Abruzzi and Molise

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In a nutshell: Good-value and improving reds.

Main grapes: Montepulciano (red); Trebbiano (white).

These wild, hilly, eastern regions on the Adriatic coast of Italy between the Marche and Puglia are arguably Italy's most isolated, and those few who manage to produce exciting wine from the overhead trellises and two grape varieties that dominate production here are to be congratulated.

The two grape varieties officially sanctioned here are the Montepulciano (also planted in the Marche) for red wines and a local Trebbiano, called Trebbiano d'Abruzzo and also known as Bombino Bianco. In general, the red wines here have a great deal more character than the whites, even if most of them are the none-too-demanding, but keenly-priced produce of the local co-operatives.

In the hands of the late, near-fanatical Eduardo Valentini, however, **Montepulciano d'Abruzzo** has become a cult wine: deep, dense, brooding and capable of becoming yet more interesting after many years in bottle. His trick is much lower yields than average and extreme selection, sending the great majority of his crop to a co-op and choosing only the very best grapes for the wines carrying his label. If his red is exceptional, his **Trebbiano d'Abruzzo** stands even higher above the norm, another concentrated essence of subtlety that can be aged for at least as long as a fine white burgundy. Other Abruzzo producers are beginning to present a challenge to his reds.

In Molise, the pace-setter is Di Majo Norante, a family concern that began following organic methods years before they became fashionable (and another of Cotarella's clients). The best wines are made from Montepulciano and the great red and white grapes Aglianico, Fiano, Falanghina and Greco of southern Italy.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is usually keenly priced relative to its warmth and flavour. The best wines come from the hills around Teramo and **Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Colline Terrame** has been awarded its own DOCG.