



Umbria is a region of central Italy which is bordered by Tuscany to the west and the north, Marche to the east and Lazio to the south. The area is best known for its beautifully preserved medieval hilltop towns. The Etruscans, Romans, feuding medieval families and Renaissance artists have all left an imprint. From Orvieto's splendid Gothic cathedral to Assisi's fresco-clad basilica, one must contrast the beauty of wild-flower-flecked meadows to the ancient towns. It is the only Italian region which has neither a coastline nor a common border with other countries.

Umbria has been called "Italy's Green Heart." It is green mainly because it is agricultural and more sparsely populated than its western neighbor, Tuscany. Umbria has no access to the Mediterranean but is home to one of the largest lakes in Italy.

A Quick History Lesson

The region is named for the Umbri, an Italic people absorbed by the Romans' expansion. The Umbri's capital city was Gubbio, where the longest and most important document of any of the Osco-Umbrian group of languages, the Iguvine Tablets, can be found.

The Etruscans were the chief enemies of the Umbri. The Etruscan invasion went from the western seaboard towards the north and east from about 700 to 500 BC, eventually driving the Umbrians towards the Apennine uplands and capturing 300 Umbrian towns. Nevertheless, the Umbrian people outlasted the Etruscans.

After the Etruscans' downfall, Umbrians aided the Samnites in their struggle against Rome in 308 BC. Ultimately the Romans prevailed. Allied Umbrians and Etruscans had to return to their territories to defend against simultaneous Roman attacks.



The victorious Romans established some colonies (e.g., Spolegium) and built the via Flaminia in 220 BC. The via Flaminia became a principal vector for Roman development in Umbria. During Hannibal's invasion in the second Punic war, the battle of Lake Trasimene was fought in Umbria, but the local people did not aid the invader.

During the Roman civil war between Mark Antony and Octavian in 40 BC, the city of Perugia supported Antony and was almost destroyed by Octavian. Once the Roman

Empire collapsed, the Ostrogoths and Byzantines struggled for supremacy in the region.

After the Ostrogoths, the Lombards founded the duchy of Spoleto, covering much of today's southern Umbria. The Lombard king also controlled the northern part of the region ruled directly by Pavia. Charlemagne conquered most of the Lombard kingdoms, thus giving the Pope control over much of the area.

In the early 14th century, the signorie (city-state) arose. The most important were those of the Vitelli in Città di Castello, the Baglioni in Perugia, and the Trinci in Foligno. Still, the two last ones were soon added into the Papal States by Cardinal Albornoz, who prepared for the Pope's return from Avignon to Rome. In this period, "Umbria" became the area's name; previously, it was named "Ducato," after the Duchy of Spoleto. Papal rule over Umbria was reinforced through the erection of a fortress in Perugia (Rocca Paolina) by Pope Paul III. The Papacy ruled the region uncontested until the end of the 18th century.

THE ROCCA PAOLINA

At the start 19th century, France conquered Italy and Umbria became part of the French republic.

After Napoleon's defeat, the Pope regained Umbria



Wild boars roam free in the more remote parts of the region; hare, deer and game birds are highly prized among chefs and home cooks. Sheep farmers exist in the area but beef reared in Perugia province is particularly famous and boasts European Union and national protection.

Umbria is known for an abundance of meat dishes, particularly lamb, pork, and game, which are either grilled over a fire or cooked on the spit with many herbs but it is probably most famous for its roast suckling pig.

Pork, pork, and

more pork. Umbria's vast oak forests mean there are plenty of

acorns for snaffling pigs to feast on, which flavors the meat and makes it some of the best in the country.

You can find Porchetta all over Italy, but Umbria is where the delicacy originated and it remains the best place in the country to pick one up. It involves taking a whole gutted pig and stuffing it with internal pork organs flavored with lots of salt, pepper, fennel and garlic. It's then rolled, tied up and spit-roasted slowly over several hours on a spit in a wood oven. Norcia has become so famous for its art of pork butchery and preparation of cured meats, that butchers across Italy now use the term "norcino" to indicate all kinds of meats preserved in this manner. Visitors to this small city in northern Umbria will be able to savor an

extraordinary variety of cured meats. Some of these delicacies are boar sausages, Norcia prosciutto with DOC and IGP designation, bacon, and pork fat, all minced three times, which is ideal for spreading over bread.

Among the region's most traditional and typical main courses is colombaccio selvatico (pigeon), or palomba (turtledove), generally cooked on a spit. Umbria is a rural region known for its game. Everything from roasted lamb's head, wild boar to wild hare, and even pigeon are prepared in various methods and can be found on restaurant menus across the region.

Antipasti (Antipasto is singular and relates to one portion. Antipasti is plural and relates to multiple portions) in Umbria also reflect this region's best. They can be as simple as a variety of bruschetta topped with



and ruled it until 1860. In that year, during Italian Risorgimento, Umbria, Marche, and part of Emilia Romagna were annexed by King Victor Emmanuel II. In the same year, the people of Perugia destroyed the Rocca Paolina, a symbol of papal oppression. The region of Umbria, with its capital, Perugia, became part of the Kingdom of Italy. At the time, the region was somewhat larger than today, comprising Rieti to the south. Rieti was detached and added to the Province of Rome (Lazio) in 1923. In 1927, the region of Umbria was divided into the provinces of Perugia and Terni.

During WWII, the region's industrial centers, Terni and Foligno, were heavily bombed and, in 1944, became a battlefield between the allied forces and the retreating Germans. In 1946, Umbria was incorporated into the Italian Republic as a region, comprising the two provinces of Perugia and Terni.

Cuisine and Wine

Umbrian cuisine is about good flavor, freshness, and simplicity. The traditional methods still used in producing such typical ingredients as Norcia's cured meats, regional artisan cheeses, regional wines and farm-raised meats ensure these products' absolute best quality. Umbria is the birthplace of the ancient art of butchery and home to the treasured black truffle. Its cuisine is unique to the region and authentic to its origins. The cuisine of Umbria is healthy, hearty, and born from "Cucina Povera." The small town of Norcia, near the Marche border, is famous for its artisanal butchers of impeccable skill. They are often considered to cut and cure pork better than anyone else in Italy.



olive or truffle pastes, a platter of grilled vegetables dressed with the region's olive oil, or a selection of the region's exceptional salami or cured meat specialties. The simple frittata is another popular appetizer, flavored with cheese, sautéed greens, fresh herbs, or leftover vegetables. In the spring, fava beans dressed only with olive oil and Pecorino cheese are often served. In the fall, when olive oil is harvested, antipasti may include Pinzimonio (fresh vegetables dipped in seasoned olive oil) or Fettunta (oily slice), which is grilled bread slices drizzled with fresh olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt.

Umbrian soups tend to be rustic and include seasonal vegetables, dried beans (favas, lentils, chickpeas), or ancient kinds of wheat such as farro and spelt and chestnuts. These hearty soups are served simply with a drizzle of good Umbrian olive oil and can take the place of a first course at dinner or become a main course at lunch.

Bread varieties change from region to region across all of Italy and vary significantly across a specific region.

Umbrian bread varieties are numerous, but many are saltless, which originated from the 16th century when the Pope imposed a salt tax on the people who refused to pay it. Torta al Testo (shown here) is Umbria's flatbread made of a simple combination of flour, water, salt, and olive oil. It gets its name from the surface it's cooked on, known as a testo, originally a circular flat stone heated over a fire. It is either served alongside rich meaty stews to mop up the sauce or turned into a sandwich stuffed with wild greens, cheese, and cured meats. Another bread traditionally served at Easter is cheese bread, often called Torcoletti, made with Pecorino cheese and baked in a ring shape.



Pasta Alla Norcina (shown here) is Norcia's most popular pasta dish and features sausage meat. It also often contains local mushrooms or grated truffles, two more of Umbria's most famous ingredients. The sauce itself is cream-based and includes a healthy pour of white wine (usually Orvieto). The pasta generally paired with this sauce is either penne or Umbrian strangozzi (rectangular spaghetti). Note that there is another local pasta dish, pasta alla nursina, which combines black truffles with anchovies or a spicy tomato sauce. Other heartier pasta



dishes include pappardelle alla lepre (wild hare ragu), seasoned with bacon and cloves or tomato-based sauces made with rabbit or duck.

While Umbria has no coastline, the vast Lake Trasimeno provides plenty of freshwater fish. Perch, eel, carp, pike, and smelt are caught and cooked over a fire or turned into stews. Tegamaccio is a cross between a local freshwater fish soup and a rich stew. Any combination of fish found in the lake can be included, although usually perch and eel are used, and the sauce is made of a combination of top-quality olive oil, garlic, celery, white wine, chopped tomatoes and aromatic herbs.

Umbria relies strongly on seasonal produce such as mushrooms, wild asparagus, numerous other fresh vegetables and, of course, on the highly prized truffles that grow throughout the region. Umbria produces more black truffles than any other part of Italy. Truffles play an essential role in many Umbrian dishes, including appetizers such as crostini al Tartufo, or crostini Alla Norcina, made using anchovies, truffles, and chicken livers. Grated black or white truffles are served with pasta and risotto dishes and are found in fresh and seasoned cheeses and cured meats. They can be found year-round but are at their best and most prolific in the summer months. Fortunate truffle hunters can also find white truffles in the winter, which can fetch a high price.

Crostini al Tartufo all'Umbra, the most popular antipasto in Umbria, uses the bountiful truffle harvest. Grated black truffles are pounded into a paste with local olive oil and anchovies and then spread on small pieces of crusty toasted bread. The vast Umbrian woodland is also home to plenty of wild mushrooms. Many locals will venture into the forests with a basket to find different varieties, of which the porcini is the most coveted.



Umbrian Tegamaccio

Umbria's Castelluccio valley is home to what many claim are the best lentils in the world- Castelluccio di Norcia (PGI protected). They are exceptionally tiny and have such thin skins they don't need to be soaked before cooking. Vegetables of all kinds are grown in the fertile soil around Lake Trasimeno, but the black celery of Trevi (which has IGP protection) must be one of the most interesting. It has much darker leaves than regular celery and a more pronounced flavor. Red Cannara onions are also highly prized; both black celery and Cannara onions have their own festivals during harvest time in Umbria. Umbria only produces around two percent of Italy's olive



Crostini al tartufo all'Umbra

oil, but it is held in high regard (the region boasts five separate DOP-protected oils). The climate means the olives grow slowly, and oil producers pick the olives when they just start to ripen, which is when they're at their fruitiest. This comes through in the flavor of the oil, which is often quite peppery and bright green in color, too.



Leccino Silver Leaf Olive Grove

The olive groves around Trevi are said to be the best. Umbria's largest production center for olive oil is in the area directly around Trevi, which is covered with silver-leaved olive trees as far as the eye can see.

Umbrian cheese is produced from both cow and sheep milk and includes such varieties as fresh salted ricotta, caciotta, raviglio, pecorino and truffle flavored cheeses. Pecorino di Norcia, a sheep's milk cheese that's aged for at least two months to one year (sometimes underground on a bed of local herbs) and is firm enough to be grated over dishes, is one of Umbria's most popular cheeses. Umbria's most famous cheese is Caciotta, matured for just twenty days to retain a light and soft texture. It is often flavored with generous amounts of truffle. Even fresher is Ravigliolo which must be eaten within a week of being produced. It can be made with goat or sheep milk and is found throughout the Tuscan-Romagna Apennines.

The most famous Umbrian cake is Torcolo, a seventeenth-century ring-shaped delicacy flavored with pine nuts, raisins, citrus peel and candied fruits. It's generally baked and eaten on January 29th for the Feast of St Costanzo, the patron saint of Perugia. The Umbrians don't tend to go for many sweet dishes and desserts.

Almost all that exist are associated with religious festivals and ceremonies although Perugina, the company that produces Baci chocolate often given during Italian Valentine's Day, is based in Umbria. Founded in 1907 by the Buitoni family, the Perugina chocolate factory rose to international popularity and fame with its famous Baci chocolate, made with ground hazelnuts and dark



chocolate. The original machinery used in Perugina chocolate production is still on display at its museum, Museo Storico Perugina, which opened in 1997 and is devoted to the factory's history. In 1988, Perugina was incorporated into the holdings of the Swiss multinational, Nestlé, and its factory can now be found in San Sisto not far from the city center. Each year the city of Perugia holds **Eurochocolate**, an international chocolate fair that draws thousands from around the world.



Wine plays an integral part in Umbrian cuisine due to the region's optimal growing conditions. While Umbria ranks 14th of the 20 wine-producing areas in Italy, it produces many different wines and is best known for its white wine production. Umbria's most famous wine is its white wine made from Grechetto grapes, found mainly in the Orvieto area. The vineyards around the village of Orvieto produce nearly all of Umbria's wines. Most of the region's vineyard plantings are placed along terraces cut into the hillsides. This is reflected in several of the area's DOC names (Colli means 'hills'). Although best-known for its white wines, Umbria's two top-level DOCG designations are for red wines. The native red grape Sagrantino is the base for Umbria's most prestigious DOCG red wine, Sagrantino di Montefalco. Sangiovese is growing in popularity and is the region's most planted grape variety yielding the region's DOCG wines Torgiano Rosso Riserva and Non-Riserva reds.

Sites to See

Umbria has many Etruscan sites, medieval hill towns and beautiful countryside. Umbria is often called Italy's Green Heart for its many parks.

It is home to one of Italy's largest lakes, Lake Trasimeno. Umbria is known as "mistica" (mystical) and "la terra dei Santi," (the land of saints), after the hundreds of saints born here, including St. Valentine and the two fathers of Western monasticism, St. Francis and St. Benedict.

The Saint Francis Basilica in Assisi holds Saint Francis's tomb and is a popular tourist and pilgrimage destination. Assisi is extremely popular and therefore sometimes crowded.

Saint Francis's popularity has meant that splendid churches and related structures have been created in Assisi and filled with beautiful frescoes and paintings over several hundred years. Assisi also offers a first-rate medieval festival, the Calendimaggio Festival, taking place shortly after May 1st.

Norcia is the birthplace of Saint Benedict and has exciting and beautiful architecture. Norcia is also especially famous for its pork products. At the very least, try a plate of pork sausages and lentils during your visit.

Lake Trasimeno is a large (the fourth largest in Italy) but not very deep lake with three islands; some are inhabited and can be visited. Almost the entire shoreline of the lake is accessible. The cycling track around most of it is popular due to the lack of steep inclines. The most attractive town on the lake is Castiglione del Lago, which features a medieval center and castle. The lake was the site of a famous battle between Hannibal and Rome.

Orvieto is easily reached by car or train and makes a good day trip from Rome or a good base for exploring southern Umbria and Tuscany. The area around Orvieto is dotted with Etruscan tombs and vineyards. Orvieto's monuments and museums cover centuries. Its stunning duomo (cathedral) with its mosaic facade is one of Italy's best medieval monuments.

Perugia is the capital of the region of Umbria. It is arguably the main town in Umbria for art and architecture. It is also a town of considerable charm in its own right that should not be missed by anyone interested in Etruscan history and architecture or Renaissance art. Perugia is home to two universities that result in a large "youth culture" evident at night. Perugia has an excellent Italian language school, a world-famous jazz festival and hosts one of the largest chocolate festivals in Europe.

Gubbio is a well-preserved medieval town built of gray limestone on the slopes of Mount Ingino. Gubbio's compact center has a good selection of medieval, Gothic, and Renaissance monuments. Just outside the town is a Roman amphitheater.



Assisi, a walled medieval city, is famous as the hometown of Saint Francis, or San Francesco, Italy's patron saint.

Spoletto is a walled hill town and one of the largest cities in southern Umbria. Spoleto has Etruscan, Roman, and medieval sites. Above Spoleto is a medieval Rocca Albornoziana, with its six large towers and a beautiful interior courtyard surrounded by a loggia spread over two floors. On one side of the Rocca is Spoleto's most famous sight, Ponte delle Torri or Bridge of Towers. The ancient Longobard Church of San Salvatore is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Spollo is characterized by a vast number of well-preserved Roman remains, including medieval wall foundations, three Late Antique Roman gates (Porta Consolare, Porta di Venere and the "Arch of Augustus"), traces of three more plus remains of an amphitheater. The architecture of the town is mostly medieval, with several medieval gates and about two dozen small medieval churches, among them Santa Maria Maggiore

Narni is a small hill town considered to be the geographical center of mainland Italy. Narni was an important Roman settlement and was part of the Papal State in the 12th to 14th centuries. There are many impressive buildings in Narni, and there's a nice walk out of town to the 1st century Ponte Cardona, part of the Roman Aqueduct Formina. Along this wooded walkway, you'll also pass a sign marking the geographical center of Italy.

The tiny town of **Ferentillo** in southern Umbria may have one of Umbria's strangest sites, the mummy museum. Bodies buried below the Church of Santo Stefano were preserved by a rare micro fungus that attacked the corpses and turned them into mummies. Some of the best-



preserved mummies are on display in the mummy museum in the church's basement.

Città della Pieve was a significant producer of bricks, and therefore, unusually for central Italy, almost all its buildings are of brick. It is most famous as the birthplace of Perugino. Some of his most famous works may be seen here.

