

Italy's heart, beating strong

There's renewed energy in Emilia Romagna, says Carla Capalbo, who finds producers making serious wines from their native grapes – a far cry from the drab, industrial Lambrusco of old

GEOGRAPHY PLAYS A big part in Emilia Romagna. It is one of northern Italy's richest and most strategically positioned regions, and one of the country's most exciting up-and-coming wine areas. Located right at the heart, it is a wide, sloping horizontal wedge that begins south of Milan and stretches all the way east to the Adriatic Sea, to Byzantine Ravenna and seaside Rimini.

Its lands start in the north in the flat, fertile

valleys of the mighty Po river – Italy's most important and feared – and rise up onto the country's mountainous backbone, the Apennines, with Tuscany on their southern side.

As the name suggests, Emilia Romagna is a composite: a marriage of two worlds that are divided between Emilia in the west and Romagna in the east, with Bologna sitting in the centre as the capital. It's been that way since Roman times.



Photograph: Carla Capalbo

Emilia's gastronomic identity is powerfully linked to its foods and their places: prosciutto from Parma; Parmigiano Reggiano cheese from Parma and Reggio nell'Emilia; aceto balsamico tradizionale – the true balsamic vinegar – from Modena and Reggio; mortadella and other sausages from Bologna. This is the land of the sacred cow, the even more sacred pig, and rich meaty sauces.

So it's no surprise that Emilia Romagna's wines were traditionally judged on their fat-cutting

abilities. Fizzy, fruity wines with healthy rations of acidity were the most popular to quaff with oozing pork sausages such as *cotechino*. Lambrusco was sparkling, red and 'brusco' (tart or sharp), perfect for freshening the palate after a platter of pork *salumi* and fried dough. The cheap, industrial Lambruscos – some of them inexplicably white – that were exported across the oceans at the end of the last century gave Emilian wines a bad name.

A lot of that has changed. To balance out the plonk there is now a movement in Emilia Romagna of committed winemakers intent on bringing the best out of their native grapes – starting with Lambrusco itself. Alberto Paltrinieri is one of the heroes of the movement against industrial Lambrusco – or what he calls 'Italian soda pop'. ➤

Below: the impressive Torrechiara Castle overlooks vineyards just south of Parma



‘There is now a movement in Emilia-Romagna of committed winemakers intent on bringing the best out of their native grapes. Starting with Lambrusco’

At his family-run, 15-hectare estate at Sorbara, the epicentre of fine Lambrusco production, he makes eight deliciously drinkable yet complex Lambruscos that reflect the characters of its grapes – Sorbara and Salamino – and vinification methods, from Charmat to the ‘ancestral’ natural refermentation in the bottle. ‘In the end though, the rule here that wine must go well with food still applies,’ he says. ‘They should make you salivate and clear the palate, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be full of interest.’ Other fine Lambruscos are being made by Ermete Medici and Camillo Donati.

Beyond sparkling

Sorbara is in the plain and is the Emilian exception to the rule about good wines coming from higher ground. Most of the region’s best wines do come from the southern range of hills in appellations with visibly different landscapes. I asked wine critic Giorgio Melandri, who is from Faenza, about this diversity and the revival of the region’s viticulture.

‘If Emilia’s soul has always been sparkling, Romagna’s has always been still, though that doesn’t stop some Emilian producers from making



Above: Elena Pantaleoni inspects the sun-dried Malvasia bunches for La Stoppa’s Vigna del Volta

fine still wines,’ says Melandri as we tour Enologica, the annual wine and food fair he helps to organise that is dedicated to the region. ‘You could say the new movement in Emilia Romagna started in earnest 20 years ago, with the Sangiovese wines made on the Castelluccio estate at Modigliana. They – with Fattoria Zerbina, Nicolucci and San Patrignano – sent out the first signals of a more serious approach.’

It was only a matter of time before the revolution that had been sweeping Italy for over two decades reached these rural hills. The region is well placed for this, with many unique grapes and terrains to explore, and ever more winemakers concerned about the health of the soil and its fruits.

I visited several producers working along these lines. In the gentle hills above Piacenza in the west of the region is Elena Pantaleoni at La Stoppa. She farms organically, focusing primarily on reds Bonarda and Barbera, and on the aromatic white Malvasia di Candia Aromatica.

When I arrive she’s checking on the Malvasia bunches that are being sun-dried for her exotic passito, Vigna del Volta. ‘I’ve been making this dessert wine since 1995 because I believe wines should speak of the places they’re born in,’ she says. ‘It’s hard to believe, but our summers are sometimes hotter than Sicily’s. Other producers are following suit: Piacenza is becoming known for this type of wine, which makes more sense here than Sauvignon.’ She also works the Malvasia in dry and sweet sparkling versions.

A few valleys further east, above Parma, Monte delle Vigne takes a different tack, preferring to concentrate on well-made still wines with a more international bent. Andrea Ferrari rounds out his Barbera with 30% Merlot in the estate’s best-known wine, Nabucco.

In the hills south of Bologna, the Colli Bolognesi, the key variety is Pignoletto. A traditional white that was formerly trained high into elm trees, Pignoletto is being relunched by a few growers whose wines offer good minerality and delicate notes of pear and citrus. Maurizio Vallona explains: ‘When I started in the 1980s, the fashion was to

Right: Alberto Paltrinieri, one of the heroes of the new Lambrusco movement, and one of his wines



Photographs: Carla Capalbo(5), Map: Maggie Nelson



Above: vineyards nestle among the *calanche* cliffs near the town of Brisichella

plant French varieties, but I wanted to keep it local. You won't find Pignoletto anywhere else.'

Nearby, Pignoletto's repertoire is also being successfully expanded by biodynamic producer Federico Orsi. His Frizzante Sui Lieviti Pignoletto is fermented in the bottle on its lees while the single-vineyard Vigna del Grotto raises the bar for still, aged Pignoletto with its complexity and fine citrus character.

Sangiovese, Romagna style

Further east, in Romagna, the wine scene is focused primarily on one of Italy's most important red grapes – synonymous too with Tuscany – Sangiovese. This is the predominant variety from Imola all the way to the coast. Francesco Bordini, an agronomist and winemaker who consults for several estates, is an expert on Romagna's Sangiovese, as is his father, the pioneering agronomist Remigio Bordini. Francesco has recently helped produce the first detailed map of Romagna, breaking it down by sub-zones and soil types. It is published by the Vini di Romagna consortium by wine expert Alessandro Masnaghetta of wine newsletter *Enogea*.

'Zones are the key to understanding Romagna's wines,' Bordini says as we drive past an area of dramatic *calanche*, natural cliffs that feature in parts of the area. 'There are distinct geological differences here that allow for the character of the wines to change, just as they do in Burgundy or other better chronicled winemaking areas.'

Romagna's side of the Apennines breaks down into two main soil types. 'Sangiovese is grown on both, but it changes according to its terroir,' Boldini explains. 'On higher ground, where the mountains have greater levels of limestone, sandstone and marl and the soils are looser and less compact, the Sangiovese is more austere, vibrant, mineral and long-lasting. Lower down, on the clay, it tends to be more fruit-driven but less elegant.'

Sub-zones such as Bertinoro have the fine tannins you would expect from soils rich in limestone, as in the wines of Tenuta Villa Trentola, while up at Predappio the wines are long-lived and mineral, as producers such as Nicolucci and the more recent

Condé are showing.' Boldini's own estate, Villa Papiano, is situated among the woods high up in those hills, a stone's throw from Chianti Rufina on the Tuscan side.

As in Montalcino, the type of Sangiovese that is prevalent in Romagna is Sangiovese Grosso, so called for its large berries. But despite using the same grape variety, the resulting wines are very different. In Montalcino the wines are more mineral, meaty and earthy, with a tighter tannic structure. 'In Romagna they may seem lighter at first, but they have an agility and suppleness about them that means they can age long and well,' says Melandri. 'The Romagnan wines also offer a much better price-quality ratio.' It's not unusual to find good riservas for less than €10.

'Sangiovese in Romagna has a different character from Tuscany's, so you have to recalibrate your palate to get the most from it,' says *Decanter* contributor Rosemary George MW. Romagna's >



'There are distinct geological differences in Romagna that allow for the character of the wines to change, just as they do in Burgundy'

Francesco Bordini (above)

Below: the cellars at Nicolucci in Predappio



‘There is a positive atmosphere of exchange and mutual support [among young winemakers] that didn’t exist in our fathers’ generation’

Filippo Manetti

Sangiovese is more elegant and perfumed than Montalcino’s, and less over-concentrated.

An about-turn

The irony is that, 50 years ago, Sangiovese was ripped out of the higher hill areas (as it couldn’t be mechanised or made to produce enough) in what are currently considered the best zones by the new-wave vigneroni. ‘Similarly, there’s a return to the use of traditional large barrels now that the “experiment” with barriques that so much of Italy has engaged in over the past 20 years is over,’ says Melandri. ‘Sangiovese Grosso doesn’t like barriques! Its best partners are the large barrels that help maintain its austere yet elegant character.’

Of course, Sangiovese is not the only grape capturing the imagination of Romagna’s winemakers. Local whites such as Albana, Famoso and Pagadebiti (literally ‘debt-payer’) are also being re-explored. Of these, Albana is the clear favourite. This grape does well in the areas nearer the coast, between Forlì and Cesena. Traditionally used for passito dessert wines, it’s being made successfully in dry versions now too. Albana offers freshness and tannins with notes of apricots and citrus fruits.

It’s cheering that so many of the most interesting winemakers in Emilia Romagna are young: ‘There’s a positive atmosphere of exchange and mutual



Above: the village of Fognano

support that didn’t exist in our fathers’ generation,’ says Filippo Manetti, an organic winemaker at Vigne di San Lorenzo in Campiome, at Brisighella.

‘There’s a lot going on in Emilia Romagna at the moment,’ Orsi says. ‘Some of it is a work in progress, but the results are bearing positive fruit.’ **D**

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Capalbo’s dream dozen from Emilia Romagna

Vigneto San Vito-Orsi, Pignoletto Frizzante Sui Lieviti, Colli Bolognesi 2012

18 (93) £17 **Tutto Wines**
Gently cloudy, this unfiltered, lightly sparkling biodynamic wine is aged on its lees. Lively with citrus notes; long, refreshing finish. **Drink** 2014–2015 **Alcohol** 12.5%

Paltrinieri, Solco, Lambrusco dell’Emilia 2012

18.5 (95) £16 **Passione Vini**
Everything a quality Lambrusco should be: softly persistent bubbles, joyous, ripe fruit on the nose and a long, semi-dry palate. You can’t stop drinking it. **Drink** 2014–2014 **Alc** 11%



Fattoria Casetto dei Mandorli, Predappio di Predappio, Vigne del Generale, Sangiovese di Romagna Riserva 2009

18 (93) N/A UK **vini-nicolucci.it**
Pure notes of violets and ripe cherries. Deep, mineral and

long, with fine tannic structure. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 14%



San Patrignano, Ora, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore 2011

18 (93) £18 **Passione Vini**
Light spice and wild berries on the nose, a fresh, fruity wine with youthful vigour that promises well. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 14%

Gallegati, Corallo Nero, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore Riserva 2007

17.5 (91) £31.25 **Grossi Wines**
Fine Sangiovese character with austerity and freshness. Well-structured and long. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Vallona, Pignoletto, Colli Bolognesi Classico 2012

17.5 (91) £13 **Vini Italiani**
Notes of lime blossom and yellow peaches, good energy and mineral quality, fine length. **Drink** 2014–2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Villa Papiano, I Probi di Papiano, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore Riserva 2010

17.5 (91) £19.50 **Vini Italiani**
Delicately spiced nose of cherries and plums, supple, with fine tannic structure and a mineral finish. **Drink** 2014–2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Villa Venti, Primosegno, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore 2011

17.5 (91) £17.50 **Vini Italiani**
Mineral nose; ripe, supple, elegant, understated with youthful verve. **Drink** 2014–2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Galassi Maria, NatoRe, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore Riserva 2009

17 (90) N/A UK **galassimaria.it**
Fresh, lively fruit, with minerality, a drinkable, pleasurable wine. **Drink** 2014–2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Villa Liverzano, Don 2010

17 (90) £24 **Maccanino**
Carmenere and Cabernet Franc: pepper and spice, with fruity berries, freshness and minerality. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 14%

Fattoria Zerbina, Scacomatto, Albana di Romagna Passito 2008

17 (90) £39.99–£41/375ml **Les Caves de Pyrène, Wined Up Here**
Botrytis brings elegance and depth, with citrus and quince notes, and fine length from attractive, lively acidity. **Drink** 2014–2030 **Alc** 13.5%

La Stoppa, Vigna del Volta, Emilia Malvasia Passito 2008

17 (90) £29.99/500ml **Les Caves de Pyrène, Wined Up Here**
Sun-dried Malvasia di Candia brings amber sweetness, apricots and marmalade, in an aromatic wine of gentle power. **Drink** 2014–2020 **Alc** 13%

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