more extensive coverage of the region's wines, see Alison Napjus' tasting report, "Marche Time," on page 81.)

Yet for all this, Marche sees nowhere near the number of tourists that the Italian regions to the west do—Umbria in the interior and Tuscany on the western coast of the Italian boot. Marche remains relatively obscure, drawing mostly Italian visitors.

"We host less than one percent of Italy's foreign tourists," says Michele Bernetti of Umani Ronchi, one of the region's leading wine producers. "There is a fantastic opportunity out there."

In 2014, convinced of Marche's potential as a lifestyle, nature and cultural destination, Bernetti decided to move his family back into the hotel business after a quarter-century respite.

The Grand Hotel Palace was built by Bernetti's grandfather from the ruins of a 17th-century palazzo in Ancona, Marche's capital and chief commercial port (population: 100,000). But Bernetti's father put his energies into wine, and the family rented the hotel out to a third-party operator. Last year, after a full renovation, Bernetti reopened the Grand Hotel Palace. Now it's a modern hotel with a wine bar offering a range of regional bottlings and local products.

Feeding the vibrant agricultural scene, Marche has become a



Urbani Beach, located in Sirolo, south of Ancona

hub for sustainability-minded producers of all kinds, attracting a new generation back to the land.

"Twenty years ago, when we started, it was different," says Marco Casolanetti, who founded Oasi degli Angeli with his partner, Eleanora Rossi. Located in gorgeous, pastoral Cupra Marittima, about 50 miles south of Ancona, the small winery has become a cult sensation for its rich Montepulciano red by the name of Kurni. "Now there are more young people coming to make wine and other agricultural products," Casolanetti says.

As with many wine regions in Italy a generation ago, demand was once a detriment to quality here. In the 1970s, Verdicchio, the local white wine packaged in fish-shaped bottles, rode a wave of popularity. But overproduction ruined its reputation. Today, however, Verdicchio from the inland appellations of Castelli di Jesi and Matelica is an esteemed white grape in Italy, making complex, structured wines with a bitter-almond kick.

Verdicchio is still a rarity on U.S. wine lists, and it's worth a pilgrimage to Marche to get to know it in its natural habitat. A first-time visitor might start in Ancona (via the airport) and drive south or north along the coast, with day trips into the interior.

Besides being a commercial port, Ancona is an evocative medieval town, with ornate Renaissance palazzos



A café in Urbino



A fish market in Ancona

TOP: SHINE/STOCK PHOTO



that now hold an important archaeological museum, as well as one of the region's most significant collections of paintings.

To the south is a dramatic coastal site: the bay of Portonovo, at the base of Mount Conero and its wild natural park. Also known as the Conero Riviera, this area offers rugged white stone beaches, calm, clear waters, hiking trails and a sprinkling of fine restaurants.

The Conero peninsula gives its name to the region's most notable red, the fragrant, fruit-powered Rosso Conero. Dominated by Montepulciano, it is sometimes blended, usually with Sangiovese.

Pesaro is 50 miles north of Ancona along the coast. Marche's second city sits along a lido of sandy beaches. This bicycle-loving, tree-lined town, the birthplace of composer Gioachino Rossini, maintains an elegant feel with its impressive collection of ornate *stile liberty* (Italian art nouveau) villas and as a center of classical music performance.

Here also you'll find a curious mix of wines from the tiny Colli Pesaresi DOC, including Italian varietals and even French grapes such as Pinot Noir, which is said to have been introduced here under Napoleonic rule in the early 19th century.

Marche's historical focal point is the walled medieval city of Urbino, about 20 miles inland from Pesaro. It's the birthplace of the Renaissance painter Raphael; a pair of his works is housed along with those of other Renaissance masters in Urbino's soaring, turreted ducal palace, itself one of Italy's great architectural masterpieces.

Traveling and driving in Marche is relatively easy, and the region has a friendly, unhurried feel. Hotels, restaurants and even acclaimed chefs never make things fussy or stuffy but tend to stay close to their backyard *terroir*: that sea and those hills.

Note: The season here is April through October, with the largest crowds during the height of summer, particularly August. We recommend contacting venues well in advance of your visit to confirm hours of operation and any closures. When calling the following establishments from North America, dial 011 followed by the telephone number, including the initial 0. Prices in this story have been converted to U.S. dollars using the conversion rate at press time (\$1 equals 0.80 euro) and rounded to the nearest dollar.

WHERE TO EAT

Al Mandracchio

11 Largo Fiera della Pesca, Ancona **Telephone** (39) 071-202-990
Website None **Open** Lunch, Tuesday to Sunday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$20–\$27

At the edge of downtown Ancona is the city's gritty commercial fishing port and fish market. You'll also find what many locals consider the top spot for ultrafresh fish and seafood prepared simply and perfectly, whether raw, marinated, grilled, poached or fried. Decade-old Al Mandracchio is modern, funky and friendly, with a semiopen kitchen, seating fashioned from rubberband stretch-tube material and Italian crooners playing over the sound system.

Antipasti include seafood crudo drizzled with pungent green olive oil and lemon, and salads such as a bold surf and turf using grilled calamari tossed with bitter green *puntarelle* in a dressing thick with salty pureed anchovies. The pastas are comfort dishes. *Sagnitelle* (thick handmade fresh pasta ribbons) is served with long tender *nocchie* (a variety of mantis shrimp) and lightly sauced with stewed tomatoes. Spaghetti tossed with delicately sautéed shrimp and tiny chickpeas is completed with meaty, crunchy bits of guanciale (pork jowl). Fish caught in the shallow waters off the coast are served roasted or poached.

The small wine list of about two dozen choices is Verdicchio-dominated, starting with Umani Ronchi Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Casal di Serra Vecchie Vigne 2016 for a mere \$17 a bottle.

Da Giacchetti

Portonovo **Telephone** (39) 071-801-384 **Website** www.ristorantedagiacchetti.it **Open** March to October; lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$17–\$37

Italy's simple culinary pleasures don't get much better than this: a vintage fish restaurant on a rocky beach in the middle of the wild beauty of Portonovo bay. It was founded as a bar by fishermen brothers Aroldo and Dario Giacchetti in 1959. Three generations, including the founders, who can be seen table-hopping to chat with



Chef Massimo Ceccarelli of Al Mandracchio

MAP: HENRY ENG

regulars, now serve up fresh seafood and pasta dishes on a terrace with a panoramic view in summer, and in the dressed-up, 1970s-style dining room the rest of the year.

The bay is renowned for its wild Portonovo mussels. You could easily make a meal of these small, tender mollusks, which are sustainably fished and available from April to October. Start with a bowl of these in Giacchetti's minimalist take on the classic *marinara* style—lightly cooked and drizzled with oil and lemon, allowing subtle sea flavors to shine. Follow this with a dish of plump rings of *paccheri* pasta, sauced with pan-cooked mussels and cherry tomatoes and seasoned with wild fennel. Or proceed directly to a signature regional dish of whole oven-baked turbot with potatoes, tomatoes and black olives.

The list of more than 200 wines features local whites such as Bucci Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2016 (\$22 a bottle).

Nostrano

7 Piazzale della Libertà, Pesaro **Telephone** (39) 0721-639-813 **Website** www.nostranoristorante.it **Open** Lunch, Thursday to Monday; dinner, Wednesday to Monday **Cost** Entrées \$27–\$40; tasting menus \$56–\$112

In 2015, after working for prominent chefs across Italy and in Paris, Stefano Ciotti opened his own place in seaside Pesaro. Accolades and buzz have followed. In a warm, relaxed room with a small terrace, Nostrano has a low-key, artsy feel, with wooden tables made by local carpenters and an iron-and-ceramic overhead lighting system designed by Ciotti to resemble sea urchins.

Ciotti's cuisine takes elements from Marche and from his native Emilia-Romagna, several miles north, and elevates them with exotic flavors and twists. A rich starter of local zucchini blossoms stuffed with tangy Squacquerone di Romagna cheese, then fried in tempura batter (the cheese becomes oozing perfection) comes with a pumpkin-ginger sauce for dipping. His creamy signature risotto, with local Verdicchio wine and strong pecorino cheese, is finished with a weirdly apt topping of peanuts and white chocolate. Perfectly roasted calamari are seasoned with Parmesan, lemon, pear and vanilla, for a range of sweet, sour and umami flavors.

Like all else here, the 350-label wine list is highly personal, featuring Ciotti's selections from Italy, France and beyond. For a local surprise, try Fattoria Mancini's Pinot Noir Colli Pesaresi Focara Rive 2015 (\$50 a bottle), from a *terroir* selected specifically for the grape when it was first planted here more than a century ago.

Uliassi

6 Banchina di Levante, Senigallia **Telephone** (39) 071-65463 **Website** www.uliassi.it **Open** Late March to December; lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Sunday **Cost** Entrées \$47–\$56; tasting menus \$131–\$174

Chef Mauro Uliassi and his sister Catia's 28-year-old creation is that rare find: a relaxed restaurant that serves some of its region's most refined cuisine. In a white wood-and-glass structure with a sea-facing terrace at the edge of Senigallia's lido, Mauro cooks with a light, restrained hand, creating accessible dishes that favor a few flavorful ingredients over culinary pyrotechnics.

A welcoming Kir Royale arrives with fun nibbles that awaken the palate: a layered wafer cookie filled with foie gras; airy, puffed seaweed chips; buttered toast smothered with local truffles. A starter of thin, batter-fried mullet fillets crisped to perfection and moist inside looks like an inviting sandwich and is served with a vibrant green pool of parsley "dipping soup" that's lightly drizzled with anchovy syrup. The intensely flavorful, classic combination of spaghetti and clams is exalted with small details such as "smoking" the spaghetti before it's tossed with perfectly sautéed tiny, tender clams served out of the shell, and sweet roasted *datterini* tomatoes.

More adventurous diners might try the kitchen's 10-course "Lab" tasting menu, featuring Uliassi and staff's artistically plated experimental offerings that explore seafood in exotic ways, with dishes such as raw langoustines sauced with fresh-squeezed juice from the crustaceans' heads, and a medley of fish organs (tripe, heart and liver) called *Il Mare Dentro*, or "The Sea Inside."



Uliassi restaurant's Catia and Mauro Uliassi



Portonovo mussels at Da Giacchetti

A 600-label wine list deftly covers Italy, France and the world. For a local white, try the full-bodied Santa Barbara Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Tardivo Riserva Classico ma non Tardo 2015 (\$56 a bottle).

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hotel Palace

24 Lungomare Luigi Vanvitelli, Ancona **Telephone** (39) 071-201-813
Website www.umanironchi.com/it/enoturismoofgrand_hotel_palace **Rooms** 39 **Suites** 4 **Rates** \$112–\$373

In 2017, the Bernetti family of the Umani Ronchi winery reopened this once-faded hotel in a historic palazzo in the port of Ancona. Enriched by local artisans—cabinetmakers, wallpaper designers, lighting producers—the result is a white, light-filled boutique hotel that’s warmed by its historic soul—from a marble entry with Murano chandeliers to high-ceilinged rooms with restored antique furniture and art.

Choose Comfort-class rooms (with carpet or wood-plank floors) for space, style and some of the best views over the port or the medieval town center. Four suites include the Wine Suite (stocked with a range of Umani Ronchi wines and boasting a double Jacuzzi); a classical theater-themed junior suite; the Wellness Suite (with a treadmill and steam room); and the top-of-class sprawling Terrace Suite.

The hotel organizes tours and tastings in the nearby wine country, and the property’s casual wine bar, called Wine Not?, features a street-food menu by chef Max Mariola. The wine list showcases 16 Umani Ronchi wines along with more than 20 of the Bernettis’ Italian favorites, including the cult red Oasi degli Angeli Marche Kurni 2013 (\$122 a bottle).

Hotel Excelsior

Lungomare Nazario Sauro, Pesaro **Telephone** (39) 0721-630-011
Website www.excelsiorpesaro.it **Rooms** 38 **Suites** 14 **Rates** \$149–\$634
(Note: The top rate is listed at \$1,180, but is discounted even in high season)

This hotel opened a decade ago, created by Italian travel tour impresario Nardo Filippetti on the seafront of his hometown of Pesaro. Touting itself as the Marche coast’s first five-star hotel, the Excelsior promotes its design influence as “American 1950s Hamptons” and features vintage black-and-white photographs of the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. But it comes off more like South Beach, Italian-style, with its steel-and-glass ocean liner exterior and bright, clean interiors. The rooms feature distressed dark-wood-plank floors; white, black and beige decor; and ample black marble showers. Book either a suite or a Superior room for sea-facing views and a private terrace.



The lido at Hotel Excelsior

The Excelsior offers a full-service spa, its own elegant lido with bar service on the beach in front of the hotel, and both a casual bistro and a more refined restaurant. At both eateries, a 300-label wine list carries an extensive selection of Champagnes and Italian bubblys, and ranges smartly across Italy, with selective forays into France, Germany and Austria as well. Marche wines include high-quality, small-production choices such as Andrea Felici Castelli di Jesi Verdicchio Classico Riserva Il Cantico della Figura 2013 (\$37 a bottle).

Hotel Fortino Napoleonico

166 Via Poggio, Portonovo **Telephone** (39) 071-801-450 **Website** www.hotelfortino.it **Rooms** 28 **Suites** 5 **Rates** \$112–\$622

Antique military forts don’t necessarily make for the best luxury accommodations. Fortino Napoleonico, a converted Napoleonic-era lookout on Portonovo bay, is an exception.

The first thing going for it is a stunner of a location; it’s the only hotel right on the rugged stone beach in Portonovo’s regional park. The 19th-century limestone-and-brick fort, which had largely fallen into disrepair, was restored and converted into a hotel in the 1960s. The rooms have been successively renovated to keep up with modern tastes. The outer ring of the fort now houses guest rooms, the tall central building is a candlelit gourmet restaurant and the observation decks serve as dining and sun terraces. Empire-style furnishings and Napoleonic memorabilia add to the historic aesthetic.

Most rooms have modest windows, and on the seaward-facing side, only wall slits designed long ago for muskets; they can feel confining. For more comfort, book one of three generously proportioned Superior doubles or one of five suites. Or better yet, live large in the Royal Suite, with its own living room, fireplace and sprawling rooftop terrace with a sweeping panorama.

The restaurant wine list counts more than 500 selections, with a generous helping of French *grands crus* and Champagnes that would have made the emperor proud. For local bubblys, try Verdicchio-based *méthode traditionnelle* Garofoli Brut Riserva 2008 (\$32 a bottle). □



A suite at Hotel Fortino Napoleonico

TOP: COURTESY OF HOTEL EXCELSIOR