

Unknown

Italy

THE MARCHE
HOLDS
UNEXPECTED
RICHES OF
FOOD AND WINE

by Anthony Dias Blue

The Marche is the most beautiful part of Italy you've never heard of. Located east of Tuscany and Umbria on the Adriatic coast, this region has the most varied and striking landscapes in an already picturesque country. It offers craggy mountain promontories, undulating green meadows, thick forests, breathtaking nature preserves and deep, sandy beaches.

Instead of one dominant large metropolis, the Marche (pronounced *MAR-kay*) offers a number of small, historic towns and cities: Urbino, Pesaro, Fano, Ancona, Fermo, Ascoli Piceno, Jesi. Ten percent of its land mass is set aside as park and nature reserve. Agriculture—wheat, corn, olives, vineyards—dominates this verdant land crisscrossed by rivers and accented by steep rock formations within which the dramatic Frasassi Caves offer phantasmagorical moonscapes.



The ducal palace in
Urbino at sunset.

PHOTO COURTESY OF REGIONE MARCHE TOURISM DEPARTMENT



legs are salted twice and air-dried for fourteen months.

East of Urbino are the lovely beach towns of Pesaro and Fano. Pesaro is larger and more upscale, but Fano is the busy commercial seaside center. At four a.m. every morning the fresh seafood auction takes place as boats that have been fishing all night deliver their shimmering catch which rolls into the market in plastic bins. It is bid for electronically by buyers seated in an amphitheater grandstand. At around 8 a.m., when the market is over and all the fish is sold, participants repair to local bars for a *moretta di Fano*—espresso spiked with a brandy-and-sambuca mixture.

South of Urbino is the small town of Acqualagna, the epicenter of the Italian truffle industry. Fully two-thirds of all Italian truffles are produced here. Acqualagna is the top market in the world for truffles, with more than six tons of the precious tuber sold each year. The town is surrounded by oak groves, and it is not uncommon to see dogs digging furiously around the tree trunks to unearth the pungent fungi.

Rustic Regional Cuisine

As in the rest of Italy, regional cuisine is a source of great pride in the Marche. Of course, seafood is an important component of the local cooking but hearty, rustic dishes are also plentiful. I was impressed by the stunning roasted rabbit with garlic, wild fennel

PHOTO: ANTHONY DIAS SILE

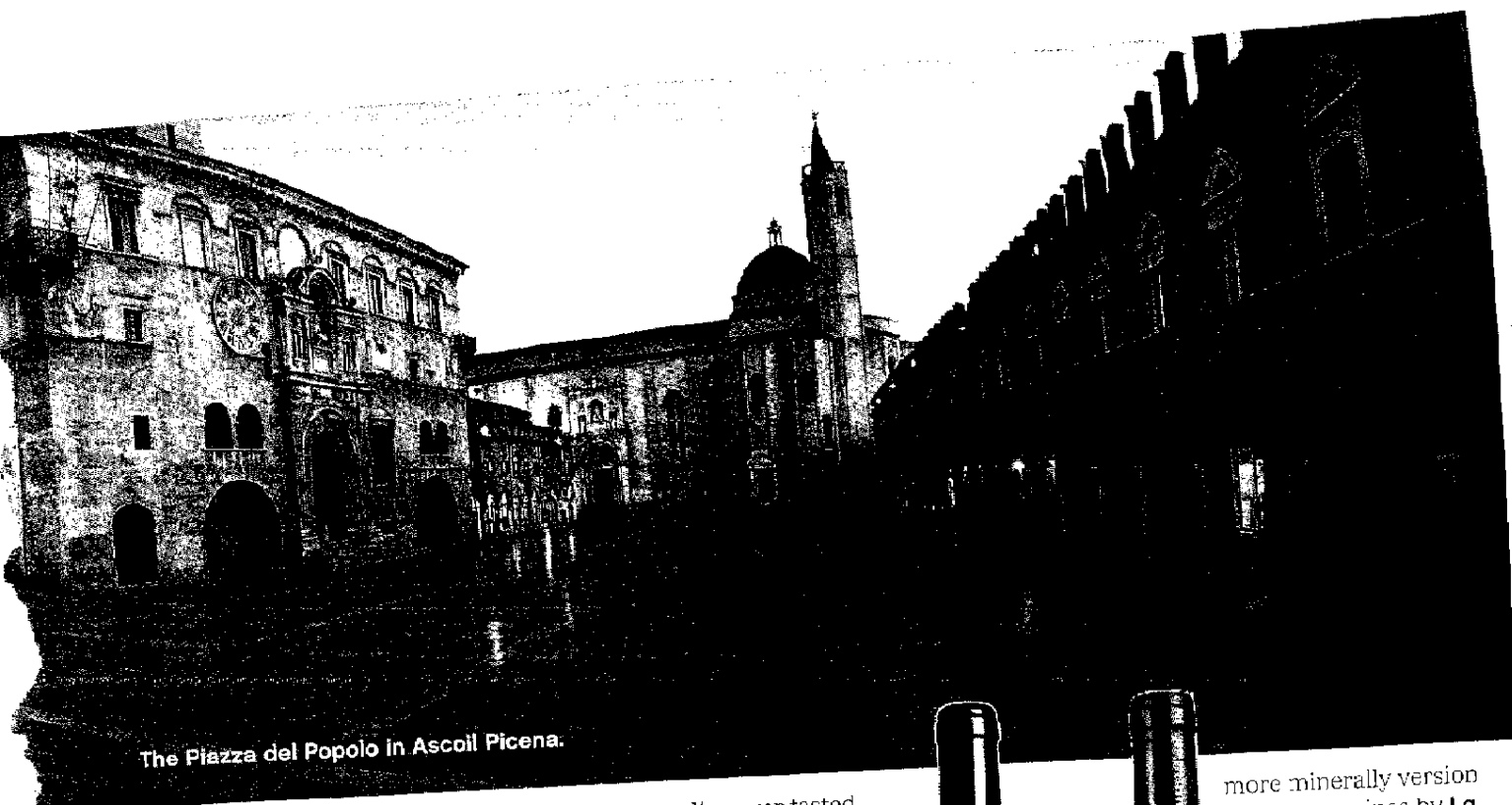
Above: Prosciutto drying in Carpegna. Right: The famed truffles of Acqualagna.

Urbino is a stunning Renaissance city located inland and elevated above the plains. The birthplace of Raphael, it is dominated by a splendid, turreted Palazzo Ducale perched at the highest point in the city. The palace houses the region's National Gallery featuring works by Tiziano, Piero della Francesca and Raphael.

Truffles and More

Farther west, almost to the Umbrian border, the town of Carpegna produces an exquisite prosciutto (sweeter, spicier and, dare I say, more flavorful than the hams of Parma). A visit to the plant where the prosciutto is made is a unique experience. The whole





The Piazza del Popolo in Ascoli Picena.

PHOTO COURTESY OF REGIONE MARCHE TURISMISMO DEPARTMENT

As in the rest of Italy, regional cuisine is a source of great pride in the Marche.”

and cauliflower cooked by Alberto Melagrana at his restaurant **Antico Furlo** in Acqualagna. The risotto and snapper roasted in parchment at the one-star **Alceo** in Pesaro were sublime.

Symposium 4 Stagioni, a Michelin one-star in Cartoceto, offers the most complete menu of regional cuisine. The egg tagliatelle with truffles was brilliant. Down the coast from Pesaro in Senigallia is **Uliassi**, the eponymous two-star restaurant of Mauro Uliassi, which serves some of the finest seafood

dishes I've ever tasted. The crisped mullet with parsley sauce, pear and anchovies was transcendental, not to mention the shrimp with hazelnuts, potato purée, truffles and mushroom glaze.

The local cheese is also not to be missed. Casciotta d'Urbino is a rich cow and sheep's milk round that combines easily with the local cooking.

Drinking Locally

The wines of the Marche are bright, fresh and irresistible. There are two widely produced DOC whites: Bianchello del Metauro and Verdicchio. Bianchello is made from Biancame, a rare local grape. It's a smooth, aromatic, floral white best consumed young. Verdicchio is a bright variety related to Trebbiano; it is crisp, aromatic and finishes with a hint of almonds. Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi is the most common DOC (my favorite producer is **Santa Maria d'Arco**), but Verdicchio di Matelica is a denser,



Red wine, such as these from **Piantate Lunghe** and **Umani Ronchi**, is the best-known red from the Marche.

more mineral version (best were wines by **La Monacesca** and **Belisario Cambrugiano**).

Many typical local red wines are made from Sangiovese and the best-known DOC red is Rosso Conero, which is mostly Montepulciano. My favorite was the 2007 by **Piantate Lunghe**, a seductive wine with 15% Sangiovese in the blend, and **Umani Ronchi** is another good producer. Another interesting red is Pergola, a new DOC in 2005, made from Vernaccia di Pergola, which is related to Aleatico. My favorite producers are **Pandolpi**

Orsini and **Massioli**. Local vintners are also trying their hand at new varieties. I was most taken with a lovely Pinot Noir made by **Mancini**, a Pesaro producer.

The Marche is one of the great delights of Italy and it is waiting to be discovered. There are regular flights from Rome to Ancona and frequent trains from Florence and Bologna to Pesaro. ■