

# The undiscovered Sangiovese

While Tuscany may provide the most evocative illustration of Sangiovese's prowess, it turns out this talented grape has many other homes too. Richard Baudains finds distinctive alter egos and wallet-friendly prices as he explores beyond its heartland

**Left: Sangiovese appears in nearly a dozen DOCs in Umbria, taking the lead in top producer Bocale's Montefalco Rosso**

**Right: made only in the best years, Giovanna Madonia's Ombroso illustrates the heights Sangiovese can reach in Romagna**

**Below: Claudio Fiore and Veruska Eluci at Balia di Zola work with 50-year old vines to create Sangiovese Modigliana Riserva**

SANGIOVESE IS FAR and away Italy's most planted variety. It accounts for a staggering 71,000 hectares of vineyard, equivalent to 11% of the national surface area. It was recently calculated that it is present, either as the principal or as a complementary grape, in no fewer than 243 DOC/Gs across the country. The best known of these are obviously Tuscan. Sangiovese is the grape of the region's high-profile DOCGs (Chianti, Chianti Classico, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, Brunello di Montalcino and Morellino di Scansano), of numerous monovarietal SuperTuscans, and of a whole raft of minor local denominations.

Tuscany does not, however, have a monopoly on the cultivar in central Italy. Sangiovese is the principal red grape of Romagna and, a little-known and perhaps unexpected fact, it is also the most planted variety in the neighbouring regions of Umbria and Marche. Sangiovese-based wines from these regions do not get the media exposure of their Tuscan counterparts, but there are excellent reasons for seeking them out. Anyone with nostalgia for the aroma and the juicy vibrancy of young Sangiovese will find great examples in the neighbouring regions of a varietal style that Tuscany has largely forgotten.

On the other hand if you are looking for plush concentrated fruit in the SuperTuscan vein, or the high seriousness of an austere riserva, you will find those too. And because prices have not caught up with continually improving quality, you will also be getting super value for money. Having said that, however, it would be doing Tuscany's neighbours a gross injustice to present them as simply the source of affordable lookalikes, because the Sangiovese wines of Romagna, Umbria and Marche have distinctive characters all of their own.



## Romagna

**Area planted with Sangiovese 8,554ha**

**Leading Sangiovese producers** Balia di Zola; Drei Dona; Fattoria Zerbina; Ferrucci; Giovanna Madonia; La Berta; San Valentino; Tre Monti; Villa Liverzano; Villa Papiano; Villa Trentola

Romagna Sangiovese, the relatively new (2011) name of the regional DOC, says it all. Of all Tuscany's neighbours, Romagna is the one which identifies most fervently with Sangiovese, and in fact the Romagnoli have always maintained that the variety originated in their region and not in the hills of Chianti. The wines are almost exclusively solely Sangiovese. Although the production norms allow for the addition of up to 15% of other varieties, few producers take up the option.

The DOC distinguishes three levels of quality and style. Romagna Sangiovese is for everyday >





drinking, Romagna Sangiovese Superiore has lower yields and comes out a year after the vintage, while Romagna Sangiovese Superiore Riserva ages for at least two years. The production area extends along a line of hills roughly parallel to the ancient Roman *via Emilia* that joins Bologna to the coast.

Character within this area varies according to soils and most importantly to elevation, but broadly speaking, the wines at the eastern and western extremes of the production zone are held to be the lighter and more immediate, while those in the centre, in the communes of Cesana, Forlì and Faenza, are more structured and complex.

The 2011 revision of the DOC introduced the potentially very interesting category of village cru, from 12 sub-zones. Even the locals would be hard pressed to place all of them on a map, but the best known, Bertinoro, Brisighella, Modigliano, Marzeno and Predappio, will strike a chord with aficionados.

Leaving aside the nuances, the basic character of Romagna Sangiovese is recognisably different to that of the neighbouring regions. The nose has the classic floral character (think violets and iris) and the fruit has a juicy clarity which comes through even in the more extracted styles. The tannins are fine, but often slightly gritty – more Rufina than Chianti Classico if you are looking for comparisons with Tuscany – and the acidity is both vibrant and mouthwatering. In the bad old days when overcropping was more in evidence, that acidity could be mouth-puckering, but in the vastly improved modern wines, it is an ally which gives brightness to the fruit and balances the often generous body. Romagna Sangiovese today offers some of the most engaging expressions of the variety made anywhere in the country.

The region has a solid core of top-quality producers as well as a growing number of exciting



up-and-comers (Noelia Ricci, Tenuta Saiano, Maria Galassi, Costa Archi, Torre San Martino). What is missing is wider recognition. 'The challenge,' says Cristina Geminiani, owner-winemaker at the leading Zerbina estate, 'is to overcome the misconceptions about the region's wines, to show that we are not just about simple everyday wines but also riservas, that there is high quality and a regional style, that Sangiovese can have nobility on this side of the Apennines too.'



## Marche

**Area planted to Sangiovese 3,600ha**

**Leading Sangiovese producers – monovarietal or blend**  
Bucci; Boccadigabbia; Capecci Sasn Savino; Cù Cù; Il Conte-Villa Prandone; Murola; Saladini Pilastrì; Velenosi

In wine-producing terms, Marche is the sleepest of the central Italian regions. Less ambitious perhaps than its neighbours, less glamorous certainly.

Marche has long been the region with the biggest internal wine consumption in the country and much of its production is geared towards supplying the locals with honest, everyday drinking. However there is much more to discover. Verdicchio (*see p66*) is the region's best known wine outside Italy, but surprisingly Marche grows more red than white grapes, and most of this is Sangiovese.

The vast majority of the production comes under the basic, widely planted Rosso Piceno DOC, while the top-end Rosso Piceno Superiore originates in a restricted area near the beautiful medieval town of Ascoli Piceno, the most southerly outpost of Sangiovese along the Adriatic coast. Clay soils and a warm, maritime climate combine to create hearty reds. The basic DOC is rustic in the best sense. The superiore version on the other hand is capable of the refinement that comes with a minimum of 12 months' oak ageing and a noticeably superior fruit quality. The typical tasting note reads something like 'spicy-floral with distinct notes of pepper, full body and big dry tannin'.

The DOC stipulates a blend of 70% of the native Montepulciano and a maximum 30% Sangiovese, relegating the latter very much to the role of complementary variety. Producers tend not to enthuse about Sangiovese, but it has an important function. On its own, Montepulciano can be overpoweringly tannic and one-dimensional.

As Marica Ciccarelli from leading producer Velonesi, says, 'Sangiovese by itself is not really very expressive, but it softens the Montepulciano, tones down the tannins and gives contrast and elegance.'

The other possible source of Sangiovese is the IGT Marche label. The IGT allows for the bottling of a wide range of monovarietals, among them Sangiovese. Since the denomination is regional, the wines are less identifiably terroir-driven and, as is in the case of IGTs in general, reflect house styles more than soils and climate. Cù Cù (pronounced

**Above: in the Marche, Velenosi uses Sangiovese to soften the Montepulciano**  
**Below left: Francesco Bordini, winemaker and director at Villa Papiano, listed by Baudains as one of Romagna's leading names**  
**Below: Boccadigabbia's vines produce some of Marche's top Sangioveses**

