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**Forget Tuscany.  
You'll find  
everything you  
want—natural wine,  
black truffles,  
and wide-open  
spaces—under the  
Umbrian sun.**

by Lindsey Tramuta  
photographs by Federico Ciamei



**I**T WAS CLEAR MY Roman cab driver found my travel plans perplexing. "You're staying in Todi for the week?" he asked incredulously, in a mix of Italian and broken English, hoisting my suitcase into his six-seater van. "Why not Florence?" With my limited Italian, I struggled to describe why I was so taken by Todi, a walled medieval hill town overlooking Umbria's Tiber valley. I threw out the few words I knew: "Umbria... *solo d'adina! Fierro! Tartafogorini!*" I also rattled off the names of a few other towns I knew I'd be visiting—Orvieto, Montefalco, Trevi—but his puzzled gaze confirmed that I already knew more about Umbria than he did.

His reaction wasn't entirely surprising. Umbria neighbors Tuscany, which no longer requires an introduction. It's been years since Diane Lane basked under the Tuscan sun, and foreigners still flock there with the dream of restoring a crumbling farmhouse—even though the only properties left have multimillion-euro price tags.

Umbria and its farm culture, on the other hand, have largely remained unknown. In fact, many people first learned of the region two years ago when earthquakes nearby decimated the town of Norcia in the southeast. Modest development and relative obscurity aside, Umbria is home to an impressive number of ancient culinary traditions. Sagran-

tino wine, olive oil, truffles, and salumi are among the delicious heritage products I was coming to try under the expert guidance of Elizabeth Minichilli, an author and a longtime resident of both Rome and Umbria. On one of Elizabeth's new culinary tours, I was here to spend the week eating—and meeting the artisans keeping Umbria alive.

"Well, there will be fewer people at least," noted my driver as we began the 80-mile journey from Rome to Todi. We passed through the landscape that earned the area its nickname, Italy's *cuore verde* (green heart): rolling hills and mountains, their valleys covered with olive groves and grapevines. He was right about the lack of crowds. Umbria has few tourists, another reason for my trip. With destinations such as Venice, Lisbon, and Dubrovnik battling the crippling weight of their own popularity, one way to be a responsible traveler is to venture beyond the trodden path and seek out culture-rich locales that welcome tourism, as Umbria does.

"What's attractive about Umbria is that there is still so much that isn't new," Elizabeth explained later that night, during our 10-person welcome dinner at her vine-covered farmhouse on the outskirts of Todi. (Another reason to love Umbria? You might be able to fulfill your restoring-a-farmhouse dream, if you act fast: "There are still farmers making cheese on their own farms, pressing olive oil for their own consumption, baking bread—it's a step back in time.")



This page: the town of Trevi. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Grapes dry before being made into sweet wine; visitors tour the Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine truffle plantation; ceramics on display in Deruta; Alessandra Rabitti and Emanuele La Barbera tend their goats. Previous spread, left: strangozzi pasta with black truffles at Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine. Previous spread, right: one of Umbria's many olive trees.





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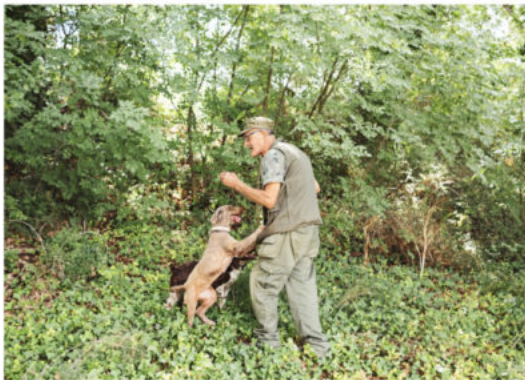
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**WE STARTED THE NEXT** morning at Montioni, a 40-year-old, family-run olive mill and winery located 40 minutes east of Todi in Montefalco. I smelled the woody scent of thousands of freshly picked green and black olives before I saw them. As we stepped into the workshop where the fruit is pressed—a two-room building with white tiled walls and terra-cotta floors—the scent intensified. Olives were everywhere, piled in colorful crates, awaiting pressing. Elisa, our guide for the morning, explained that the olives had just been hand harvested using rakes that wiggle the fruits loose and send them tumbling into nets, a method that ensures they're bruised as little as possible.

Elisa then led us farther into the pressing room, where a large hydraulic press was squeezing olives. As we entered, the liquid from the olives was being fed through a centrifuge, which separates water from oil, giving off an intense peppery fragrance that tickled our throats. We marveled at the final product—a nearly translucent golden-green oil—slowly drizzled from the centrifuge into a large jug. It belonged to an elderly man standing nearby, one of two local farmers who bring their olives to the mill to be pressed each year.

The men were watching us intently, as if worried we might snatch some. There was reason for their concern. Though the terroir in Montefalco is well suited to olive oil production, a year of drought and other poor weather conditions had yielded a harvest 50 percent smaller

than usual. There was less oil to go around. Still, that had no impact on the quality. The droplet of fresh oil that Elisa dabbed onto our fingertips tasted bright and vegetal with a touch of acidity. It begged to be drizzled on top of pumpkin and farro soup, an Umbrian specialty.

Afterward, we climbed to the top of what Elisa insisted was "the most beautiful hill in Montefalco." A silence fell across the group as we stared at a patchwork of 4,000 olive trees, vines, and prairies. Elisa pointed out the oldest olive trees in view, some nearly 100 years old.

"Like this one," she said, turning her heels in the damp earth and directing our attention to one such relic looming large behind us. Dangling from half of the branches were black moraiolo olives, one of three varieties grown in Umbria. The trunk was thick and strong but faded in color in some spots and covered with moss in others, marked by nature's wear. "It's rare to see such trees," she said. "There's usually a deep frost every 30 years that kills them off." This one had held on.

**JUST A MILE AWAY** from Montioni, winemaker Giampiero Bea and his father, Paolo, who pioneered the natural wine movement in Italy in the 1970s, continue to shake up the wine world. The family has been making wine in Montefalco for 500 years, but for the past 40 they've taken the radical, non-interventionist approach of not using chemicals on their vines. "We don't make wine," Giampiero said. "We generate wine. We

This page: Brunello examines a truffle unearthed by his dogs during a truffle hunt at the Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine plantation near Todi. Opposite page: It's aperitivo time at the Tric-Trac cocktail bar in Piazza del Duomo during the Festival del Due Mondi, Spoleto's annual summer music festival.



help the natural process." His soft smile belied the intensity of his convictions. Giampiero has ruffled a few feathers in Italy over the years with his hard-line stance on organic winemaking and his belief that tradition is more important than business. "We want to preserve the identity and biodiversity of the land, and for that, we don't add chemicals," he said.

Unsurprisingly, Giampiero's stone-walled winery is made entirely of organic materials. In the drying room, there are special shutters and windows that allow him to control the temperature and light during desiccation, the process by which water is removed from the grapes. Sagrantino grapes—a highly tannic varietal indigenous to Montefalco—make up 60 percent of the winery's vines, most of which are used to make dry wines unique to the region. The winery also makes *passito* (sweet wine), which requires the fruit to be dried before using. He pulled open hulking wooden doors and led us inside, where the violet

## How to Taste Umbria

In 2017, Elizabeth Minchilli, the author of *Eating My Way Through Italy* and eight other books, launched a series of weeklong culinary experiences that introduce travelers to Umbria's food and wine producers and include cooking classes, tastings, and private dinners. Here's what travelers will experience on a tour. From \$5,500. [elizabethminchilli.com](http://elizabethminchilli.com)

### 1. Deruta

In Umbria, the platter on which you serve a dish is as important as the food. Majolica, among the world's most iconic hand-painted ceramic dishes, can be found in the ancient Umbrian town of Deruta, where locals have manufactured intricately patterned plates, mugs, and bowls for the last 600 years. See 17th-century kilns at the Museo Regionale della Ceramica di Deruta, located in a restored convent. Then visit legendary workshops, including Ubaldo

Gracia and Patrizio Chicchio, which is known for its one-of-a-kind lustreware (metallic) pieces.

### 2. Fattoria Il Secondo Altopiano

Hubbard-and-wife duo Emanuele La Barbera and Alessandra Rabitti are among the few goat-cheese makers in Umbria. On a 37-acre organic farm in the Orvieto countryside, they raise 60 goats. Emanuele, who taught himself the craft from French cheese books, makes 25 different goat

cheeses that are sold in local shops and featured on Orvieto restaurant menus.

### 3. Montisoli

If you visit the 40-year-old, family-run olive mill and winery during the harvest, you can tour the groves and watch as olives are culled by hand and then pressed. Oil and wine tastings are offered year-round.

### 4. Paolo Bea

In the 1970s, Paolo Bea started to make wines without using chemicals or modern technologies, essentially pioneering the

and most of his stock is reserved for export. Umbria may operate under the tourist radar, but its products are in demand all over the world.

**WHEN IT COMES** to feverish demand, few products rival truffles, the most prized Umbrian speciality. The next day, at Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine, a truffle plantation an hour from Todi, we met Brunello, a bespectacled hunter who has worked for the estate since 1969. With his dogs, Molly and Pacci, in tow, we set out to hunt for black Burgundy truffles, one of the three local varieties the plantation exports. "Hunters go out daily but never know if they'll find truffles, and if they do find them, if they'll be ripe enough," said Sara Zafrani, sales director for the estate, as we watched the dogs sprint off.

As we walked, we discussed how difficult it was becoming for the plantation to meet growing demand. Operating in a niche luxury market (white truffles can sell for up to \$5,000 per pound), San Pietro is up against climate changes that complicate the harvest, as well as a sea of fraudsters and thieves. Still, the business endures, on the way it has for generations.

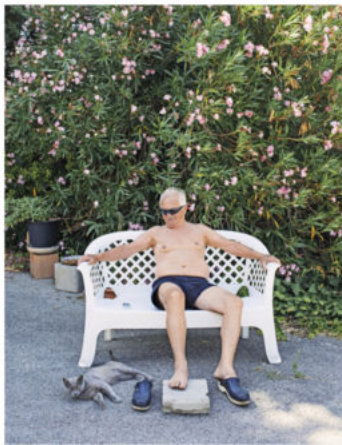
"She's got something!" Brunello shouted. Sticks and leaves crunched beneath our feet as we hurried to catch up with the dogs, whose scents were buried deep in the earth. Their paws frantically digging for treasure, Molly gingerly snatched a black truffle with her mouth and trotted back to Brunello. "Sara, check this one!" he said, holding it in his palm for all to see. Sara shook her head. "It's very soft and overripe," she explained. "We'll leave it here to fertilize the soil." Brunello lifted it to our noses for a sniff. At first, all I smelled was earth, but seconds later I detected a potent mix of wildflowers and garlic that nearly knocked me off my feet. He smiled, then tossed the truffle back into the earth.

### 5. Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine

When in Umbria, one must hunt for truffles. Tenuta San Pietro a Pettine is a truffle plantation in the village of Trevi. Visitors can book a truffle-hunting expedition with one of Pettine's hunters, which concludes with a truffle-focused lunch at the plantation's restaurant.

crushed black truffle from the hunt. He gave the pasta one last swirl with his tongs and dished it onto our plates, finishing each serving with truffle shavings. I twirled the tagliolini around my fork and inhaled the smell of truffles that, just hours before, had been buried in the soil, then took my first bite. It was gloriously uncomplicated, but rich in flavor and simple. *Why spend a week here? My driver had asked. For the beauty of simple Umbrian moments like this. ☺*

*Lindsay Tramata wrote about sniffs in the July/August 2018 issue of AFAR. Photographer Federico Ciampi is profiled on page 24.*



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Elizabeth Minchilli's culinary tour includes a lunch of farro salad with zucchini and cherry tomatoes at Elizabeth's home near Todi; the ancient town of Bevagna lies about 15 miles southeast of Perugia; a dog statue greets visitors at the Ceramiche Toretto Deruta ceramics shop; a man whose family produces ceramics relaxes with his cat on the outskirts of Deruta.