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# UMBRIA'S RED RISING

The time is right to explore the delicious and diverse array of red wines from the heart of Central Italy.

BY KERIN O'KEEFE

PHOTOS BY JENS JOHNSON

**K**nown as the “Green Heart of Italy,” Umbria is the only landlocked region in the central part of the country, bordered by Tuscany, Marche and Lazio. Its enchanting medieval towns and rolling hills carpeted with olive groves and vineyards can make it appear as if time has stood still.

When it comes to winemaking, however, Umbria's quality production makes it clear that time has indeed continued to march on. Often noted for its crisp, iconic white wine Orvieto, the region also makes intriguing reds that every wine lover should know.

Umbria is home to native red grape Sagrantino, as well as Sangiovese, Colorino and other indigenous Italian varieties. Producers also cultivate a smattering of international grapes, namely Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The region's flagship reds, Montefalco Sagrantino and Torgiano Rosso Riserva, boast layers of complexity and ageworthy structures, while Montefalco Rosso and Rosso di Torgiano are generally more approachable. Umbria *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (IGT), often made with international grapes, ranges from easy drinking to full-bodied and complex.



**94** Arnaldo Caprai 2015 25 Anni (Montefalco Sagrantino). Aromas of baked plum, purple flower, exotic spice and French oak form the nose on this full-bodied red. The firmly structured palate shows focus and finesse, delivering ripe black cherry, spiced blueberry, licorice and tobacco alongside tightly knit, fine-grained tannins that leave a rather drying finish. Give it time to fully develop. Drink 2023–2035. Wilson Daniels Ltd. **abv:** 15% **Price:** \$99



## Montefalco Sagrantino

Umbria's most celebrated red is Montefalco Sagrantino, a powerfully structured wine made exclusively from Sagrantino. The *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG) growing area spans the entire village of Montefalco, as well as parts of Bevagna, Gualdo Cattaneo, Castel Ritaldi and Giano dell'Umbria, all located in the province of Perugia.

The production zone sits roughly 720–1,550 feet above sea level. It experiences hot, dry summers, cold winters and moderate rainfall, perfect conditions for red wine production.

Winemaking in and around Montefalco dates to pre-Roman times. The first written documentation of Sagrantino dates to 1598, while, in 1925, the township of Montefalco was named Umbria's most important area at the region's principal wine fair.

But by the early 1970s, Montefalco's wine production had been all but abandoned, a victim of the mass migration from rural to urban areas that happened during Italy's economic boom of the 1960s and '70s.

"In 1971, when my father bought property and founded the winery, Montefalco's wine production was in crisis, with only about 25 acres of Sagrantino remaining and five producers, four of which were small family farms that made Sagrantino for their own consumption," says Marco Caprai, owner of the Arnaldo Caprai winery.

The Caprai family was among the first to revive Montefalco's ancient grape, along with the Adanti, Benincasa and Antonelli families. These trailblazers saved Sagrantino from near-certain extinction.

Sagrantino is grown exclusively in the Montefalco denomination, and it possesses unique characteristics that set it apart from other grapes.

"Sagrantino has more polyphenols than other red grapes, two times more than Cabernet and Merlot, and three times more than Sangiovese," says Caprai. As a result, it produces

**93** **Cantina Fratelli Pardi 2014 Montefalco Sagrantino.** Spiced plum, tobacco, rose and citrusy aromas shape the nose. On the full-bodied, enveloping palate, firm, grainy tannins accompany dried black cherry, raisin and baking spice. The fruit richness easily stands up to the hefty alcohol while fresh acidity lends balance. Drink 2020–2034. De Grazia Imports, LLC. **Cellar Selection.**  
**abv:** 14.5% **Price:** \$60

**93** **Lungarotti 2012 Rubesco Riserva Vigna Monticchio (Torgiano).** Underbrush, violet, rose and wild herb aromas mingle together on this fragrant, elegant red. The enveloping palate has concentration and finesse, delivering fleshy black cherry, blackberry and baking spice alongside tightly knit but velvety tannins. Drink through 2032. Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$61

deeply colored, full-bodied wines with tannic backbones, complex aromas and depth destined for long aging.

Most producers agree that Sagrantino is a difficult grape in both the vineyard and cellar, though taming its ferocious tannins seems to be the biggest challenge. Planting in the best areas and harvesting at the perfect ripeness are crucial, as are scrupulous leaf canopy management and just the right amount of green harvesting.

“Sagrantino is like a wild horse you want to ride,” says Chiara Lungarotti, CEO of the Lungarotti Group, one of the region’s premier firms, which has estates in Montefalco and Torgiano. “To domesticate it, you need to dominate it, first in the vineyard and then during the winemaking process.”

To help tame the vigorous tannins, Montefalco Sagrantino has a minimum mandatory aging period of 37 months before release, one year of which must be in oak.

It’s clear that Montefalco Sagrantino isn’t for the faint-hearted, but its tannic power is just one of the reasons. Due to climate change over the last several years, harvesting when grapes reach ideal polyphenolic ripeness to avoid green tannins has also led to higher alcohol levels. These days, it’s rare to find Montefalco Sagrantino under 15% alcohol by volume (abv); levels around 15.5% have become increasingly common.

The best expressions have rich fruitiness and bright acidity to balance out such high alcohol, while top bottlings possess a rare combination of muscle and finesse. Typically, Montefalco Sagrantinos boast great complexity and aromas that range from black-skinned fruit to rose, while flavors include blackberry jam, baking spice and balsamic notes of pine forest and menthol. Depending on the vintage, they can easily age 20 years and longer.

For lovers of sweet wines, there’s also Montefalco Sagrantino Passito, the area’s traditional nectar. The wine is made entirely from Sagrantino that’s been dried on mats for at least two months. It creates a sweet wine that seems drier than other dessert wines, thanks to its high tannic content, and makes for a great match with seasoned cheeses.

## Montefalco Rosso

From the same growing area as Montefalco Sagrantino, Montefalco Rosso is a *Denominazione d’Origine Controllata* (DOC) Sangiovese-based wine that ranges from medium-bodied and food friendly to full-bodied and complex.

Made with 60–80% Sangiovese, 10–25% Sagrantino and up to 30% of other red grapes, it must age for at least 18 months before release. A handful of producers also produce a Riserva version that must age at least 30 months, one year of which must be in oak.

As most producers will point out, Montefalco Rosso isn’t a “B version” of Montefalco Sagrantino, but a distinct wine in its own right.

“If Montefalco Sagrantino is the king, then Montefalco Rosso is the queen,” says Alessandro Lunelli, whose family owns Tenuta Castelbuono and the Carapace winery. “Montefalco has predominantly clay soils with a good presence of limestone. Thanks to the soil, Sangiovese from Montefalco



**92** Montioni 2017 Montefalco Rosso. Baked plum, coconut, toast, vanilla, nail polish and resin aromas mingle together on this brawny red. The solid palate shows French oak, roasted coffee bean and stewed prune alongside grainy tannins. You’ll also notice the heat of evident alcohol. Give the tannins another year or two to soften, then enjoy to capture the remaining fruit. NG Wine Services.  
abv: 13.5% Price: \$30

**91** Goretto 2015 Montefalco Sagrantino. Aromas of underbrush, prune and a whiff of pressed rose come together in the glass along with a resin note. Concentrated and enveloping, the rounded, full-bodied palate offers dried cherry, raisin, licorice and tobacco, all framed in tightly knit, close-grained tannins. Drink 2020–2030. Tricana Imports.  
abv: 14.5% Price: \$36



**91 Lungarotti 2016 Rubesco (Torgiano).** A blend of 90% Sangiovese and 10% Colorino, this focused red opens with aromas of black cherry, blue flower and a whiff of exotic spice. Savory and medium-bodied, the polished palate delivers cassis, white pepper and star anise set against polished tannins. Bright acidity keeps it fresh and focused. Now through 2023. Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$19



**91 Tenute Lunelli 2016 Lampante Riserva (Montefalco Rosso).** Blackberry jam and exotic spice aromas lead the nose along with a hint of menthol. On the brawny, velvety palate, flavors of vanilla, licorice and mocha accent a core of fleshy black cherry and prune. The heat of evident alcohol signals the finish, while close-grained tannins offer firm support. Drink through 2026. Taub Family Selections.  
**abv:** 15% **Price:** \$24



has great structure and deep color, while Sagrantino lends even more body.”

Montefalco Rosso typically boasts cherry and wild-berry sensations, and is best enjoyed up to five years from the vintage. Montefalco Riservas are fuller-bodied and more complex, with spicy aromas and flavors, dark-skinned fruit and good aging potential, depending on the vintage.

## Torgiano

You can't talk about Umbria's great reds and not mention the Lungarotti family and the Torgiano growing area. The firm's Rubesco established the region in terms of quality wine, thanks to pioneering producer Giorgio Lungarotti.

During the late 1950s and early '60s, he transformed his family's agricultural firm in Torgiano into a winemaking estate. The winery focused on traditional grapes and implemented modern training systems and technology in the cellars. In 1962, he created Rubesco, made with Sangiovese and 10% Colorino, and, two years later, developed Rubesco Riserva Vigna Monticchio, made from 100% Sangiovese.

The success of these wines fueled Lungarotti's passion for the region's grapes. Lungarotti began campaigning for Torgiano's DOC status, which it received in 1968, the first in Umbria. Torgiano Riserva would then become a DOCG in 1990, retroactive to the 1983 vintage.

Still, Torgiano is a tiny denomination with just four producers. The terroir is well-suited to expressive, high-quality Sangiovese cultivation.

“Sangiovese is the grape that best mirrors its terrain and climate, and the character of Torgiano,” says Chiara Lungarotti, Giorgio's daughter. “Here, we have a continental climate, but it rains less than other areas.

“In 2018, for example, it rained frequently everywhere in Umbria, but not in Torgiano, so grapes reached perfect ripening. Lake deposits give the soil great variability, with layers of clay, sand and sandy clays. Thanks to the soils and climate, Sangiovese in Torgiano develops great elegance.”

Medium-bodied Rosso di Torgiano is made with 50–100% Sangiovese, and it can't be released prior to the first of December the year after its harvest. Ready to drink upon release, it will develop more depth with a few years of aging.

Torgiano Rosso Riserva, on the other hand, is structured, fresh and loaded with finesse and complexity, capable of aging for 30 years or more. It must be made with 70–100% Sangiovese and is required to age at least three years before release.

## Umbria

The flexible Umbria IGT designation is made exclusively in the provinces of Perugia and Terni, and the wines can be produced with native or international grapes. Due to the diverse production regulations and wide array of grapes allowed, many styles fall under this umbrella. They range from easygoing and approachable to structured with moderate aging potential, but nearly all show their Umbrian roots in terms of ripe dark fruit and savory flavors.





**90** **Roccafiore 2016 Montefalco Rosso.** Ripe black-skinned fruit, truffle, wild herb and brown spice aromas shape the nose. A blend of 70% Sangiovese, 15% Sagrantino and 15% Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, it's smooth and juicy, offering ripe black cherry, blackberry compote and nutmeg alongside taut, polished tannins. Enjoy through 2021. Vignaioli Selection.  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$17



**88** **Argillae 2017 Sinuoso (Umbria).** Made with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Montepulciano, this opens with aromas of sunbaked earth, cassis and dark spice. The aromas carry over to the juicy, straightforward palate, along with a hint of crushed sage and powdered tannins. Vias Imports.  
**abv:** 14% **Price:** \$15



**88** **Falesco 2015 Tellus Merlot (Umbria).** Made entirely with Merlot, this has aromas of dark-skinned fruit, toasted oak and vanilla. The round, ripe palate offers ripe black plum, mocha and star anise alongside smooth tannins. LLS-Winebow.  
**Best Buy.**  
**abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$13