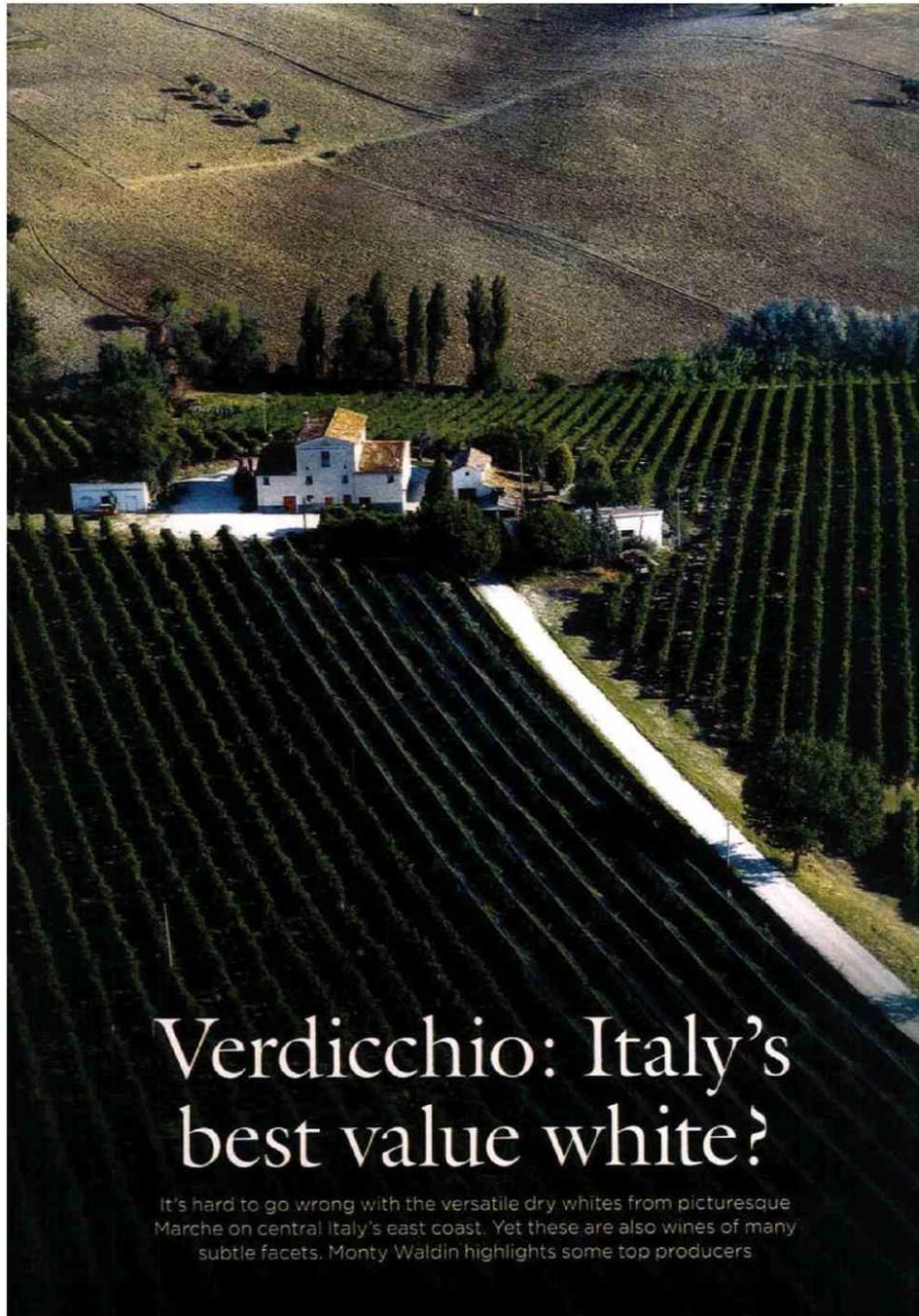




► 1 febbraio 2017





IF ASKED TO design an Italian white wine grape for those who are super-decisive when choosing clothes, wallpaper or even a dressing for their salad, but whose indecision becomes overwhelming when selecting a white wine with a label unfamiliar to them, then Verdicchio is as safe a bet as they come.

Verdicchio – pronounced ‘Ver-dik-ee-oh’ rather than ‘Ver-ditch-ee-oh’ – is grown in three north-easterly Italian regions. In Soave in the Veneto, it is barely even a bit-part player, relegated to the toughest, windiest sites because growers there don’t trust it enough to stay rot-free. Next door in Lugana, however, Verdicchio has become arguably Italy’s most ambitiously priced dry white. This is because Lugana’s Verdicchio (called Turbiana locally) grows right next to Lake Garda, a huge draw for wealthy German day-trippers, who load their cars with wine before returning home.

Luckily, Verdicchio vines were taken from Lugana and Soave around 400 years ago and planted by traders and migrants re-populating abandoned land further south, in the Marche region along Italy’s Adriatic coast.

### Aiming for perfection

Marche has two distinct areas for Verdicchio, which centre on the hilltop towns of Matelica inland in the hills and Jesi (pronounced ‘Yay-zee’) closer to the coast (*see box*). Jesi Verdicchio is called Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, because of the medieval fortifications that characterise it and its surrounding towns.

The rolling, hilly terrain is essentially a former seabed sculpted by local rivers. ‘The result is soil that is very rich in nutrients,’ says Lorenzo Marotti Campi of the Marotti Campi winery in Jesi. ‘This means our Verdicchio grapes ripen easily. But the trick is to ensure balance, by picking Verdicchio at the right time, with ripe flavours of white field flowers and lightly salted almonds. Overripe grapes create heaviness and too much alcohol.’ His Salmariano, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi bottling is a wonderful example of how rich but smoothly proportioned Verdicchio can be.

Fabio Marchionni of Collestefano in the notably cooler, inland Matelica sub-zone is equally obsessed with picking every bunch perfectly ripe. Marchionni started his garage-style operation from scratch, with only 3.5ha

**Left: the Colle del Sole winery owned by Monte Schiavo, one of the larger Verdicchio producers**

(hectares) of vines. While working in Germany and Alsace he learned that returning to pick the same vine plot piecemeal over a period of days or even weeks allows every bunch to be picked perfectly ripe.

Marchionni then learned to press the grapes as they do in Champagne, meaning as gently as possible, to avoid any bitterness. ‘I aim for Verdicchio that’s crisp but tastes neither green nor unripe,’ Marchionni says. His Verdicchios combine textural depth with extraordinary levity and have the kind of nervy, crystalline smoothness and intensity that demonstrate both Matelica’s claim to greatness and why Verdicchio can justifiably claim to be Italy’s premier native white grape.

White wine grapes aspiring to greatness

need other attributes, such as an ability to age and develop beautifully in oak, in bottle or in both. ‘Verdicchio ticks all of those boxes,’ says Ampelio Bucci, Verdicchio’s elder statesman and another of Italy’s greatest white wine growers (as opposed to white wine makers).

Bucci created what became Verdicchio’s oak-aged riserva category in the early 1980s when he installed vats made of Slavonian oak, holding between 6,600 and 10,000 bottles. His observation that ‘commercially it was hard being the first in the market with this idea’ is a delightful understatement, given the tide of stainless steel and French oak barrels that were flushing out the historic oak vats from Italy’s wineries at that time.

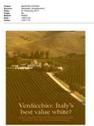
Bucci swam against this tide, arguing: ‘Large oak vats allowed my Verdicchio to taste not of oak but of Verdicchio, or the Marche. And by allowing the wine to breathe, the oak sets the wine up for a strong, healthy life once inside the bottle.’ The producer’s top-end Villa Bucci Riserva Verdicchios easily retain their mouthwateringly waxy texture for a decade or two, as reviving as Mâconnais Chardonnay but with a more diverse payload of savoury-smooth white and yellow fruits on the mid-palate.

### Progressive thinking

But decade-old Verdicchios, however youthful-tasting, are only ever going to be a niche. The kind of wines everyday consumers are likely to find most easily, and most affordably, will tend to come from the half-dozen or so Verdicchio producers with a million or more bottles to sell each year, such as Fazi-Battaglia (creator of Verdicchio’s iconic amphora bottle), Monte Schiavo, and Garofoli as well as from ➤

### Verdicchio at a glance

- Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi and Verdicchio di Matelica both come from 85% minimum Verdicchio grapes
- Warmed by the Adriatic sea, Jesi Verdicchios are mellow, yellow-fruited whites with a salty twist
- With no coastal influence, Matelica Verdicchios get their pristine white fruit flavours from cool mountain breezes
- Jesi produces around 23 million bottles annually. It is 10 times bigger than Matelica
- Dry still whites predominate. Fully sparkling (spumante) and still sweet white (passito) wines are permitted
- The producer’s name is a surer indication of quality than terms like riserva, classico or superiore
- 120 Verdicchio producers make 5,000 bottles or more annually
- 5% of Marche Verdicchio is exported



co-operatives such as Moncaro Terre Cortesi and Colonnara – 4% of the Marche's Verdicchio comes from co-ops, and these two are widely regarded as among Italy's very best.

Colonnara, founded in 1959, led the way in making terroir-specific Verdicchios such as its waxy-crisp Cuprese (after Cupramontana, the town in which the winery is located) from 1985, and the more tangerine-like Tufico from a vineyard on sandy-clay or *tuff* (rhymes with 'roof') soils from 1998.

Moncaro Terre Cortesi has spent the last 15 years investing in its grape growers, helping many to go organic despite organics usually meaning lower grape yields, when the whole point – usually – of co-ops is to have growers grow as much as they can, and then some.

Marche in fact leads Italy for organics, with 2% of its wine production (rather than its vineyard surface area) organic. This is due to Marche being a latecomer to agricultural industrialisation, its population having barely increased since the 1950s, and it being off the beaten track in terms of motorway access.

'Organics make sense,' asserts Alessandro Fenino of biodynamic Pievalta winery in Jesi. 'You get smaller Verdicchio grapes with thicker skins. They prevent rot in autumn when mists roll in from the Adriatic. Thicker skins let you pick later for greater ripeness and flavour.'

### Individual brilliance

Pievalta has a patchwork of vines and makes two single terroir wines: the earlier-ripening Pievalta from sites near the Adriatic, and the

San Paolo from a higher, cooler site further inland. The wines reflect the differences in taste each site provides.

Corrado Dottori of the organic La Distesa winery in Jesi believes that terroir-driven wines like his single-vineyard Verdicchio Gli Eremi, which comes from a sunny slope in a cool valley, are a 'logical step for smaller producers'. Such smaller-scale producers make Verdicchio from unique single sites with distinct taste characteristics, and, says Dottori: 'They reveal the incredible range of subtle shades Verdicchio has, not just between the inland Matelica and more maritime Jesi

sub-regions, but even between wines from the same town.'

For example, Dottori explains that there are 25 towns in the Jesi area. 'Each has Verdicchio vines facing all four points of the compass, and the vineyards are rarely on flat ground but on slopes. This topographical matrix means that each vineyard has its own air currents and that each vine will have a different relationship to the sun to that of its neighbour,' he says.

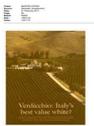
He believes this drives the differences in mouthfeel, flavour and intensity of the grapes. 'Larger producers who buy in grapes from a wide range of vine plots will blend them together so that those different individual flavour characteristics are evened out,' he says.

The conclusion is that wines from the bigger producers should convince you of the brilliance of Verdicchio, the grape, in general; while wines from the smaller producers can

further reveal the brilliant individuality that Verdicchio can attain in the different villages of Matelica (eight) and Jesi (25) in which it is grown. Either way, Verdicchio appears to be as safe a bet as they come. **D**

*Monty Waldin is a wine writer, grower and consultant with a long-standing specialism in biodynamics and organics*

*'The topographical matrix means each vineyard has its own air currents and each vine will have a different relationship to the sun'* **Corrado Dottori, La Distesa**



► 1 febbraio 2017



Above: Corrado Dottori and Valeria Bochi from the organic La Distesa



## Waldin's top 11 Verdicchios from Marche



**Collestefano, Verdicchio di Matelica 2015** 96  
 £12 **Les Caves de Pyrene**  
 Crystalline Verdicchio, which is made from grapes that are hand-picked in multiple stages. The palate offers up layers of flavour from invigorating lime citrus, via softer greengage to soothing ripe watermelon. This is a wonderful, tongue-tingling wine, made to crunch slowly. Organic.  
**Drink** 2017-2025 **Alcohol** 12.5%

**Bucci, Villa Bucci, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Riserva 2013** 95  
 £31.99 **Hedonism**  
 Ampelio Bucci's flagship is a reviver for both body and spirit. It's like white

Burgundy in shape but more tactile, creamier and brighter fruited: a benchmark white style. I'd recommend you only chill it lightly when serving though. Organic.  
**Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13.5%



**Pievalta, San Paolo, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Riserva 2012** 95  
 £14.95 **Vintage Roots**  
 Pievalta's flagship Verdicchio comes from a cool, hilly site in inland Cupramontana with warm, friable soil. This is precise and clear, with salty notes. A refined, understated and pure example of Verdicchio, which also possesses reams of attractive citrus fruit character. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13%

**La Distesa, Gli Eremiti, Marche Bianco 2014** 94  
 £32 **Tutto**  
 Made from grapes grown in a vineyard that's a high, bowl-shaped suntrap in Cupramontana. It is this, and staggered picking to ensure perfect ripeness, that gives this Verdicchio its breadth and an almost exotic feel. Bottled as an IGT since 2013. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13%

**Pievalta, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2015** 93  
 £10.95 **Vintage Roots**  
 Pievalta's entry-level Verdicchio comes from a warmer, more Adriatic-influenced site than its San Paolo single-vineyard expression. This makes for a richer, more exotic but still savoury and intense wine. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%



Right: Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi from Fazi Battaglia winery

Photograph: Susy Mezzanotte/SIME/4Corners Images



► 1 febbraio 2017

**Andrea Felici, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2015** 92

£13.95 Latimer Vintners, Lea & Sandeman

A Verdicchio from Apiro, meaning that it's influenced more by the cool Apennine mountain winds than by the balmy Adriatic breezes. Has good, bright, creamy yellow fruit on the palate that shows beautiful width and mouthwatering precision. Organic. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13%



**Belisario, Vigneti B, Verdicchio di Matelica 2014** 92

£17.99 The Wine Reserve

Matelica's co-operative is Verdicchio di Matelica's largest producer. Its organic bottling shows an almost honeyed but still savoury note, thanks to the vines that face south in full sun. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Tenuta di Tavignano, Misco, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2015** 92

N/A UK [www.tenutaditavignano.it](http://www.tenutaditavignano.it)

Up-and-coming estate under Stefano Aymerich and Beatrice Lucangeli. Their Verdicchio combines youthful exuberance, old-vine waxiness and purity. In organic conversion. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14%



**Garofoli, Podium, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2012** 91

£26.03 (2013) Mondial

As consistent an unoaked Verdicchio as you'll find since its debut 1991 vintage. This always has almond and yellow citrus flavours and in warmer vintages like 2012, yellow peach too. Food-friendly and thirst-quenching. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 14%

**Casalfarneto, Grancasale, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2013** 90

N/A UK [www.casalfarneto.it](http://www.casalfarneto.it)

From a high, inland site (11km from the Adriatic), so picked late for extra ripeness. Vibrant almond and liquorice flavours across a creamy mouthfeel from ageing in large oak vats. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Umani Ronchi, Casal di Serra, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore 2015** 90

£12.50 Great Western Wine

Five months ageing on its yeast in tank (no oak) has accentuated the peachily seductive creaminess provided by naturally low-yielding vines grown on valley slopes. A really classy crowd-pleaser in the mood for food. Organic. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p104.*