



Montepulciano d'Abruzzo: Delicious and value priced

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write the author

02/28/2011 -Some red wines are too ambitious! They're blockbusters and over-priced. If the recession has taught wine aficionados anything, it's that there are a significant number of delicious, well-priced red wines. Some of them, like Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, hail from Italy.

Get your tongue around the grape variety montepulciano (mahn-tay-pul-CHAN-no) and treat your palate to one of today's hottest Italian red wines. Be careful, though, we're not referencing Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, produced in Tuscany from Sangiovese.

We're writing about the montepulciano grape, grown in Italy's Le Marche, Molise and Abruzzo regions, where Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is the famed red wine. No so long ago, Abruzzo, Le Marche and Molise were known for large grape crop yields, the largest in Italy, that produced ordinary wine, usually sold in bulk to other wine regions.

No longer the case. With the Gen-Xers taking family winemaking reins and investment capital on the increase, wine quality made major strides, but recognition at first, was not warp speed. Highly acclaimed U.S. Italian restaurants sought a good representation of the best wines from Abruzzo, yet that was rare, until recently.

Producers to know

Illuinati: On a ridge overlooking the Adriatic Sea, Illuinati is perched at 1,000 feet elevation. "My greatgrandfather

Nicola came to this region to plant vines because the wines of northern Abruzzo are elegant with smooth tannins," explains Stefano Illuinati. "Nicola believed it was because of the sandy, chalky soils, high elevation and long growing season that allowed the grapes to develop deep, rich flavors. Proximity to the Adriatic Sea, which provides a diurnal temperature difference of nearly 20 degrees Fahrenheit, helps maintain montepulciano's balanced acidity." **Illuinati Riparosso 2008 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, \$15**, is aged in large, neutral Slovenian oak casks, proving that montepulciano does not require small barrel aging to give a full, appealing mouthfeel.

Zaccagnini: Situated 1,000 feet above sea level, 25 miles from the Adriatic and 75 miles from Rome, the unpretentious town of Bolognano is home to Zaccagnini. Following an extensive viticultural study, new vineyards with four different clones of montepulciano are teamed with high-tech winemaking equipment to create wines with extended aging potential. Smooth and drinkable with cherry-berry aromas and flavors, **2008 Cantina Zaccagnini Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, \$15**, is a value for the price

La Valentina: Sabatino Di Properzio whose passion is the promotion of Abruzzo wines, especially those made from montepulciano, founded Fattoria La Valentina in 1990. La Valentina represents the new generation's desire for authentic wines using the principles of organic farming in the hillside vineyards and minimal intervention in the winery, allowing the unique characteristics of the land to speak through the wines. Highlighted by juicy blackberry and black cherry aromas and flavors with generous, supple tannins, **2006 La Valentina Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, \$13**, is lively on the palate with an extended finish and a steal at the price.

Umani Ronchi: This is broadly considered the leading Le Marche wine producer. Yet, acknowledging a renewed interest in nearby Abruzzo, owners purchased an estate in a quality-driven sub-zone within Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. **Umani Ronchi 2008 Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, \$14**, is quite appealing with a lot of depth for the money.

Rising above a host of lower-priced quaffables in today's wine marketplace, the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wines cited above showcase a soft, appealing mouthfeel and a marvelous mélange of dark fruits hinged to a generous backbone. Simply put: they over-deliver at their price point.

Think Spring with Chardonnay

Although chardonnay remains the U.S. white wine of choice, in many ways it has become just that – a glass of white wine, especially with most low-end bottlings (\$10 and under). Most of those wines are nearly tasteless and boring. Begin to think spring with the following really delicious standouts from the crowd. Pair them with lobster or other rich shellfish, grilled fish or poultry.

2009 Bonterra Organic \$14

2009 Rodney Strong Sonoma County \$14

2009 St Francis Winery Sonoma County \$16

2009 Franciscan Napa Valley \$18

2009 La Crema Monterey \$20

2008 Hess Napa Valley Su'Skol \$22

2008 William Hill Napa Valley \$24

2008 J Vineyards \$28

2008 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch \$35

2008 Patz & Hall Dutton Ranch \$39

2009 Sonoma-Cutrer Russia River Ranches \$40

2008 Dutton Goldfield Dutton Ranch Rued Vineyard \$45

Picks of the pack:

2008 Clos du Bois Russian River Valley Calcaire \$25

2008 Patz & Hall Hyde Vineyard \$55

2007 Newton Unfiltered \$60