



and L'Aquila saffron make up the liquid for its preservation (and enhancement of its flavour) in oak barrels or glazed terracotta containers. An exquisite food with the charm of a product destined to disappear forever.

Stoccafisso or Baccalà?

For centuries cod (*Gadus Morhua*) has been dried in the North wind or salted. Fish left to dry for preservation is known here as "stoccafisso" from the word "stockfish", whereas salted cod is called "baccalà", and is certainly handier and easier to find but often not such good quality. In the past, preserved cod was not considered a gastronomic status symbol or a gourmet delicacy but a cheap ingredient for the badly off, to the point that in Abruzzo it was called the "meat of the poor". From Val Vibrata to Chieti, L'Aquila to the Pescara hinterland, traditional recipes flourish so only the best known are listed here: salt cod with (lots of) onion and tomato; linguine with light tomato sauce and salt cod; salt cod stewed with raisins and prunes or fried in batter for Christmas; salt cod with butter sauce; salt cod baked with potatoes.



Truffles

A recent survey carried out by Agenzia Regionale di Sviluppo Agricolo, the regional agricultural development agency, counted Abruzzo's natural truffle fields. The results were surprising: 219 production sites for the white Tuber *Magnatum* Pico; 175 of Tuber *Melanosporum* (prized black); 381 of Tuber *Aestivum* ("scorzone" or summer truffle) and *Uncinatum*; lastly, 109 of Tuber *Borchii* (spring white truffle). Then there are truffle farms, increasing in number thanks also to regional authority incentives and improved training in the cultivation of this tuber. Abruzzo, in short, is one of the regions richest in truffles (a partial estimate





suggests 500 quintals). Produce is marketed mostly in other regions and in areas that have been more successful in creating a truffle "brand identity". Things are starting to move, however, and truffle farming and picking associations are starting up to protect the territory (one scourge is unauthorized, indiscriminate premature picking which destroys truffle beds or decreases productivity) and promote regional production, guaranteeing clear rules, quality assurance and competitive prices. Truffle-based seasonal dishes in restaurants and agritourism facilities are already emerging as a popular speciality. In the future, this valuable regional treasure will most certainly be launched and exploited to the full.

Torrone tenero aquilano (*Itinerary 4*)

Ulisse Nurzia used to spend entire evenings in his small confectionery workshop, experimenting and inventing new, modern textures and flavours. This is how the soft chocolate nougat developed and became a real revolution in nougat making. Ulisse enhanced the product, which was similar to Cremona-type white nougat, by adding cocoa powder to simple ingredients like hazelnuts or almonds, honey and egg white for the rice paper covering. A modern nougat with balanced sensorial traits: the tang of the cocoa balanced by the honey and the tasty tart toasted hazelnuts. A success destined to last over time because a handful of large and small enterprises, each with its own recipe, keep this age-old tradition alive.

Trebbiano d'Abruzzo

Abruzzo's "other" famous grape, a white variety produced in huge amounts. Trebbiano DOC wine (which must contain a minimum 85% trebbiano fruit) comes from dedicated areas in the four provinces and acquired its designation in 1972. The grape is also called bombino, an ancient name subject to various theories and legends. The resulting wine has a consolidated imprint of crisp freshness, making it gratifying and pleasantly fruity. The vine also has an extraordinary capacity for adapting to the terroir and various training methods, so it can be grown from pre-coastal areas up as far as 500-600m in altitude,

although damp valley floors (excluded by DOC regulations) are unsuitable. A friendly, all-purpose wine, that is nonetheless stunning when taken to flourishing refined heights: some Abruzzo Trebbianos (and the number is growing, in line with overall quality trends) can actually be so complex and cellarable that they are a match for more celebrated traditional wines, with even the keenest connoisseur surprised and charmed by the results.

Ventricina del vastese (*Itinerary 1*)

Over the centuries, in the hills and foothills known as Medio and Alto Vastese, pork-butchering has become a typical local tradition. This is the homeland of a special charcuterie, aged at length and large in size, made from the best pork cuts, minced meticulously using only the knife tip. This coarse-grained ventricina has a large diameter and typically oval shape; it is an orangey red colour (due to a mixture of dried mild and hot chilli peppers, wild fennel seed and a hint of pepper) and has a mild spicy flavour. The cuts used are 70% lean (of which at least 80% are ham and loin) and 30% belly and ham fat. After the skins are filled, they are left to cure for at least 100 days. It was Abruzzo's first Slow Food Presidium.

Info: Accademia della Ventricina - <http://www.ventricina.com/>

Ventricina teramana (*Itinerary 3*)

A delicious fresh spreading sausage (related to neighbouring Ascoli's "ciaùscolo"), from the Teramo district, made with finely minced lean pork and fat, salt, garlic, ground white and black pepper, mild and hot chilli pepper, bell pepper paste, fennel seed, rosemary and orange peel. It is preserved cased in pork gut but can also be found in jars. Best way to eat? Simply spread it on a slice of toasted bread.

Virtù (*Itinerary 3*)

Virtù is the sovereign dish of Teramo cuisine, a recipe created for early spring, when the remaining contents of every provident, thrifty rural family larder, stored for the winter, had to be consumed. A need that became a virtue, a feast of sharing and a

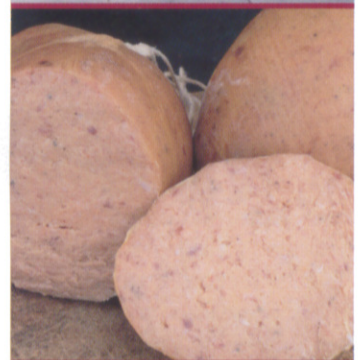


collective rite, celebrated on May Day in the homes, restaurants and town squares of Teramo and its hinterland. The dish is symbol of spring and the desire to erase memories of winter's hardships and sacrifices. We have little room to describe its recipe and the endless variations, but suffice to say that *Le Virtù* is a sort of soup made with mixed vegetables, pulses, aromatic herbs, various types of meat and pasta, in which almost all ingredients have different cooking times and are prepared separately. This can even take up to three days. The various types of pasta are cooked separately and then mixed together. The accumulated provisions of a year and several days preparation go down in a mouthful. Making it an even tastier dish to eat.

Zafferano dell'Aquila Dop (Itinerary 4)

"Zafferano dell'Aquila". The name coined over 600 years ago for the medicinal spice obtained by picking and drying the stigma (or pistils) of the *Crocus Sativus* that grows in the L'Aquila province, in Abruzzo, especially on the Navelli plain, where saffron has settled into its ideal habitat. The bulbs are planted in August in flowerbeds prepared in the fields. Flowering starts in mid-October and lasts approximately three weeks, until early November. The flowers are picked early in the morning, before the sun opens them. They are then opened to extract the stigma, which are toasted dry. During toasting the stigma lose 5/6 of their weight: 600 grams of fresh stigma yield hardly 100 grams when dry. A 1g jar therefore contains the yield of 200 blossoms. A great deal of work is involved before, during and after harvest, but the result is worthwhile, considering the exceptional quality of the aroma and unique flavours. The saffron strands are soaked in a little lukewarm water or broth before use in cooking traditional risotto or typical Abruzzo recipes: first courses with lamb or crayfish; mutton and poultry; in cakes or to enrich cheeses and dairy products.

Info: Consorzio per la tutela dello zafferano dell'Aquila - <http://www.zafferanodop.it/>



ITINERARIES FOR GOURMETS



1. South Adriatic: From the Trabocchi Coast to Majella Park.

An itinerary that takes us from the coast, up into green hills and as far as the enchanting slopes of Majella, the "mother mountain". From Francavilla al Mare, just south of Pescara, we head for San Martino sulla Marrucina (the home of one of the region's leading wineries), Guardiagrele (with its great artworks and fabulous cuisine), then into the hamlets built on Mount Majella, in the heart of the Park (including Fara San Martino, Abruzzo's pasta capital). Then we turn back downhill, to the south, towards Lanciano and lovely Vasto with its sea views (read all about its week-long festival dedicated to its famous "brodetto alla vastése" fish chowder in the "Events" section), travelling splendid vineyards, olive groves and fields of cereals on the hills and plains around Casoli. From Vasto we continue upwards, along the Adriatic SSI 6 highway, along the Trabocchi Coast with its fishing platforms looming out of the waves like giant spiders, supported and anchored by a system of cables, wires, planks and stakes tied, nailed and bolted into place. Rocca San Giovanni, Fossacesia (with one of the region's best-known and dynamic olive oil producers), San Vito Chietino, Ortona, are just a few of the localities we encounter as we journey along the coast, with their many trattorias and restaurants where we can sample fantastic yet simple goodness in the local seafood. In Ortona we can even pop into Abruzzo's "Enoteca Regionale", with its range of top local wines, to be tasted with the assistance of expert sommeliers (see "Don't Miss").



2. Oil, "Parrozzo" and Nightlife: Pescara and Its Hills.

Pescara is a modern, dynamic city on the Adriatic coast, with no lack of restaurants for sampling traditional recipes. However, "Pescara Vecchia", the old town of the authors D'Annunzio and Flaiano, also boasts pubs, bookstores, museums, and various cultural and meeting venues. So there is something for all tastes and all palates (and for night owls, especially in summer). Then we can head out for the "golden triangle" of olive oil (Moscufo, Pianella, Loreto Aprutino). Large numbers of agritourism businesses, often with their own quality olive production, are flourishing here and in nearby villages, a stone's throw from the sea. Highly recommended anywhere along this itinerary are the delicious barbecued skewers of mutton called "arrosticini". We continue towards Gran Sasso's eastern slope (Farindola, Civitella Casanova), with its lovely roads skirting olive groves and vineyards, then woods that indicate that the rugged, fascinating mountain landscape is not far off.

The next stage is to cross the Forca di Penne pass and move down towards the Alto Tirino, where the best specialities to sample are prawn-based recipes accompanied by the wines of an extremely promising – almost mountainous! – subzone. The church of San Pietro ad Oratorium and Capistrano castle are definitely worth a visit before we take the Bussi-Popoli road back towards Pescara and near Scafa bear off to explore the wild, verdant scenery that embraces Caramanico Terme, a well-known spa town. Also on the way back to Pescara, the abbey of San Clemente a Casauria, in Torre dei Passeri, is not to be missed.



3. North Adriatic and Teramo Apennines: A Marine Park and A Mountain Park

The Torre di Cerrano is the mightiest of the coastal watchtowers built along the shoreline north of Pescara and is now the symbol of the recently established protected marine area. Here, from Silvi to Pineto and Roseto, there are many excellent restaurants serving unfussy but tasty seafood dishes. If we turn inland here, we can reach Atri and its cathedral (as well as sample the great pecorino cheese), then continue to Val Vomano, passing through Canzano (famous for its turkey recipe "alla canzanese"). We go up into Val Vomano from here, into Montorio along the "Strada Maestra", a state road connecting the two sides of Mount Gran Sasso and now – after the creation of the motorway tunnel – a panoramic tarmac ribbon snaking amidst woods and charming landscapes. Isola del Gran Sasso, Castelli (with its unique pottery tradition), and Lake Campotosto (famous for its rustic "mortadella") are all possible stopping points. Then, from Montorio to the Vomano, continuing along the panoramic route, we move down towards Teramo, with its special traditional recipes ("mazzarelle", "scrippelle 'mbusse"). On the way we can turn off for Civitella del Tronto, a nearby town with a handsome Bourbon fort (and great homemade pasta called "ceppe") and a breathtaking view that spans from the Laga Mountains across Gran Sasso as far as the sea. Before turning towards Teramo, we will meet the Apennine woods (with their mushrooms and truffles), near Valle Castellana, Rocca Santa Maria and Corfinio.





4.A Majestic Road: From L'Aquila to Gran Sasso Park and The Upper Sangro.

Just one day may not be enough for this itinerary, which covers one of Italy's biggest provinces. From L'Aquila (Collemaggio basilica, 99 Cannelle fountain, the Spagnolo fortress) and its admirable culinary traditions we take the state road for Pescara, turning left at Barisciano, just 15km further along the road. Along this road we will encounter the Convent of San Colombo, with its cookery school, flora museum and botanical garden. From here the landscape becomes quite unique, from the heart of the Gran Sasso National Park, as far as Santo Stefano di Sessanio (a medieval village now completely converted into a world-famous multisite hotel), Rocca di Calascio and Castel del Monte, a stone's throw from the Campo Imperatore plateau. A few kilometres on we find Navelli, the home of PDO saffron (Zafferano dell'Aquila DOP) and heading down towards the Tirino valley (Bussi, Popoli and Sulmona, which is famous for its sugared almonds and related museum, described in "Don't Miss") and renowned red garlic. After a break and a rest at Pacentro, we start travelling up towards Naples, reaching the Cinque Miglia plateau. This is still the road (for anyone who does not like motorways) that connects L'Aquila – a city that was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – and Naples, as it did in the past. The best known towns are Roccaraso, Rivisondoli and Pescocostanzo, the latter a member of the "Club dei Borghi", included as one of Italy's loveliest, most unspoiled sites. The regional cuisine is excellent and we also find spa hotels in which to relax. In winter the slopes and ski facilities are first class. Here, in the Alto Sangro, there are a wide range of excursions over to neighbouring Molise. The local dairies encountered along the route produce exquisite cheeses, including "caciocavallo", "mozzarella" and "straciatina".





5. Discovering Abruzzo Lazio e Molise National Park: The Nature Road

This is the doyen of Italian and regional parks and can be accessed from various points. The most popular direct road is the A25 motorway that leads to Pescara from Teramo, L'Aquila and Rome. For a few kilometres we skirt the Fucino plain, where there was once a lake that the Torlonia family drained to create farmland. Pescara (the birthplace of writer Ignazio Silone) is the best motorway exit, then we can travel up towards Gioia Vecchia (an ancient village that is brought to life by excellent cultural and performing arts events) and meander – with a careful eye for wildlife crossing our path – towards Pescasseroli, where the Park's head offices are located. The shops in this lovely mountain town sell "caprino" cheese, traditional patisserie and many other specialities, while its restaurants serve simple, delicious food. From Pescasseroli we turn towards Villetta Barrea and its lake, then cross over to reach another gem of mountain Abruzzo: Scanno. This is one of Abruzzo's 18 members of the "I Borghi più belli d'Italia" club, whose unspoiled beauty, set against its gleaming lake, was documented by the greatest nineteenth-century greatest photographers, and is famous also for its traditional jewellery and gastronomic treats. From here we move down towards, and get back onto, one of the other itineraries we have described.



6. The Hills of Teramo and Thereabouts

White and red earth; slender limestone framework and sturdy clay; breccias and soils from two rivers - the Vomano and the Tronto, with the mountains and their cool streams right behind. At some points the sea is just two kilometres away. There are 31 municipalities. This is a versatile winegrowing land where a DOCG and a DOC cohabit: the former a fine expression of the flagship montepulciano d'Abruzzo vine; the latter open to being applied to great classics (merlot, cabernet, chardonnay, riesling). Besides which, native vines like pecorino and passerine are becoming the crowning glory of what we can call a "wine park". This bodes well for the future, given that local viticulture is alive and kicking, ready to embark on this new adventure: Controguerra DOC dates back to 1996; Colline Teramane DOCG is a 2003 addition. We can trust in the colour of the land. Around Atri the pale soil of the badlands; the Vomano hills are mainly calcareous but more stony and intense; approaching Val Vibrata the earth deepens into darker reddish hues. The sides of this geographical triangle are dotted with the town of Campi, the cradle of Abruzzo wine; Casal Thaulero at the tip; Morro d'Oro; Notaresco on one side; then Ancarano, Controguerra, Colonnella. These are all stops on a road that connects not just wineries of ancient roots (now embarked on a well-planned reprise), but also emerging businesses that include solid, cool-headed investors and small, lively local labels. We can follow "Strade del Vino" indications to discover the best winemaking companies in the area.



7. From the Tirino to Valle Peligna: A New Frontier in The "Oldest" Land

Legends say it all started here, or not far from here. Carapelle, a Medici barony and source of winemaking techniques that we would now describe as cutting edge. Then there is Torre de' Passeri, mother of all vineyards so of montepulciano d'Abruzzo and its saga. "Here", if we seek a starting point for our wine tour, it could be Vittorito, the Cerasuolo "capital" that follows in the footsteps of the Region's chief city and main reference market, L'Aquila. A turning point. Go south into Valle Peligna from Corfinio (already famous for its whites) and further down a source of montepulciano (connected to the east with the Torre de' Passeri "mother" zone). Go north, into the Tirino area, between Bussi and Popoli, where the vines clamber upwards in their quest for an ideal habitat. When the winters were bitter, this border district – between the Aquila plateau and the slow descent seawards – was where warmth was sought to ripen grapes. Now, when the heat is on, the area is sought for its cool breezes, night current and temperature drops, to save the aromas and delicacy of the wines. Once this was an area of head-trained black and white grapes: bombino, camplese (a type of passerina), moscato, cococciola. The perfect microclimate is an excellent attraction for new winemakers, who settle here alongside established wineries that were already embarked on promoting local production. This district offers some of the best Cerasuolo, refined Montepulcianos, complex Pecorinos. The Peligna district is no less, refining and honing the muscle in its mighty wines.



8. Casauria and Vestini: Olives Oil the Path Through Abruzzo's Vines.

There will be sound reasons if Torre de' Passeri is considered the "mother" of modern Abruzzo winemaking, guiding us from ancient history to the modern day and then into the future. The same sound reasons that underpin the creation of standards that led Casauria to becoming a Montepulciano d'Abruzzo DOC subzone (rubbing shoulders, as it were, with the Tirino subzone). So we can start from Casauria to travel a route that connects two of the Region's glories. If we take the northeast diagonal, leaving Bolognaro (and one of Abruzzo's most renowned vineyard areas) behind us, we find Cugnoli above, with Manoppello and Serramonacesca lower down, and we bump into the "dritta", the legendary olive cultivar that arrived here thousands of years ago, from Greece. Thus the scenario for a love match between great wine and great extra virgin olive oil was sponsored by the inhabitants of the Vestino district. No coincidence then, that we have another certified subzone on our hands, but defined with scathing wit by the residents as the "land of oil backsides", to endorse the abundance of oil that is an existential constant and has brought renown. The triangle lies above Cepagatti, opening from Pianella to Moscufo, and with Loreto Aprutino on the western tip. The important

entries in the world's wine guides for this little town are no secret: it was a forerunner of today's montepulciano and trebbiano hordes, it is the home to key figures and success stories in Abruzzo winemaking. Its role was then consolidated by new players and producers, whose widespread – and healthy – commitment was to bottle and label what had previously been the anonymous but vital core of other people's wines.