

How And Why The Abruzzo Wine Region Of Italy Is Moving From A Low Cost To Ultra-Premium Wine Strategy

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Vineyards in the Abruzzo Wine Region of Italy

CONSORTIUM FOR THE PROTECTION OF WINES OF ABRUZZO

If you enjoy Italian food and wine, then most likely you have ordered a bottle of Montepulciano de Abruzzo – the delightful fruity, soft, and dark colored wine from the Abruzzo region of Italy. It is also highly likely that you found it at the beginning of the wine list under affordable and approachable wine styles. However, many of the winemakers of Abruzzo are trying to change that low-priced positioning to one

that is more ultra-premium, and they have some very persuasive reasons as to why it is now time to recognize the complex terroir that can be found throughout the region.

This doesn't mean that Abruzzo still won't offer some entry-level affordable wines, but the region has evolved to a place where there is a new guard of wineries that want to showcase the impressive advances they have made in viticulture and winemaking. Recently, on a Zoom call, a group of ten Abruzzo wineries explained how and why they are evolving their wine business strategy.

“Abruzzo is in a phase of its evolution where it is repositioning itself,” explains Colin Proietto, a family owner and sales manager with Agricosimo Winery. “We are now focusing more on family estates, adopting more organic farming, and shifting from varietal minded to terroir focused.”

Rodrigo Redmont, family proprietor with [Talamonti Family Estates](#), adds, “In the 1970s and 80's, Abruzzo was dominated by large coop wineries. Most families sold their grapes to the coops, and the coops produced affordable inexpensive wines. However, in the last 20 years, family estates have started to develop and produce their own wines that showcase the terroir.”

Given this more focused attention on producing the best wine from an individual estate, coupled with organic farming and more advanced winemaking techniques, many Abruzzo wineries are now producing wines that are, in fact, more complex and reflect the unique attributes of the region.

Abruzzo's signature red grape, the Montepulciano de Abruzzo (not to be confused with the Vino Nobile de Montepulciano wine from Tuscany where the signature red is Sangiovese), is leading the charge. According to Stefano Zuchegna, Sales Director at Tenuta Secolo Winery, “Montepulciano de Abruzzo is not a basic grape. It is not true! It can compete with the other great grapes of Italy, such as Sangiovese.”

The Abruzzo Wine Region – Two Hour’s Drive from Rome with High Mountains and Seaside Vineyards

The Abruzzo wine region is situated in central Italy just about a two hour drive east of Rome. It stretches 130 kilometers along the Adriatic coast and has many rugged mountains, including Gran Sasso, which is one of Italy’s highest peaks at 9554 feet (2912m). Some of the best vineyards are on hillsides with views of the ocean in the distance. It has a Mediterranean climate with abundant sunshine along the coast and an average rainfall of 26 inches per year. Inland, in the Apennines mountains, it is a more continental climate with snow in the winters.



Map of Abruzzo Wine Region Location in Italy

VINI DE'ABRUZZO CONSORZIO TUTELA

Abruzzo has been producing wine since the [6th century BC](#), with a heritage from the Etruscans. Today, according to the [Consorzio Vini D'Abruzzo](#), it has around 250 wineries, 35 coops, 34,000 hectares of vineyards, and produces approximately 1.2 million bottles of wine per year. Abruzzo exports 65% of its wine, and achieves annual sales revenues of around 300 million euros (\$319 million).

The major red grape is [Montepulciano de Abruzzo](#), which makes up nearly 80% of its production. However, they also grow Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and other red varieties. The most unique white grape is called [Pecorino](#) - similar to the cheese – and is named after the sheep that used to eat this grape in the vineyards. It has a floral nose, with notes of lemon, white peach, spice, crisp acidity, and a touch of salty minerality. Other regional white grapes include Trebianno and [Cococciola](#).

The Five Major Ways the Abruzzo Wine Region is Differentiating Itself

So how does the Abruzzo wine region plan to differentiate itself, and move beyond its image of only producing inexpensive smooth red wine? The ten wineries identified five major ways that Abruzzo is evolving to allow them to implement a more ultra-premium wine business strategy:

1) **Family Estates Focused on Producing High Quality Wines** – with the movement in the last 20 years for families to stop selling all of their grapes to coops, and instead build their own estate wineries, there has been an increased focus on quality. With the family name on the wine label, there is more pride and craft in the winemaking. Andrea Bianco De Sipio, of Di Sipio Winery, explains, “We have added much new technology to our cellars, and are experimenting in the vineyards so we can reduce the amount of copper and sulfur sprays.” These types of advances are producing high quality wines, and a few wineries in Abruzzo, such as Azienda Agricola Valentini and Emidio Pepe Winery have already moved into the \$100 plus luxury category on their bottles of Montepulciano d’Abruzzo

2) **Increased Emphasis on Terroir** – Whereas in the past, the region was focused on mass production, now wineries are trying to showcase the unique terroir (soil, climate, slope, winemaking philosophy, etc.) from their vineyards. They are trying to show how different Montepulciano de Abruzzo can taste if produced in the DOCG of [Montepulciano d’Abruzzo Colline Teramane](#) compared to other DOCs, and even specific estates within the same area. Different winemaking techniques, such as longer oak aging, battonage on Pecorino, or even fermenting wine in terracotta tanks rather than stainless steel, such as is done at Ciavolich Winery, are also helping to showcase the regional terroir.

3) **Growth in Certified Organic Vineyards** – due to its wine-grape loving climate, Abruzzo is home to a large number of organic vineyards, and many wineries from the region will include the organic seal or the word “bio” on their label. Many others are practicing organic farming, but have not yet spent the time or money to obtain official certification. Due to this new focus on organic farming, there is often more pure fruit flavors and texture in the wines that adds to their distinctiveness. The organic certification is also attractive to many consumers.

4) **Wineries are Pursuing Very Unique Certifications** – in addition to obtaining organic certifications, there are a number of Abruzzo wineries that have become Vegan Certified, and display this certification proudly on their websites and label. [Talamonti Family Estates](#) has recently become the first winery in the world to be certified for *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*. This is a new certification offered by [Arborus](#). “Agriculture in Italy has been strongly male dominated,” explains Rodrigo Redmont, a member of the Talamonti Family. “I have two girls and want to leave them a better place for the future. At Talamonti, we decided to utilize diversity and inclusion as a guiding principle for our policies and approach in life, so we participated in the certification process.”

5) **Increased Focus on Abruzzo Tourism and National Parks** – Abruzzo is blessed with not only high mountains and sunny beaches, but is made up of three national parks and many regional preserves, making it the only region in Europe where more than 30% of the territory is protected by parks. This brings many tourists to the region to enjoy the outdoor activities, but also to feast on the regional cuisine, which is known for its fresh seafood, pasta, cheese, and lamb. A unique tourist past-time is fishing from a [trabocchi](#) – a large wooden structure with nets that stretches out into the ocean.

Indeed there are probably very few regions in the world where a winery has vineyards in a national park, but the Passetti Winery has been farming organic vineyards for five generations, and a national park encompasses their vines. “We are the only winery in Abruzzo to have vineyards in the national park,” states Annesa Vanarelli, export manager with Passetti. “We work very carefully with the park officials to make sure that the environment is protected, and that everything

we do is organic and environmentally friendly.” Another organic winery, Menicucci, has combined wine tourism with their estate by building a boutique hotel and restaurant on the property.

Abruzzo Wine Strategy Implementation Takes Time and Patience

Moving from a low-cost to ultra-premium wine business strategy is not an easy feat. However, the Abruzzo region has received some funding from the European Union as part of the ‘Charming Taste of Europe’ campaign to promote all of the positive changes within their region. A series of Zoom sessions similar to this one is targeted at wine buyers and journalists, as well as press trips for foreign sommeliers and writers to visit the region to taste the wines and see the changes in the wineries and vineyards. This is a good start, but needs to be expanded and emphasized over-time, so that consumers and wine buyers around the world will begin to recognize all of the positive changes happening in the Abruzzo wine region of Italy.



Enjoying Wine from the Abruzzo Wine Region of Italy CONSORTIUM FOR THE PROTECTION OF WINES OF ABRUZZO