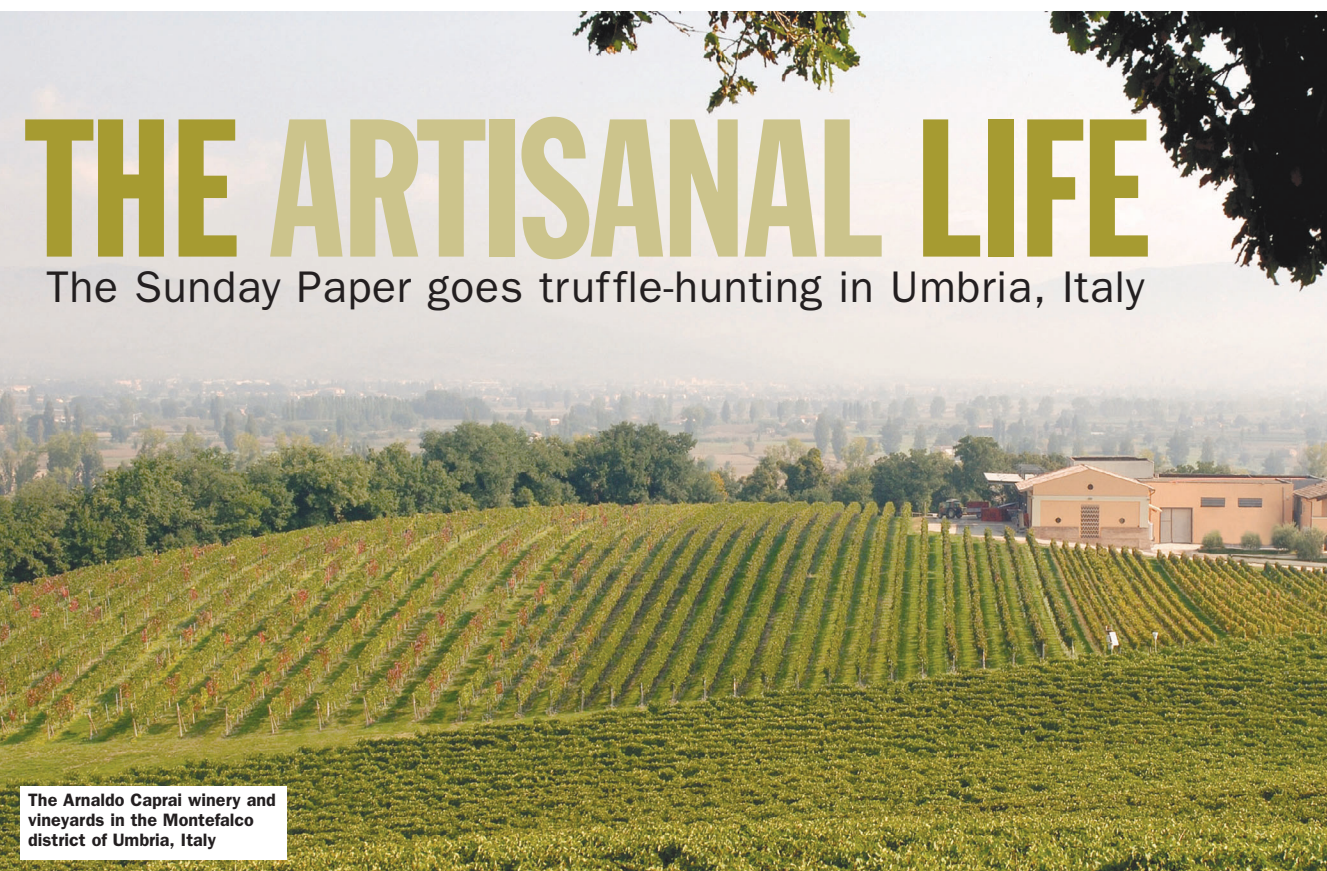


THE ARTISANAL LIFE

The Sunday Paper goes truffle-hunting in Umbria, Italy



The Arnaldo Caprai winery and vineyards in the Montefalco district of Umbria, Italy

COURTESY OF ARNALDO CAPRAI

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

You don't have to be a sports fan to understand team rivalry. But Georgia v. Florida is nothing compared to the rivalry between neighboring villages in Umbria, Italy. "I'm from Bevagna," explains our guide Analita Polticchia as we navigate the cobbled streets of her birthplace. "My husband is from Foligno. My friends say, 'Poor you, you married a foreigner!'" I'm astounded. After all, the two villages are a mere five miles apart. She laughs and explains that traditions endure in the walled medieval townships and then demonstrates how she and her husband even pronounce certain words differently; though I can't speak Italian, the variation is distinct. But when it comes to food, Umbrians put their differences aside and celebrate flavor.

TRAVEL At Da Tagliavento, an artisanal butcher shop in Bevagna where sausages hang like thick drapes from ceiling hooks, I'm treated to an impromptu antipasto plate after explaining that I've just stopped in for a look since I can't take meat through customs to the U.S. Married co-owners Marco Biagetti and Rosita Cariani, who are third- and fourth-generation meat producers, want me to taste it—even if I can't buy it. As I bite into savory slices of *coppa* (pork remnants boiled with gelatin and orange rind) and *porchetta* (a whole pig roasted with fennel and herbs), they haul various cuts of meat from their back room to prove that their products are all-natural. "No preservatives," says Cariani (through Polticchia, who translates).

Depending on the variety, meats sit in salt or rest on hooks to mature for up to one year. They are then wrapped in thick brown paper and dried or ground into sausages. While cut and processing techniques make the difference between prosciutto and pancetta, other factors, like the pigs' diet and weather during the meat's aging period, can mean that no two prosciuttos taste alike. "Details make the difference," says Cariani, emphasizing that what I taste in Umbria will be unique.

When I share my culinary travel plans, my new friends are thrilled, even if it does take me into other villages. An olive oil tasting at Luigi Tega in Foligno the next day begins like a wine tasting, with a sniff of the glass. My first whiff is a mind-blowing revelation. If the extra-virgin olive oil typically stocked in my home pantry smells like a deciduous tree in winter, this one is like a spring wildflower garden—the fruit notes are intense and intoxicating. No wonder Umbrians drizzle the stuff over nearly everything they eat, from their regional unsalted bread to pasta and roasted meats. Tega, a third-generation producer, has won several awards, including "best olive oil in the world." Not knowing when I might return, I want to stuff as many bottles as I can into my luggage. But Tega says that it won't keep indefinitely: "The best thing to do is buy fresh olive oil every year." I take the advice as an invitation to return.

Next stop, truffles. When it comes to truffle-hunting, a dog is still man's best friend—contrary to popular belief, pigs haven't been used for truffle hunts for more than 100 years because "dogs are easier to move and train," says Romina Papperini of Urbani Tartufi in

Perugia, who adds, "Pigs are very good at finding truffles—even better than dogs—but it's more probable that pigs will eat what they find." As we walk through damp woods behind truffle hunter Luigi, his well-trained mutt, Diana, zigs and zags with her nose to the ground. Umbria is "best known all over the world for the *tuber melanosporum vitt*, or black winter truffle," says Papperini. The culinary treasure seems to be in abundant supply: Diana unearths an average of one a minute and rushes them back to her owner.

Despite its delicious regional specialties, Umbria has long been overshadowed by Tuscany in the world marketplace. But an indigenous grape could change that: Sagrantino is genetically unique to the Montefalco district of Umbria, and its vino is taking the wine world by storm. Marco Caprai, a winemaker who took charge of his family's Arnaldo Caprai wine estate in 1989 at age 21, produces balanced, rich, complex wines from this grape. His wines pair well with food—whether that food is prepared at a restaurant in Umbria or at home in Atlanta.

During my visit, Caprai does something that no other winemaker I've met has done: He pours samples of his Sagrantino alongside several from neighboring wineries for me to taste. This way I can best learn the unique characteristics of the grape, he explains. It's a generous, thrilling opportunity that not only shows he's confident in his winemaking skills—he is the undisputed leader in the production of Sagrantino di Montefalco wines, and with good reason—but also that pride in Umbria trumps competition. **SP**

Villages in Umbria are composed of a complex web of picturesque streets and alleyways.



HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Marco Caprai, winemaker



COURTESY OF ARNALDO CAPRAI

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Delta offers direct flights to Rome. The drive to Umbria is about an hour.

WHERE TO STAY

Villa Pambuffetti Hotel, www.villapambuffetti.com.

WHERE TO EAT

Il Bacco Felice, www.ilbaccofelice.it.

MORE INFORMATION

Travel agency and tour operator Vade Feliciter, www.vadefeliciter.com. Arnaldo Caprai Winery, www.arnaldocaprai.it.