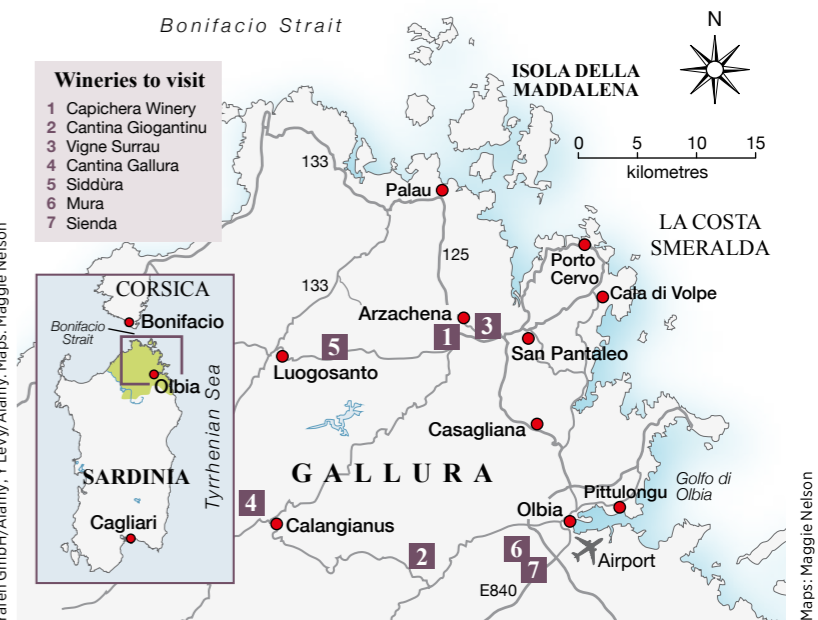




Photograph: Look-Die Bildagentur der Fotografen GmbH/Alamy; Y Levy/Alamy; Maps: Maggie Nelson



Maps: Maggie Nelson

My perfect day in Gallura

Morning

At Antica Dimora La Corona (www.anticadimoralacorona.com), wake up to a breakfast of Sardinian pastries and sheep's ricotta in a handsomely restored 18th-century house in the village of San Pantaleo. From there it's a short drive across the hills to Capichera winery (www.capichera.it) near Arzachena and Cudacciolu, run by Emanuele Ragnedda with his father and uncle. 'My family has been in Sardinia for 300 years, and was the first, in 1980, to make single-varietal Vermentino,' he says. Make sure you visit the Giant's Tomb, a stone megalith from Sardinia's Nuragic Bronze Age civilisation – more than 3,000 exist in Sardinia.

Afternoon

After tasting the wines and some local salumi, head down to Porto Cervo – full of cafés and designer shops – to eat lunch in one of Hotel Cervo's restaurants, such as Il Pomodoro (www.ilpomodoro-esmeraldachurrascaria.com), which has the area's best pizza. There are breezy sea views from the terrace, perfect for people-watching. After lunch, drive a few kilometres to Palau and take the boat around Isola della Maddalena national

Isola della Maddalena national park



park, an unspoiled, seven-island archipelago close to southern Corsica (www.lamaddalenapark.it).

Evening and overnight

In the late afternoon stop in at Vigne Surrau (www.vignesurrau.it), east of Arzachena. This estate is impressive, with a modern building for tasting and buying wines, sampling local pecorino cheeses and salumi, and learning about winemaking. They produce five versions of Vermentino, including one sparkling and a sweet passito. Meals can be ordered in advance. After that aperitivo, drive west for 15 minutes to Agriturismo Tenuta Pilastru for dinner and an overnight stay (www.tenutapilastru.it). The food is strictly Sardinian.

Above: on the Costa Smeralda, Porto Cervo's exclusive hotels attract a well-heeled crowd

'Gallura's stunning coastline is never far away from the vine-growing slopes'

intense mineral character,' says Giampaolo Gravina, one of Italy's senior wine critics.

As so often with native varieties, Vermentino has found its ideal habitat through time: it has been cultivated in Gallura since the 14th century. The vines have adapted well to the extreme growing conditions: cool, dry Maestrale (Mistral) winds coming down from the northwest, and 300 days of forceful sun a year.

Into the wilds

Still, Gallura is not an easy place for vines to grow. The rocky terrain is very uneven, and the hillsides are covered thickly by *macchia mediterranea*. Similar to English heath, the mix of indigenous plants here – including broom, euphorbia, holm-oak, buckthorn and myrtle – are able to survive Sardinia's parched summers. It results in a fragrant, evergreen ➤



The Decanter travel guide to

Sardinia, Italy

FACT FILE

Planted area 7,000ha, of which 66% is DOC and/or DOCG
Production (2014) 502,000hl
Total Vermentino 4,194ha (of which 70% is in northern Sardinia)
Vermentino di Gallura DOCG 1,320ha
Main grape varieties
Red Bovale (Bobal), Cannonau (Grenache), Carignano, Monica,
White Malvasia, Muscadellu, Nasco, Nuragus, Vermentino

One of the world's most popular holiday spots, this Italian island is a haven for those wanting an authentic food and wine experience, finds Carla Capalbo

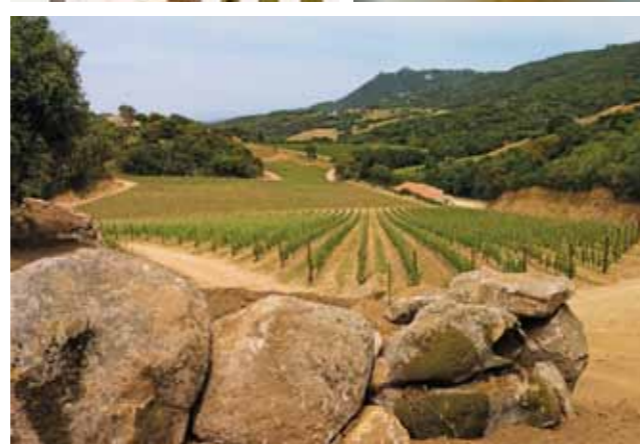
ITALY'S SECOND LARGEST island has striking landscapes with unspoiled, rocky coastlines giving way to rugged mountains still sparsely populated by shepherds and their sheep. Almost despite its coastal accessibility, the island remains closed and introspective at its heart; many islanders prefer lamb and goat to fish. Yet in recent years Sardinia's better wines have progressed from stubborn rusticity to a more open, modern approach.

While the big reds of the south, such as Cannonau and Carignano, reflect the Spanish influence of the island's past, the light-

skinned white Vermentino has links to Liguria – where it is known as Pigato – and to the Tuscan coast. It's also found in Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon: indeed Sardinia's geology has more in common with southern France than with its political motherland.

Nowhere does Vermentino express itself better than in the province of Olbia-Tempio, at the northeastern corner of Sardinia, where it's made into Vermentino di Gallura DOCG (with the Superiore category also available for wines with slightly higher alcohol levels). Vermentino is most often vinified in stainless steel vats to maintain crispness, though some barrel ageing is also found. Its lively character and attractive citrus and floral notes – often with hints of ginestra, the local yellow broom flowers – keep it refreshing and dry.

'The region of Gallura is Vermentino's natural home, where the salty winds and very poor, stony soils of granite and sand give it an



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Clockwise from top left: the vineyards at Vigne Surrau, where wine is also available to buy; Sardinia's famous seadas cheese pastries are served with local honey; scrubland has been transformed into vineyards at the Siddùra winery; the Cala di Volpe hotel and the terrace of its Il Pontile bar

and impenetrable scrub. Many trees are also farmed for their cork (used in wine bottles). Wineries here range from small family affairs to large, successful cooperatives such as Cantina Gogantinu (www.giogantinu.it) and Cantina Gallura (www.cantinagallura.net) that specialise in affordable and drinkable wines from the local area. All are open to visitors but appointments are necessary.

'Vermentino is the quintessential Mediterranean grape: it loves the sun, the sea and the wind, and it marries perfectly with fish, shellfish and seafood pastas,' says Gravina. 'Despite the region's climatic extremes, well-made Vermentino di Gallura maintains freshness and acidity and often shows an attractive saline quality.'

Gallura's stunning coastline, with its pristine, fjord-like bays and sandy beaches, is never far away from the vine-growing slopes. In 1961, the Aga Khan – one of the world's richest men – created a luxury tourist complex here along 20km of coastline that allowed for some development while successfully preserving its natural beauty. He named it La Costa Smeralda (the Emerald Coast) and built some of the world's most exclusive hotels and villas around Porto Cervo.

In midsummer, hotels such as the luxurious

Cala di Volpe (www.caladivolpe.com) charge prices only moguls can afford, with multi-tiered yachts anchored at its secluded marina. But either side of high season both tourism and hotel prices drop far enough to make its splendid seaside accessible in affordable country agriturismo and smaller hotels.

The food is delicious, with fresh fish and local pastas such as fregola served with intensely flavoured local tomatoes, followed by roast suckling pig – or *porceddu* – another of the island's favourites. And save room for dessert: Sardinian pastries are legendary. Look for the fabulous *seadas*, a fried pastry filled with fresh sheep's cheese that's served warm with the bitter honey made from native *corbezzolo* (the strawberry tree).

It's worth spending at least one night in Olbia to check out the town before heading to the wine country and beaches. There's a Roman aqueduct and port, while the Museo Archeologico helps set the scene of Sardinia's ancient past. Olbia's historic centre offers shops, cafés and some good food.

Visiting the vineyards

Wine tourism is increasing in Sardinia and well-appointed cellars make perfect destinations for day trips. If you're intrepid

Your Sardinia address book

Hotels

Locanda Conte Mameli, Olbia

In the town centre, this is a small hotel in a historic palazzo with some character.

www.lalocandadelcontemameli.com

Li Finistreddi, Arzachena

Near Arzachena, at Micalosu, this country resort near the vineyards offers all the comforts of a summer retreat.

www.finistreddi.it

Hotel Nibarù, Cala di Volpe

Stay here to enjoy the Costa Smeralda on a budget: great location, a lovely pool and walking access to several beaches.

www.hotelnibaru.it

Agriturismo Agrisole, Casagliana

If you prefer to stay outside the towns, this agriturismo is halfway between Olbia and Arzachena, and offers a more rustic atmosphere, with local dishes available for dinner.

www.agriturismo-agrisole.com



Photographs: Carla Capalbo(5)

Restaurants

Caffè Cosimino, Olbia

In Olbia's town centre of Piazza Margherita, this wine bar features a huge selection of wines and good food. Always open. Tel: +39 0789 21001

Ristorante Barbagia, Olbia

Try some of the hinterland dishes of pork, wild boar and cheeses in the spacious Ristorante Barbagia.

www.ristorantebarbagia.com

Ristorante Nino, Pittulongu

A few kilometres outside Olbia, in Hotel Stefania, this restaurant offers local Sardinian dishes, along with lovely rooms and views of (and access to) the sandy Pittulongu beaches.

www.stefaniahotel.it

Ristorante Il Tirabusciò, Calangianus

Inland at Calangianus, in the hills where the cork trees grow, this affordable venue prepares homemade traditional food, with pastas (boiled and fried) and locally reared meats and vegetables.

Tel: +39 0796 61849

Gelateria da Pasqualina, Porto Cervo

In the Promenade du Port at Porto Cervo, this ice creamery makes its own fabulous ices and pastries from Mediterranean fruits and nuts.

www.lapasqualina.com

Stelle D Stelle, Porto Cervo

In summer, this restaurant hosts Italian Michelin-starred chefs who prepare their own gourmet food. www.stelledstelle.com



Shopping

Soha Sardinia, Porto Cervo

As well as offering handmade jewellery and other accessories, this boutique makes fine, polyphenol-rich skin creams using an extract of red Cannonau grapes. www.sohasardinia.com

In Vino Veritas, Olbia

On the Corso Umberto in the centre of Olbia, you will find a large selection of Sardinian wines to taste and buy, and they also serve light lunches.

www.invinoveritas.playfun.tv

Thursday market, San Pantaleo

In the small, traditional village of San Pantaleo, there is a fun market every week where you can find local produce, crafts, artworks and more.

How to get there ✈

From Olbia's Costa Smeralda airport, the train station or port, it's a 30-minute drive to the wine region.

and enjoy spectacularly situated vineyards, Siddùra is a short drive under the mountains towards Luogosanto. Here 19 hectares of macchia have been transformed into thriving young vineyards, mostly planted to Vermentino (www.siddura.com).

Sardinia's interior is dotted with small stone villages in which time seems to have stood still, yet in which Sardinia's gastronomic and cultural heritage is still very much alive. *Pane carasau* is a uniquely thin crispbread favoured by the local fishermen; often enjoyed with Fiore Sardo DOP cheese. When it is made with the raw milk of the native breed of sheep that is descended from the Nuragic age, it has a slightly smoky character from the wood-

burning fire over which the milk is cooked. It's even listed in Slow Food's Ark of Taste.

Wine is another great way to access that culture. The annual Porto Cervo Wine Festival, held in mid-May each year, is open to the public and offers a perfect introduction to Sardinia's exciting world of wine and food (www.portocervowinefestival.com).

If you're based in Olbia, drive 30 minutes' southwest one day to visit two other fine Vermentino producers. Mura (www.vinimura.it) is a family run estate with 20ha and high-quality wines, including the award-winning Sienda. Nearby, Masone Mannu (www.masonemannu.it) is a larger winery with 60ha and a good range of both whites and reds. ■

Carla Capalbo is a food wine and travel writer and photographer who has written three guides to the food and wine culture of Italy