

# Trade secret

The hillsides of Marche hold many secrets, among them the complexity and ageability of well-made Verdicchio. Tom Hyland finds himself intrigued as he explores the region

‘VERDICCHIO IS HELD in great esteem by critics and wine lovers, but remains little known by the general public,’ says Leo Felici, owner/winemaker at the Andrea Felici estate in Airo in the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi zone. His words go a long way towards explaining the puzzle that is Verdicchio in today’s market, especially outside of Italy.

The Verdicchio grape, grown in the hillsides of north-central and western Marche, is used to produce a variety of wines, from *metodo classico* to *passito* and, in between, some of the longest-lived dry whites found in Italy. *Decanter* Italy expert Ian D’Agata, in his book *Native Wine Grapes of Italy*, asserts that ‘Verdicchio is arguably Italy’s greatest native white grape variety.’ In its 2015 Italian wine guide, *Gambero Rosso* awarded its highest rating of *tre bicchieri* to 11 examples of Verdicchio – more than any other white in the country. So why is it that you would be hard pressed to find more than one example on wine lists outside of Italy?

Ampelio Bucci, owner of the eponymous estate in Ostra Vetere in the Jesi zone, notes that Verdicchio comes to the conversation with some historical baggage. ‘Verdicchio from the 1950s through to the 1980s was known as a low-quality white, an industrial wine,’ he remarks, recalling that some *cantine sociali* (cooperatives) would bottle wines from outside the area and label them as Verdicchio. Even today, the appellation rules for Verdicchio allow a maximum yield of 14 tons/hectare, which is among the highest for any Italian wine; at that level, the issue of quality is not even in the discussion. Given this data, it is not surprising that Ampelio wrote Villa Bucci on the front label while mentioning the word Verdicchio only on the back label, a practice he continues to this very day.

## A tale of two zones

There are two DOC zones for Verdicchio in Marche: Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, the more famous of the two, and Verdicchio di Matelica. While most examples are 100% Verdicchio (DOC regulations require 85% minimum Verdicchio), the characteristics of these wines are quite varied, thanks to a series of factors including soil, climate and elevation.

The Castelli di Jesi zone is located in north-central Marche, while Matelica is in the western-centre of the region, close to the Apennine Mountains that traverse this part of the region, near the border with Umbria. ‘The greatest difference between Matelica and Jesi,’ says Riccardo Baldi, proprietor of the La Staffa estate in the Jesi zone, ‘is the terrains. Jesi is very rich in clay and skeletal deposits, while Matelica is richer in minerals.



*‘In Verdicchio, one can find powerful antioxidants such as etil-caffeato, which is similar to resveratrol in red wines’*

Riccardo Baldi, La Staffa (above)



**Above: one of Matelica’s best known producers, Bisci, produces a Verdicchio with ‘gorgeous aromas’ which ‘glides across the palate’**

**Far left: the vineyards of Montecarotto, with their clay-rich soils, lie in the Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi zone, one of two DOCs for Verdicchio in Marche**

Also Jesi is more open to the sea, while Matelica is an inland territory, where the influence of the mountains can be felt.’

Fabio Marchionni of Collestefano, one of Matelica’s most renowned producers, elaborates further: ‘The valley of Matelica is a closed valley, with the Apennines on one side and on the other, the mountain range of San Vicino. It does not feel the effect of marine influences, rather it is a continental climate with very cold winters with snow and very hot summers.’ For Marchionni, the Verdicchios from Matelica have ‘a great structure on the palate, but with stronger acidic and saline components with respect to Jesi.’

As for the grape itself, Massimiliano Latini of Colonnara, the leading cooperative producer in the Jesi zone, speaks of the ‘vibrant acidity and high content of polyphenols that combine to result in wines that last many years’. Baldi notes that ‘in Verdicchio, one can find powerful antioxidants such as *etil-caffeato* [ethyl caffeate], which is similar to resveratrol in red wines.’

In both zones, structure in the wines is provided by the combination of vineyard altitude and vine age. ‘About 90% of Verdicchio is produced on hills that are situated between 280m and 600m above sea level,’ says Baldi. Felici explains that his oldest vineyard – a 2ha plot at the heart of his estate that averages more than 50 years in vine age – is located at 400m, while some of his younger plots are situated at between 400m and 600m elevation. Felici estimates 20 years for maximum drinking pleasure, while Baldi goes even further, arguing that Verdicchio is ‘capable of beautifully ageing for more than 30 years’.

Flavour profiles vary from one area to the next, often with notable differences. For example, the Cupramontana zone, which is home to several ➤





Above: the sparing use of oak favoured by Michele Bernetti of Umani Ronchi results in wines with good ageability

Below: wines produced from Collestefano's vineyards have achieved something of a cult status

banana and honeyed flavours derived from late-harvest grapes. Meanwhile Felici ferments and matures his Il Cantico della Figura Riserva in cement; fermentation on the skin takes two weeks, while ageing on the lees lasts 12 months. The 2011 Riserva is sleek, with stunning varietal purity and dazzling aromatics of Bosc pear, lilacs and golden poppies; in just a few short years, this wine has become one of the signature examples of Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi.

Easy on the oak

Regarding wood ageing, barriques are used sparingly (as in Fazi-Battaglia's San Sisto Riserva and Garofoli's Serra Fiorese); generally the preferred cask is large oak botti, ranging in capacity from 5,000 to 7,000 litres, as with the riserva offerings from Umani Ronchi (Plenio) and Bucci (Villa Bucci). These two wines have been among the most consistent in terms of longevity and quality.

Only 30% of the Plenio is matured in the large casks (the remaining percentage in cement and stainless steel), while all of the Bucci wine ages for 18-24 months in botti. Both wines display impressive structure, with the Bucci offering more richness on the palate; the best time to drink is between 12 and 20 years of age.

So with such positives behind it, why does Verdicchio not sell in greater numbers or enjoy a more solid reputation? The answer is unavoidable – the wine is from the Marche region. This may be an enchanting territory, but it is unfamiliar to most consumers. 'The wines of Marche have never been well known,' declares Felici. So the area's vintners have to fight an identity crisis as well as the fact

that there is still too much bulk Verdicchio available at petrol stations and AutoGrill markets (airport and highway outlets) throughout Italy. 'The mass market of Verdicchio products has created an insipid, boring drink that we producers today are trying to fight,' says Felici.

Bucci is one that has bucked the trend, achieving great commercial success. 'We grow Verdicchio with a greatly reduced quantity [half of the allowed yield] so it can age like a red wine,' he says. It's that sort of thinking that could help change the common identity of Verdicchio. Only time will tell if this persistence pays off... [D]

Freelancer writer and photographer Tom Hyland is the author of Beyond Barolo and Brunello: Italy's Most Distinctive Wines



Colonnara uses Verdicchio's natural acidity to create a sparkling wine with 'more richness than most'

Photograph: Francesca Ballarini

Hyland's top Verdicchio picks



**Colonnara, Ubaldo Rosi, Brut Metodo Classico, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi 2008** 16.25 (87) N/A UK [www.colonnara.it](http://www.colonnara.it) Verdicchio's natural acidity makes for a well-structured sparkler; this limited-production cuvée offers more richness than most. Arguably the area's finest. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alcohol** 12.5%

exceptional length. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%



**Sartarelli, Balciana, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Superiore 2012** 17.75 (92) £22 **Astrum Wine Cellars** Made from late-harvested grapes from a single site. Delicate hints of tropical fruit in a very subtle style. Great balance and finesse. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 15%

Current releases

**Villa Bucci, Riserva, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi 2009** 18.25 (94) £25.74-£35.50 **Exel, Vini Italiani** Easily the most famous and arguably the finest Verdicchio producer, Ampelio Bucci is a great ambassador for the area. Despite its age, this is the current release. The riserva offerings display length on the palate with structure and persistence; the 2009 is even richer than usual. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



**Andrea Felici, Il Cantico della Figura, Riserva, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 2011** 18 (93) £18.25 **Lea & Sandeman** Leo Felici is a Verdicchio perfectionist and it shows. Cement-fermented and aged, this has outstanding varietal purity, lively acidity and



**Collestefano, Verdicchio di Matelica 2013** 17.5 (91) £11.49 **Les Cave de Pyrène** Fabio Marchionni farms his vineyards organically. This has become something of a cult wine. Golden apple and cinnamon aromas lead onto notes of mango on the palate. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Stefano Antonucci, Le Vaglie, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 2013** 17.5 (91) £14 **St Andrews Wine Co, Vinum** Antonucci is one of the area's most inimitable characters; his wines are flawless, with great intensity. This wine, from the top 2013 vintage, is particularly so. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Bisci, Verdicchio di Matelica 2013** 17 (90) £15 (2012) **Vini Italiani** Matelica's best-known producer; gorgeous aromas of dogwood, spearmint and green apple. The wine glides across the palate – ultra clean and delicious. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 13.5%



**La Staffa, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 2013** 17 (91) £13-£14 **Armit Wines, Exel Wines** Impressive varietal focus, but this wine shies away from simple fruit, offering flavours of mint and herbal tea with distinct minerality. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

**Colonnara, Cuprese, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Superiore 2013** 16.5 (88) £9.80 **Alvini** Made by the best cooperative for Verdicchio, this is a beautifully structured wine that can be appreciated after six months or years; great value. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

**Verdicchios with age Colonnara, Cuprese, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi 1991** 18.25 (94) N/A UK [www.colonnara.it](http://www.colonnara.it) Golden yellow; aromas of honey, banana, orange blossom and geranium. Outstanding length and complexity, vibrant acidity; amazing shape at 24 years. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%



**Villa Bucci, Riserva, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi 2004** 18.25 (94) N/A UK [www.villabucci.com](http://www.villabucci.com) Expressive aromas of almond pastry and orange peel; excellent depth of fruit. Good acidity, outstanding persistence. A pleasing note of creaminess to finish. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%



**Garofoli, La Selezione Gioacchino Garofoli, Riserva, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 2008** 17.75 (92) £30-£31 **Mondial, Pipai** From a great family estate, this riserva is made from late-harvest grapes. Layers of fruit, beautifully structured – very sexy! **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p88

