



Enjoy the wines of

EMILIA- ROMAGNA

Italy



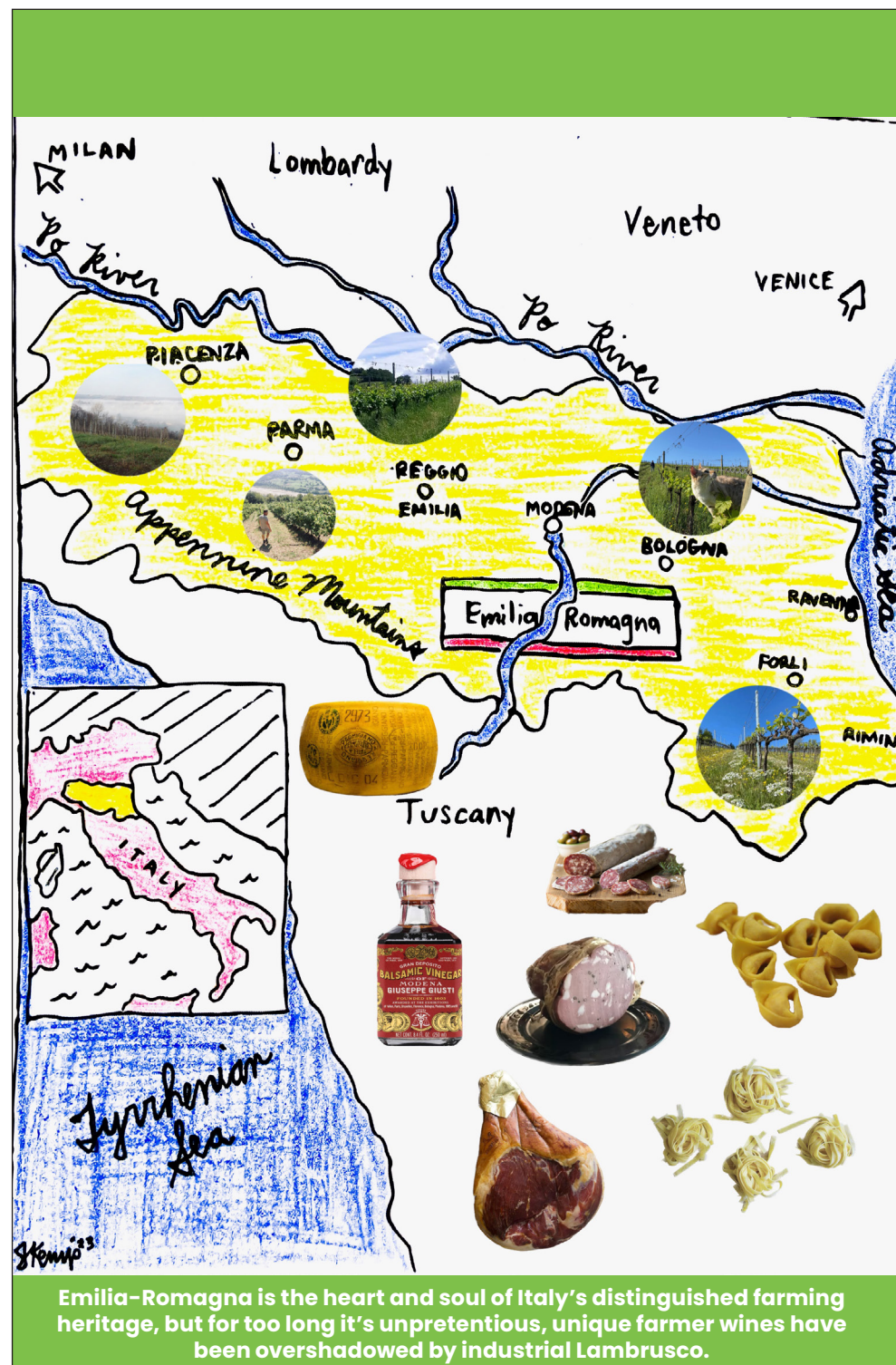
In conversations with people new to natural wine I often try to reframe wine as an agricultural craft instead of a luxury beverage. The mantra, ‘great wines are made in the vineyard,’ is used by many winemakers trying to challenge the technical innovations of the past century: from Roundup to reverse osmosis to any of the 72 chemical additives allowed in modern wine. Of course, not all innovation is useless—but much has removed the manual farming aspect from wine in lieu of slick, efficient production. As a result, brands have been able to maximize profits while covering up environmental abuse, and threaten the existence of independent growers who are motivated by less short term goals such as land stewardship, traditions, and community. I kind of doubt that most people drinking Dom Perignon or Whispering Angel are thinking about tractors, pruning, and weed management. Natural wine has done a lot to change this—and nowhere shows the strife between industrial and natural wine quite like Emilia-Romagna.

The heart and soul of Italy’s distinguished farming heritage and culinary tradition is Emilia-Romagna. The Po River that is the lifeblood of the region is the longest in Italy, and its valley and plains are the most fertile land in the country, providing about 35% of Italy’s agriculture. Unlike many wine regions in Europe, wine is pretty far down the list of notable culinary features of Emilia-Romagna. After all, it’s home to the best-known foods in Italy: Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano, Tagliatelle, Tortellini,

Prosciutto di Parma, Mortadella di Bologna, Culatello di Zibello, Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, and more. There are 19 D.O.P.’s—strictly regulated food categories that guarantee quality and origin—in Emilia-Romagna, the most in Italy. Wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano and legs of Prosciutto di Parma are bankable enough to secure loans, create black markets for thieves, and even be targets for immense, complex scams: for instance, the infamous 2017 Parma ham scandal. The wines of Emilia-Romagna have no such appeal to thieves, or even aspirational aristocrats. While you can easily find bottles of aged Balsamic vinegar for \$275, you’d be hard pressed to find wine from Emilia-Romagna for even \$75 at a shop in the U.S. The region is one of Italy’s wealthiest, so what gives?

Part of the explanation is that Emilia-Romagna is Italy’s farm-stand; the wines are best described as farmer wines. They are unpretentious, low alcohol, and easy to knock back with fatty foods. In addition to all the famous pork products, Emilia-Romagna is one of the few Italian regions where butter is typically used instead of olive oil. Often it’s said that the need to cut through all these rich foods is the reason much of the wines are lightly sparkling, but the fizz in these wines is a “gift from nature,” according to Elisabetta Montesissa, one of this month’s winemakers (Press 4 Red).

Giovanni Masini of Cà de Noci, another one of the winemakers featured this month (Press 2), explains, “we were born with bubbles because Lambrusco grapes ripen very late and the first fermentation almost never



Emilia-Romagna is the heart and soul of Italy’s distinguished farming heritage, but for too long it’s unpretentious, unique farmer wines have been overshadowed by industrial Lambrusco.

ABOVE MAP: JONATHAN KEMP & JEREMY HERNANDEZ
COVER ART AND LAYOUT: JEREMY HERNANDEZ

ends in autumn—but in the following spring when it is bottled. So Lambruscos are the first sparkling red wines in the world, because it happened naturally.” In other words, because the grapes were picked later in the year, the winter temperatures stopped fermentation before it was finished. By the time people were ready to drink the wines in the spring, they were still fermenting, resulting in bubbles. Either nobody had the patience to wait for the fermentation to complete, or they liked it—or both. Depending on when you took the wine out of the traditional glass demijohns, you would get something closer to Pet Nat on the early side and something faintly spritzy later on. Giovanni emphasizes that it was not only a result of stopped fermentation but an intentional process of people figuring out what tasted best. “Emilia is a land of passage for many cultures and I think the reason for the pairings [of

fizzy wines with fatty foods] is that they’ve been trying them for more than 2,000 years and over time those that gave the most satisfaction were created,” he says. “Excuse the simplicity, but it’s my personal hypothesis.” He has a point. The distinctive wines and the foods of Emilia-Romagna exist in a beautiful symbiosis like few other places in the world. This was not an accident, but perhaps it wasn’t any more complicated than making what tasted best.

Lambrusco, easily the most recognizable wine from the region, is named from the Latin *labruscum*, meaning ‘fruit of the wild grape,’ and is derived from the same root as *Vitis labrusca*, one of the wild North American hybrid species featured last month. Though we are actually not featuring any Lambrusco this month, the grape and the wine

named after it are foundational to understanding Emilia-Romagna’s wines. Lambrusco started out growing wild in Emilia-Romagna and was cultivated by the Etruscans. And yet the fizzy, farmer juice made from this feral grape somehow was manipulated into one of the most industrial wines produced in the world. Brands like Riunite still make Lambrusco (and other wines) in factories the size of airplane hangars at the pace of 211 million bottles a year, making it the biggest wine producer in Italy. Cheap, sweet, purple-soda Lambrusco was one of the exceptions as the world export market moved towards higher quality wines in the 1970s and 1980s. Driven in large part by American and German consumers, it went from a wine that paired with local cuisine to something so confectionary it was better by itself. Lambrusco’s evolution has much in common with the way Georges Duboeuf and others wreaked environmental havoc and brought down the reputation of Beaujolais during the same time period.

Yet, just as Ohio’s polluted Cuyahoga River caught fire 14 times before igniting the modern environmental movement, the excesses and ecological abuses of Riunite and Duboeuf sparked the fire that is today’s natural wine movement. So it’s really no coincidence that Emilia-Romagna, like Beaujolais, is home to some of natural wine’s leading lights, including La Stoppa (Direct Press March 2023), Saetti (Direct Press June 2022), and Giovanni and Alberto Masini of Cà de Noci, the brothers who were perhaps the earliest to fight for the pre-industrial legacy of Emilia-Romagna. “I can say that in 1993 when we started making wine we also started a

cultural revolution: a return to our origins to focus on families and quality,” says Giovanni. “The prices that we have chosen are only linked to the real cost of making wine; not with fashion, not with success, not with upward speculation.” Cà de Noci has been critical to the survival of other grapes that have been growing wild in Emilia-Romagna for thousands of years, like Spergola, Termarina, and Sgavetta. These would be extinct without the Masini brothers.

“I don’t think that natural wine has influenced Emilia-Romagna,” says Elisabetta Montesissa. “I think it’s the other way around. Piacenza, my province, has always had a ‘peasant’ wine production for very local consumption. Today the so-called natural wine [movement] is simply that the farmer’s peasant wine has taken on enough dignity that many young people have started making wine and taking it to a bigger market, making us known in many countries.” I love Elisabetta’s use of the word *dignity* since it highlights the proud connections to a unique history and community that are essential to the survival of small family farms—things that are threatened by industrial airplane hangar wine. Until the 1970s, most of the region was dotted with polycultural family farms where everyone made their own wine, and it probably wasn’t bottled unless an enterprising farmer was selling it to their local *osteria*. We are lucky that this was recent enough that the peasant traditions of Emilia-Romagna were not lost, but carried on with dignity by Elisabetta, Giovanni, and the other winemakers featured this month.



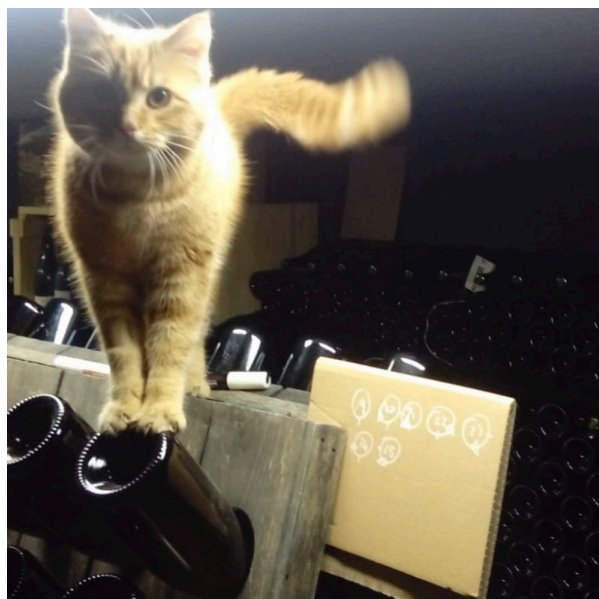
The Riunite production facility in Campegine, Reggio Emilia. Riunite is by far the biggest producer in Italy, with the closest competitor some 100 million bottles behind.

Emilia-Romagna covers a huge range of topography and culture that we can barely scratch the surface of. There are mountainous regions bordering the longest stretch of Apennines in Italy and have more in common with Piemonte. There are cities like Bologna, its capital, home to the oldest university in the world, whose left-leaning mortadella-hungry students earned Bologna the nickname ‘La Dotta, La Rossa, La Grassa,’ or ‘The Learned, The Red, The Fat,’ (sounds better in Italian). Ravenna, on the Adriatic coast, is home to crowded beaches and further down the coast are the more working-class environs of Rimini, featured in native son Federico Fellini’s 1973 film *Amarcord*. All the world knows names of Emilia-Romagna natives like Ferrari, Ducati, Verdi, and Pavarotti; all the world is comforted by the satiating recipes that have been written there, the abundance of culinary delights that flow from its borders. It is high time the wines of Emilia-Romagna are given their due, too. The gulf that exists between industrial Riunite Lambrusco, and, say, Saccomani Gutturmo (Press 4 Mix/Red) highlights precarious extremes that exist in the region. Yet it also vividly illustrates choices. Do we want our traditions and culture dominated by a few corporate entities or spread out among many voices with myriad stories, passions, and personalities? A few winemakers in Emilia-Romagna started making that choice a few decades ago. Who knows how many more will follow?

Salute!

Jonathan Kemp

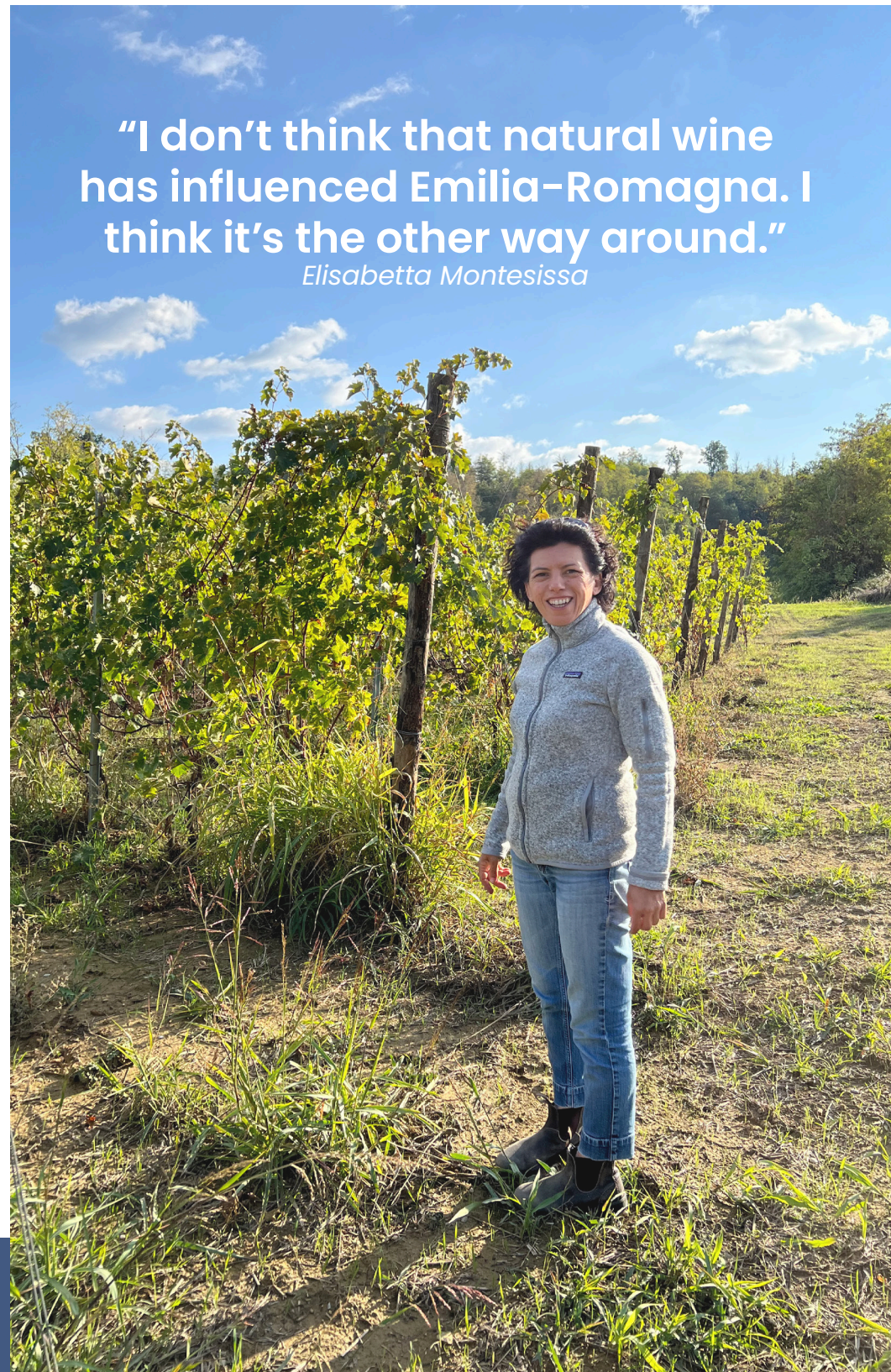
Special thanks to Elisabetta Montesissa, Giovanni Masini, Jules Dressner, and Logan Davis



Sparkling wines in riddling racks at Cà de Noci. Feline helpers like Leo, pictured above, are not allowed at Riunite—yet another reason to support independent family wineries.

“I don’t think that natural wine has influenced Emilia-Romagna. I think it’s the other way around.”

Elisabetta Montesissa



Filarole 'Fatto Coi Piedi'
Vino Bianco NV
Emilia-Romagna • Italy
Press 4 Mix/White

Filarole translates to “a couple of rows, a small vineyard” in the local Piacenza dialect, which is fitting as this is a very small-scale, family run operation. The estate was started by wife and husband team Barbara and Paolo Pulliero, who left the city to pursue a rural life and make pure expressive wines. They are self-taught and revitalized the old vines on their property that had been overgrown and neglected for years. These were the traditional grapes of the area: Malvasia Aromatica di Candia and Ortruga for the skin contact white wines, Barbera and Bonarda for the red wines.

Fatto Coi Piedi translates to “made with feet,” referring to the traditional foot-stomping of the grapes they employ to make this wine. It highlights the striking Malvasia di Candia Aromatica, a grape variety found only near Piacenza. It is a thick-skinned, very aromatic grape, which turns out to be perfect for a skin-contact wine. The blend in this cuvee is 35% Malvasia di Candia Aromatica, 35% Ortruga, 25% Trebbiano, and 5% mixed indigenous varieties. The age of vines is 50 years, on average.

The grapes are hand harvested in small crates, selected, then crushed, and fermented using only indigenous yeast. Maceration takes 21 – 30 days with frequent punch-downs. The wine is aged in fiberglass tanks until bottling in the spring. No fining, filtration, or added sulfur.

This is a bright and intense white wine with stunning aromas of white flowers, high-toned citrus, and a bit of spice. I found it to be quite saline, with a good amount of minerality, and tannins. This structure, concentrated aromatics, and length make it a strong contender for pairing with similarly complex dishes like saffron risotto, cured or raw fish, and spicy Asian dishes—particularly curries. *Jeremy Hernandez*



Barbara Pulliero

Croci 'Lubigo' Vino Frizzante
Bianco 2021
Emilia-Romagna • Italy
Press 4 Mix/White

Croci is a small estate, currently run by *vignaiolo* Massimiliano Croci whose grandfather started the estate in 1935. They, too, hail from the hills around Piacenza, just east of Lombardy. Milk was originally the main focus of the farm until 1970 when Massimiliano's father realized they couldn't compete on the same level with industrial farms, and switched to wine production exclusively. Today it is still just 16 hectares

with only about half of that planted to vines. The rest of the property is used for dairy cows, grain, hay, and pasture, and production is about 40,000 bottles a year. Their vineyards and winery are located in the Val Arda, named after a small tributary of the tremendous Po River. Their plots are mainly steep hill-sides of old vines at 250-300 meters of elevation on soils made of loose sand full of fossilized, limestone-rich seashells (evidence of a time when the land was once an ocean floor) and red clay. The vines are farmed entirely organically and harvested by hand.



Rainbow over the Piacenza hills at Croci

In the 1980's Croci tried to compete with modern wineries by switching to *charmat* method, where the wines get their bubbles in an enormous steel tank, like Prosecco. When Massimiliano assumed management of the estate in 1999 he observed that the more traditional method of re-fermenting in bottle instead of tank held up better and showcased the expressiveness of the land far better, so he switched back. Croci now uses the anachronistic but traditional “low and slow” approach, where the first spontaneous fermentation stops in the winter and continues fermentation in the spring as it warms up.

Croci's 'Lubigo' (translation = landslide) is 100% Ortruga from a steep, southeast-facing vineyard referred to as a “beach” due to the aforementioned sandy soils full of fossils. The grapes see 1-2 weeks of skin-contact, and the wine is bottled unfiltered with a small addition of sulfur in the springtime before the wine starts to ferment again, generally around Easter and always during a waning moon. Re-fermentation takes an-

other 8-10 months, at which point the wine is fully dry and a little sparkling—less than your average Pet-Nat. It's bottled with a cork, which takes a bit of elbow

grease to remove because of the pressure from the bubbles, but it will be worth the effort.

This wine is both funky and incredibly refreshing. There's a grippy minerality, and it reminded me of a farmhouse ale or *Saison*. Youthful with notes of just-bitten apple, meyer lemon, stewed pineapples, and salty cheeses. Picture yourself lazing down a cross-town river in a boat with fresh cut fruits, pecorino, and *tarte tatin* laid out around you.

Jeremy Hernandez & Demi Elder

**Chiara Condello Sangiovese
Predappio Romagna 2020
Emilia-Romagna • Italy**
Press 4 Mix/Red

Chiara Condello is a young winemaker located in Predappio, a town in the southeast corner of Emilia-Romagna. Predappio is specifically in the Romagna region which, until the unification of Italy in the mid 19th century, was completely distinct in history, culture and dialect from Emilia. Chiara's estate totals seven hectares of which about five hectares are dedicated to Sangiovese and the rest are split between woods and olive trees. Chiara's family also makes wine in Predappio, but she makes wines in her own distinctive way with her own vines and cellar.

Predappio is one of 12 villages that gives their name to a Sangiovese subzone and is located in the foothills of the Apennines which are characterized by a sedimentary soil known as *spungone*—relatively young at three million years old. It is notable for containing abundant, intact shells of marine life, is chunky and porous, and held together by a calcareous sandstone “cement.”

This wine is 100% Sangiovese from three plots ranging between 150m and 350m above sea level. The vine age here is approximately 40 years. The grapes are destemmed but not crushed, leaving the whole berries intact. It's then aged for a year in large Slovenian *botti*. The result is Sangiovese with substance, edge and clarity. Dusty rose, cherry, and cocoa



Chiara Condello

powder on the nose. The palate is a firm yet nuanced blend of cherry, plum, and cocoa powder with supple tannin structure and a satiating length. Some claim that Emilia-Romagna is actually Sangiovese's native land—not Tuscany—and tasting Chiara's wines there is an essential vitality I find that makes me want to believe it. *Jeremy Hernandez*

**Saccomani 'Gutturnio'
Frizzante Vino Rosso 2021
Emilia-Romagna • Italy**
Press 4 Mix/Red

In the Piacenza hills, red clay and fossilized shells help create wines with an extra structure and mineral backbone. Luckily there are also growers like Claudia and Luca Saccomani who use the traditional refermentation in bottle method, which they feel best captures these elements in the soil and allows them to speak through the wine. They are continuing work their grandfather Giuseppe began in the 1940s, though he started out just growing table grapes. By the early 2000s, they were growing Otrugo, Malvasia di Candia, Croatina, and Barbera completely without chemicals. They've never used any additives in the cellar.

'Gutturno' is a wine long associated with Piacenza, and by law it must be a mix of Barbera and Croatina. The Saccomani version is a very typical blend of 60% Barbera, 40% Croatina, made in the time-honored tradition

of bottling it while it's still fermenting to give it a bit of fizz. Blueberry, raspberry, and cherry cola are topped off with notes of sage and savory minerals to create something quite unique but undoubtedly refreshing. There's just enough chewy complexity to help this match the earthy umami of fried porcini, ragù, or roast guinea hen. Serve it with a slight (or not so-slight) chill.

Jonathan Kemp

**Montesissa 'Rio Mora' Emilia
Rosso Frizzante 2020**

Emilia-Romagna • Italy
Press 4 Red

Elisabetta Montesissa is following in the footsteps—though maybe not foot stomps—of her grandfather. “My grandad pressed with his feet, now we have a machine to do it,” she says. “My grandad

bottled without doing analyses. Now we do analyses on the residual sugar. These are the only differences. I've always lived among vineyards and in agriculture. My grandad and my father have always farmed this way. We have been working for three generations to farm our soils respecting the biological cycles, so we can protect the environment and safeguard the health of consumers. We also farm cereals (particularly traditional grains that we use to produce flour and pasta), corn and others arable lands for animal's alimentation and to consent a good soil rotation. As for the wine, we have always done it as we do it now,



without the use of chemistry in the vineyards and in the cellar.”

Her ‘Rio Mora’ is another lightly sparkling red wine from Piacenza, a style that is pretty irresistible once you have it with the right food. A blend of Barbera and Bonarda (aka Croatina) with zero sulfur added, it is proudly rustic, with barnyard aromas that accompany lively blueberry and cured meat notes. The Barbera gives it bright acidity and the Bonarda provides a mineral, tannic backbone to create a wine that is refreshing, complex, and could not be duplicated anywhere else in the world. Elisabetta says, “traditionally it goes well with important meat dishes such as roasts and braised meats, but also with stuffed pasta and vegetables. It can be a perfect accompaniment for hamburgers or a very stuffed pizza.”

Jonathan Kemp

Scandelara Vino Rosso 2021 **Emilia-Romagna • Italy** *Press 4 Red*

Mattia Donini wanted to make use of his family’s vines about 15 minutes outside of Bologna so he got to work after attending oenology school and working in Burgundy, New Zealand, and Argentina. The property is 50 hectares of forest, pastures, lakes, and vegetable gardens, with only 3.5 hectares under vine. Everything is farmed organically with some biodynamic practices.

This 100% Barbera comes from soils that are mostly clay and limestone with some big rocks and chalk mixed in. Partial whole cluster fermentation and zero added sulfur gives this a playful suggestion of spritz without

any actual bubbles. Otherwise this is a substantial wine with lots of juicy, ripe black plum, violets, black cherry, and a heaping of chewy tannins. Lively acids from the Barbera keep this formidable wine zippy and versatile. The mix of dark depths, vivid clarity, and feral energy is intensely satisfying. *Jonathan Kemp*

Crocizia ‘Znestra’ Malvasia **Emilia 2020** **Emilia-Romagna • Italy** *Press 4 White*

Crocizia is in an area outside of Parma that is not especially known for its vineyards. Yet Marco, Sara, and Aurelio Rizzardi found an abandoned farm with vines deep in the woods at 1640 ft of elevation and decided to restore it. The vines were never sprayed with chemicals in the previous 50 years and the Rizzardis have continued to farm them organically since they began in 2003. They are deeply committed to taking care of their woodland paradise and using the pre-industrial traditional method of making lightly sparkling wines.

‘Znestra’ is more or less a Pet-Nat made from Malvasia di Candia Aromatica, a special grape of Emilia-Romagna. It is extra-floral but Crocizia’s example is beautifully complex with dusty lavender, tangerine, and layers of mouth-coating chalky detail. There’s an amazing umami on the finish that is haunting and soulful. Three days of skin contact and zero sulfur added.

Jonathan Kemp

Croci ‘Valtolla’ Bianco 2021 **Emilia-Romagna • Italy**

Massimiliano Croci has been at the helm of his family’s estate since 1999 and in those years he has made Croci into one of the most important names in natural wine, helping to guide others who also wanted to turn back the clock on many of the traditions that were being lost to in a homogenous sea of modernization and standardization that began in the

concentration and tannin—all while staying light and refreshing. You can certainly taste the land, as there is a distinctive iron tang that reflects the iron-rich clay soils where it is grown, a parcel Massi prefers for still wines.

Jonathan Kemp & Jeremy Hernandez

Cà de Noci ‘Le Rose’ Bianco **Frizzante Emilia 2021** **Emilia-Romagna • Italy** *Press 2*



The Saccomani family

1980s. Using modern methods like charmat and filtration, Massi says, “the wines could be from anywhere.” With the older techniques, “you taste the land.” So he went back to working the way his grandfather did in the 1930s.

Valtolla is a still wine from Malvasia di Candia. It spends 30 days on the skins and 10 months aging in concrete. Creamy citrus notes pop out of the glass on first pouring. You’re then met with jasmine flowers, green tea, a hint of Sunny Delight, bright citrus oils freshly squeezed from the peels, a pop of spice, and intense

Natural wine would not be where it is today without people willing to go against the grain back when there were few others to provide examples. Brothers Giovanni and Alberto Masini were truly outliers back in 1993. “We have not been influenced by people but by the call of nature, which demanded

respect; and by society, which demanded a revolution to react to the wine industry,” Giovanni explained to me. “The birth of mass production social cooperatives in 1900 made it possible to transform this region. The families that made wine began to sell the grapes to the large wineries to lower production costs—but this began a continuous decline in the quality of the wines, and it risked extinguishing the families that made wine.” It also risked extinguishing the nearly 100 autochthonous grape varieties that once existed in the region, and the Masini brothers have worked hard to keep some of these

alive: Spergola, Malbo Gentile, Montericco, and others that few have ever heard of.

'Le Rose,' is an orange *frizzante* wine made from Malvasia di Candia, not an obscure grape but a fabulously delicious one. There is a very short skin maceration and the wine undergoes a secondary fermentation kicked off with the same vintage's grape must to give it some mild bubbles. It is certainly floral due to the Malvasia, but this is matched with funky *Saison* notes and lots of texture to sink your teeth into. It's an ethereal, joyful wine that feels truly original. According to Giovanni, their wines "have very original tastes because they do not

come from crossings with international varieties but were born and cultivated only here. In the glass you can also feel more because the fermentations are made with yeasts indigenous grown from our countryside." As for food pairings? "Le Rose is very fond of young Parmigiano Reggiano but also of Pancetta," says Giovanni.

Jonathan Kemp

Mutiliana 'Ibbola'
Sangiovese Romagna
Modigliana 2019

Emilia-Romagna • Italy

Press 2

Sangiovese is so identified with Tuscany it would be forgivable to

overlook the Sangiovese being grown over the border in Romagna, where it has nearly as long of a history, if not longer. Yet only recently have more growers been taking advantage of the region's potential. High up in the Apennines on clay and marl soils, the subzone of Modigliana is an exceptional place for Sangiovese, where it can ripen slowly and benefit from the extra acidity it gets from the elevation. Giorgio Melandri is a wine journalist who has been slowly transitioning to full-time cellar master and grower, but his instincts and training are already of a very high level and he has an acute eye for detail. Apparently he waits to press his

wines until he can taste the sensation of the exact flowers and herbs that he noted growing in the vineyards during the summer. 'Ibbola' comes from his steepest, highest-elevation plot, in a dramatic, narrow valley exposed to the elements and surrounded by forest at nearly 2000 feet. It's a nervy and spicy wine with sagey, brooding layers of serious, detailed tannins. There is a lot of energy and tension that comes from the interplay of opulent power, rustic irreverence, and a fine-tuned razor's edge of snappy acidity. Fermented in steel and aged in concrete. Only 200 cases produced. Drink now or age for 8-10 years.

Jonathan Kemp



**Giovanni and
Alberto Masini of
Cà de Noci**



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