

Article Archive
Vintage Profile

Italy, Emilia-Romagna: One Region Two Hearts

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Although regional politics consider Emilia-Romagna to be a single region, this west-to-east strip of land is really two regions in one. Emilia and its odd couple rival Romagna share very little in common. They are however both linked by the Via Emilia, or the ancient Roman trading route that connects Rimini on the Adriatic coast to the inland city of Piacenza. All of the important winemaking zones remain directly adjacent to the Via Emilia. This is an important testament to the power and importance of this ancient corridor of commerce and communication.

The Romagna area occupies the eastern half of the Via Emilia from Bologna to the west including Ravenna, Forlì, Imola and Rimini. This is a lush and green area with softly rolling hills that extend gracefully to the coastline. The main red grape planted here is Sangiovese and the varietal tends to be softer and plumper in terms of its fruit intensity compared to the celebrated Sangiovese-based wine from neighboring Tuscany. Winemakers have done much to underline the distinct territorial identity of the Romagna Sangiovese appellation (previously known as Sangiovese di Romagna). They have made much progress over the years in domestic markets where Romagna Sangiovese is appreciated for its fruit-forward personality and attractive price points. There is still much work to be done to promote the identity of Romagna Sangiovese in foreign markets where the category is almost always overshadowed by the famous brand names of Tuscany. Romagna also focuses on international red grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

In terms of white wines, Romagna is the lucky home of the promising Albana grape that is made into a popular sweet wine but that can also be vinified as a dry white. Some producers have successfully harnessed damp conditions for botrytized dessert wines that also see some degree of appassimento (air-drying). Albana is prized for its thick, disease-resistant skins. Other white grapes include Trebbiano that is planted commonly throughout the region. There is a little-known white grape named Pagadebit (because it once "paid the debts" thanks to its vigorous production) that is now making a small but interesting comeback. Pagadebit is synonymous with the Bombino Bianco grape found in Puglia and southern Italy. Podere La Berta makes a very interesting white wine from this grape.

The landscape changes radically in Emilia where long, empty plains are often covered by mist and low-hanging fog in winter months. Emilia is the western half of the region that extends from Modena to Reggio Emilia, Parma and Piacenza. These are proud culinary capitals with some of Italy's most prized foodie contributions such as the real balsamic vinegar, Aceto Balsamico Tradizione di Modena, Parmigiano cheese and Prosciutto di Parma. The foods here tend to be heavier and fatter with cheese and butter often incorporated into local recipes. A favorite dish is shapely tortellini stuffed with up to four kinds of minced meats, nutmeg and topped with grated Parmigiano. Of course foods of this nature need acidic, fresh and effervescent wines to keep the palate clean. The vinous protagonist of Emilia is Lambrusco with the lighter Sorbara expression and the dark purple, impenetrable Grasperossa di Castelvetro. In addition to fizzy effervescence, these wines tend to show high levels of residual sugar. Although Lambrusco is deeply loved in its native territory, it lacks respect abroad.

Growing conditions in 2013 were balanced and relatively stress-free across the Emilia-Romagna territory. Sangiovese grapes in Romagna were harvested ten days earlier on average compared to Tuscany. Cool nighttime temperatures during pre-harvest weeks helped to develop aromas and flavors. The 2014 vintage was a difficult one especially for producers in the Emilia half of the region. They saw violent rainstorms throughout much of the summer. The wines in Romagna are also thinner and slightly less fragrant as a result in 2014.

—Monica Lamer