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## Italy's Emilia-Romagna becomes a contender

Talia Baiocchi, Special to The Chronicle  
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Emilia-Romagna is known first as a veritable hall of fame of gastronomy - from the legendary prosciutti of Parma, to the balsamic vinegar of Modena and the ragu of Bologna.

Despite the wealth and recognition that such prowess has brought this region of northern Italy, its wine industry, dominated by bulk production for decades, has failed to make wines truly worthy of induction. Until now.

"Emilia-Romagna on the whole has struggled to have a wine identity," says David Lynch, wine director at Quince and author of "Vino Italiano." "That has a lot to do with consumer perception and a lack of legendary Emilia-Romagnan wine estates."

It's true: Emilia-Romagna doesn't boast an area that creates world-class wines like, say, neighboring Tuscany's Brunello di Montalcino or Chianti Classico, nor storied producers like Biondi-Santi or Castello di Ama.

There's Lambrusco, of course, the region's fizzy red mascot, and its main source of wine recognition. And who can forget Riunite, whose red, white and blue labels lined shelves like a Warhol print during its heyday as America's No. 1 selling imported wine between 1976 and 2002?

But Emilia-Romagna's most recent advances have grown beyond riffs on its famed fizzy red. It has acquired many other Italian regions' renewed interest in indigenous grapes, along with a growing crop of winemakers who hope to find out what else the region is capable of.

### 2 in 1

As the hyphen suggests, Emilia-Romagna is actually two regions in one, with the city of Bologna acting as the divider. To the east lies Romagna, whose hills are said to be the original birthplace of the Sangiovese grape. To Bologna's west lies Emilia, home base for Lambrusco production and, more recently, alternative white wines.

"There's a cluster of winemakers of the same ideology as you find in Friuli," says Ceri Smith, owner of the Biondivino wine shop in Russian Hill.

The ideology Smith refers to is a genre pioneered by Friulian winemakers like Josko Gravner

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and Stanko Radikon; their white wines see extended contact with grape skins, resulting in an orange-tinged wine (see [sfg.ly/htLR4L](http://sfg.ly/htLR4L)) that blurs the line between white and red.

A dedication to minimal intervention in winemaking tends to go hand-in-hand with this movement, which has, over the past decade, picked up devotees from California to Spain. Now Emilia-Romagna is emerging as an unlikely hotbed.

Consider La Stoppa, a producer in the Colli Piacentini appellation just south of Piacenza, at the foot of the Apennine Mountains. The Ageno bottling - a blend of the local grapes Malvasia de Candia Aromatica and Ortrugo, along with Trebbiano - spends 40 days on its skins and is fermented with indigenous yeasts. It's an amber, hauntingly aromatic wine that ranks among the most singular produced in this style.

La Stoppa's winemaker, Giulio Armani, also makes wine at Denavolo, an estate that is experimenting with skin-fermented white wines made from Malvasia, Ortrugo and Marsanne, sourced from a biodynamically farmed vineyard with limestone soils situated at 1,500 feet above sea level, alpine in relation to the rest of Emilia.

### **Indigenous**

Other Emilian producers are looking to the suite of indigenous varieties that have flirted with extinction over the past couple of decades as many wineries ripped up lesser-known grapes in favor of international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon.

In the fertile plain between Parma and Bologna, you'll find Ca' de Noci, a producer near Reggio Emilia whose vineyards lie on a small patch of limestone soil near the Crostolo River. The estate's proprietors, brothers Giovanni and Alberto Masini, have dedicated themselves to rescuing grapes like Spergola and Malbo Gentile. They, too, make an orange wine called Nottediluna, from Spergola, Malvasia and Moscato Giallo. It's floral and edgy, with Moscato lending aromatic intensity.

### **Noble morphing**

Other grape varieties native to Emilia-Romagna, with the exception of Sangiovese, are hardly noble. But producers are using various techniques to morph grapes like Albana - from which a number of terrific sweet passito bottlings, made with semi-dried grapes, are made - and Pignoletto into wines worth contemplating.

Near Bologna, there's Alberto Tedeschi, who works exclusively with Pignoletto, a grape that generally produces wines about as flavorful as San Pellegrino. But his winemaking, which includes skin contact, has transformed the grape into something that could give Gravner a run for his money - at a fraction of the price. His success is reminiscent of Abruzzo star Edoardo Valentini's transformative work with equally neutral Trebbiano.

Others, utilizing more mainstream techniques, are bringing the region's authentic wines into

relief.

"There is a sense that there wasn't before to make dry, much clearer wines than they were before," says Kevin McKenna, a partner in Louis/Dressner Selections, which imports some of Emilia-Romagna's top wines.

This is perhaps most evident in the Colli Piacentini, which is, in terms of terroir, the finest wine-growing area on the Emilia side. Its regional red is a fruit-forward, slightly funky blend of Barbera and Bonarda that has earned a spot within the expanding roster of value-driven Italian wines, thanks to producers like Castello di Luzzano.

Castello di Luzzano's Tasto di Seta, a 100 percent Malvasia di Candia bottling, might as well be the region's archetypal expression of this unique subvariety. The same is true for the red Gutturnio Romeo, its take on the area's classic red blend, which manages mass appeal without sacrificing its characteristic funk.

### **Newly visible**

The efforts have helped turn the DOC (denominazione di origine controllata, or wine-growing area) into Emilia's most newly visible.

On the Romagna side, there is, of course, Sangiovese di Romagna, the DOC that stretches from the foothills of the Apennines along the border of Tuscany. Here, the grape takes on a brooding, fleshier profile than the bright renditions found just over the hills in Chianti.

Beyond its regional advancements, what really makes Emilia-Romagna unique is the potential for these new wines to become embedded into the robust, historic gastronomic culture of its top locales.

"When you consider the towns that you can anchor these wines to, there's no reason why Emilia-Romagna couldn't become a more important wine region," Lynch says.

It's still a long way from Lambrusco to rivaling Italy's top wine regions. But Italy's march of wine progress has finally made inroads to Emilia-Romagna. After years struggling to find itself, the region might be on the path to a proper rivalry.

### **Life beyond lambrusco**

Here are several bottles that represent a new taste of Emilia-Romagna wines.

**2006 La Stoppa Ageno Emilia IGT White** (\$40): One of the most unique skin-contact white wines on the market. Aromas of burnt orange peel, wildflower and tea. Tannic but finessed. (Importer: Italia Wine Imports)

**2009 Castello di Luzzano Colli Piacentini Tasto di Seta** (\$15): High-toned and effusive with notes of white flowers, tropical fruit and smoke. Juicy core with brisk acidity. Also seek out

the 2007 Castello di Luzzano Gutturnio Reserva Romeo (\$25), a polished take on the classic Gutturnio blend of Barbera and Bonarda. (Importer: Vias Imports)

**2007 Alberto Tedeschi Spungola Bellaria Emilia Pignoletto** (\$20): Tedeschi has managed to transform a generally uninteresting grape into a mineral-driven powerhouse with notes of citrus oil and smoke via extended skin contact. (Importer: Louis/Dressner Selections)

**2007 Ca' de Noci Nottediluna Bianco** (\$35): A blend of Malvasia Candia, Moscato Giallo and Spergola that sees five days of skin contact and results in a red-orange wine with notes of incense, orange peel and almond. Round and plush, plenty of tannin. (Importer: Louis/Dressner Selections)

**2007 Denavolo Dinavolo Bianco Vino da Tavola** (\$40): A blend of the local strain of Malvasia, plus Ortrugo and Marsanne, that sees eight months of time on its skins. Herbaceous, floral and mineral driven, with a lean palate and formidable structure. (Importer: Savio Soares Selections)

- *T.B.*

Talia Baiocchi is a freelance writer in New York and wine columnist for Eater.com. E-mail comments to [wine@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:wine@sfnchronicle.com).

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