

The Telegraph

Posted April 30, 2020

Why the uncrowded alternative to Tuscany should be your first holiday after lockdown

Tuscany may win the culinary plaudits, but its smaller neighbour deserves a place at the table, says Andy Lynes

Umbria is often overshadowed by its neighbour Tuscany, which lures food fans with culinary specialities such as panzanella (bread and tomato salad) and bistecca alla Fiorentina (barbecued sirloin). Umbrian dishes such as pasta alla Norcina (pasta with sausage) meanwhile, are yet to register on the radar of the globetrotting gastronome.

Indeed my own food-related travels in Italy had never included Umbria, so I jumped at the chance to join Umbrian-born chef Masha Renner of Lina Stores in London late last year on a trip to the region's hilltop capital of Perugia and the surrounding area, to discover the gourmet delights I'd been missing all these years.

Born in the town of Umbertide, north of the capital Perugia, Renner cooked in the family restaurant before relocating to London to become head chef at Lina Stores restaurant in Soho, which opened in 2018 (the associated deli just around the corner in Brewer Street opened in 1944). Before opening a second restaurant and deli in King's Cross, Renner returned to her homeland for some culinary inspiration.

Her hectic schedule meant that we had just two days to get a taste of what is often referred to as "the green heart of Italy" that's bordered by Marche to the east, Lazio to the south and Tuscany to the west and the north. "It's such an undiscovered and authentic region where you can find great products like olive oil and wine. Umbria is a place where you can still find the authenticity of the people, that are not too used to tourism," says Renner.

The tourist-free roads meant we were able to pack in a lot in the short time available. Our first stop was the hillside town of Assisi. We were not on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of St Francis but, instead, headed to Fontemaggio, a holiday complex set above the town that includes a hotel, a hostel and a campsite, as well as La Stalla restaurant.



On the sun-drenched terrace overlooking a magnificent Umbrian valley dotted with Cypress trees, we indulged in what seemed like a never-ending parade of delicious rustic dishes. Highlights included torta al testo, an Umbrian flatbread sandwich stuffed with braised greens; strangozzi, a local type of rope-like pasta served with spicy tomato sauce, and a mixed grill of chicken, pork ribs, sausage and lamb, all cooked over embers.

We could have frittered away the afternoon, lingering over coffee, grappa and the array of liqueurs on offer, but a packed itinerary saw us heading south-west on to the valley floor to the acclaimed Di Filippo winery, a supplier of Renner's when she worked at her family's restaurant.

A horse-drawn carriage took us on a bone-rattling tour of some of the 74-acre property, which has panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. As an organic and biodynamic winery, horses are used to till the soil as a low environmental impact alternative to tractors, while a flock of 400 geese help to cultivate the land by eating herbs and grasses and providing free manure.

After a brief but enjoyable tasting of Di Filippo's wines, which are made with indigenous or typically Umbrian grape varieties, we made the short journey to Perugia and the grand five-star 19th-century **Brufani Palace hotel**.

Dinner in the elegant **Collins' Restaurant** was undeniably delicious, but the rich refinement of dishes such as beef in Sagrantino wine with a vegetable and taleggio cheesecake, served with noticeable formality, seemed at odds with the Umbrian "authenticity" Renner had talked about.



A horse-drawn carriage tour in Umbria

A visit to another hillside town, Spello, and its morning market put things back on track. As Renner explained: "Umbria has a very rustic and country-style cuisine. Only a few central ingredients are used, but the quality of them is so good."

A panino con porchetta – a roll filled with thinly-sliced slowly roasted rolled and stuffed pork belly – sold by a mobile vendor was a delight, and ample evidence of why Umbrian pork is so highly prized.

On our way up the steep, cobbled lanes we passed L'Angolo del Tartufo, a shop selling black and white Umbrian truffles, the region's best-known delicacy. It appeared in every conceivable form, from fresh examples to truffle-flavoured beer.

Meanwhile, Enoteca Properzio restaurant and wine shop has what must be one of the finest collections of Italian and Umbrian wines in the country. We also tasted some superlative oil

from Trevi, a few miles south of Spello, which produces Umbria's best olive oils and which was to be our next stop.

Sorelle Zappelli Cardarelli Farm, set between Foligno and Spoleto, is run by three sisters who produce olive oil from 37 acres of trees. Olive oil production has been the family trade for centuries – a fact attested to by the antique oil mill, built in the 1600s and thought to be one of the last of its kind in Umbria.



Umbrian pork is highly prized

After a short tour of the picturesque mill and farm (which also offers accommodation), we settled in for what proved to be a long and memorable lunch, prepared by the family's nonna, that included a vast array of antipasti, including ricotta with local black celery and chilli marmalade, followed by courgette flower omelette, pasta with vegetables from the garden and a Crescionda di Spoletina, a soft cake with chocolate and lemon rind.

The simple but generous and delicious meal summed up what is so good about Umbria and why it is worthy of shouting about just as much as its more revered neighbour.

Renner agreed: "I loved visiting Nonna Wanda. It captures the spirit of family as she was surrounded by her seven nephews and daughters all cooking together. It made me feel emotional; that's the same thing I was doing as a child in Umbria."