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LAMBRUSCO  
& SANGIOVESE  
DI ROMAGNA  
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RECIPES  
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## Splendor in la grassa

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

■ On a flight home from Italy about 15 years ago, I sat on an airplane next to an Italian couple busily circling all the sites in New York City they planned to visit in the week ahead. She was a beautiful brunette with spectacular almond-shaped eyes, and he seemed nice enough (at least he had good taste). So, I opened the proverbial door and started offering enthusiastic suggestions for their visit. Nine hours later, Tiziana and Angelo Rigotti returned the favor and offered me dinner—and a room—the next time I found myself in the Adriatic resort town of Rimini.

A year later I took them up on their offer and discovered Emilia-Romagna, a part of Italy that I knew little about. On top of it all, Angelo, a doctor, turned out to be a wine buff, too, and introduced me to a bevy of wines from the region that were—and remain—unfamiliar to many Americans, in particular dry Lambrusco, a sparkling red wine, and Sangiovese di Romagna, the local clone of the popular Sangiovese grape made famous by Tuscany, which lies just on the other side of the Apennine mountain range.

I was introduced to the region's food when we drove from their seaside town into the countryside to the walled medieval village of Santarcangelo di Romagna. We ate dinner at Osteria La Sangiovesa, a legendary restaurant designed by local poet Tonino Guerra, who had been friends with Federico Fellini. He also worked as Fellini's scriptwriter for his film *Amarcord*, which was filmed throughout the area. Fellini lived in Rimini

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If Emilia-Romagna's food is collectively "**la grassa**," then its wines might best be nicknamed "**l'eccentrico**."



Traveling along the Via  
D'Annunzio from Rimini to  
Borgo San Giuliano, murals  
decorate walls with the  
likeness of Federico Fellini.

and often frequented the restaurant, which is known for its artisanal, hand-made pastas and procurement of the best local specialties, such as salumi superstars mortadella and prosciutto, and a variety of cheeses, including, of course, Parmigiano-Reggiano, as well as squacquerone, a local, tangy cream cheese slathered on piadini, the regional panini made with flatbread.

The symbol of this gastronomic temple, which adorns the restaurant sign and several walls in the dining rooms, is a painting of a jovial, well-fed topless woman reclining serenely on a divan. Her name, La Sangiovesa, reflects the close bond between food and wine in Emilia-Romagna. Angelo explained that she personifies bounty, la bontà, and, because she's plump, it's a wink to "la grassa," or the fat one, which is

the nickname for the rich, complex cuisine of nearby Bologna, and the region in general.

If Emilia-Romagna's food is collectively "la grassa," then its wines, specifically its reds, might best be nicknamed "l'eccentrico," eccentric, because they are unique and markedly different from the wines in neighboring Tuscany. To fully understand the contrast between Emilia-Romagna's two prominent wines, the light and refreshing Lambrusco and the more serious, sometimes brooding Sangiovese di Romagna, it helps to know that Emilia-Romagna is really two distinct areas, with Bologna, the region's capital, serving as the heart that unifies them. Emilia straddles Bologna's western flank and is renowned for prosperous provinces along the ancient Roman Via Emilia. To Bologna's east, Romagna stretches to the Adriatic Sea, including the mosaic-rich town of Ravenna, and Rimini, known for its beaches, legendary all-night

discos high up in the mountains and for being the long-time residence of Fellini.

Lambrusco wine, named after the grape from which it's made, hails from Emilia and remains one of the area's most famous—and misunderstood—exports. While many Americans of a certain age will recognize the name from labels of Riunite, the fizzy, red, white or rosé “party wine” made in a sweet style called “amabile,” that is an entirely different creature created mainly for the American market. Authentic Lambrusco is a crisp, dry frizzante (slightly sparkling) red wine, meant to be enjoyed young (within a year of bottling), and is something of an eye-opener when tasted alongside the region's rich cuisine: it's the perfect palate cleanser. When I first tasted Lambrusco in the mid-1990s, it was not being exported to the U.S. because Americans had a longstanding reputation for being sweet-tooth wine drinkers thanks, in large part, to the inexplicable success of White Zinfandel.

Lambrusco is produced mainly in four zones (plus one in Lombardy) around the central provinces of Modena, Parma, Reggio Emilia and Mantua. The best of the best are from five DOC regions: Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro, Lambrusco di Sorbara, Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce, Lambrusco Reggiano and Lambrusco Mantovano. Thankfully, quality Lambrusco is increasingly available in the U.S., like Pederzana's Lambrusco Grasparossa, a powerful, dense wine with amazingly complex notes of black fruit that's ethereally light on the palate.

Heading into Romagna, the other half of this hyphenated region, Sangiovese reigns. Known locally as Sangiovese di Romagna, it's grown in the rolling hills and flatland plains of the Po basin between Ferrara and Ravenna. Sangiovese is considered the king of Romagnan wines, and the locals think the grape originated here. The Tuscans, of course, would beg to differ. What is certain is that, unlike many of the vitis vinifera grapes brought to Italy by

the Greeks, Sangiovese and local Lambrusco are believed to be vitis silvestris, which is native to the Italian peninsula. What's also indisputable is the fact that Sangiovese's history in the Romagna hills goes back centuries, specifically in the area south of Via Emilia.

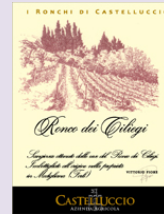
While Tuscany's Sangiovese gets all the attention, I've found that Sangiovese di Romagna wines are juicier, plumper wines with generous fruit (black cherry and blackberry) and softer tannins than their Tuscan cousins. Why? It could be their proximity to the Adriatic and its maritime influences. Or it could just be that the Sangiovese clone grown in Emilia-Romagna differs distinctly from the one grown in Tuscany, much as the Sangiovese clones Brunello from Montalcino and Prugnolo from Montepulciano each have their distinct characteristics.

The only way to form an educated opinion on the difference between these wines would be to pour some of your favorite Tuscans alongside Romagnans available here, such as Umberto Cesari's delicious Sangiovese di Romagna Riserva, or Zerbina's fragrant Torre di Ceparano. Castelluccio, in Modigliana, one of the area's top Sangiovese producers, makes a gorgeous red wine called Ronco Dei Ciliegi, as well as a blend called Massicone, which adds Cabernet Sauvignon to the Sangiovese. As in Tuscany, French grapes have a long history here. While they've mostly taken a back seat to Sangiovese, in recent years winemakers have given them a more prominent role, like San Patrignano's Montepirolò, which is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

Whether or not the inclusion of “foreign” grapes benefits these wines is up for debate, but in any case, it's interesting to see how the Sangiovese from this side of the Apennines is evolving, both on its own and with the bolstering of Bordeaux's best grapes. And I think La Sangiovesa, that lusty symbol of bounty, would approve of making good use of whatever nature provides.

## Suggested bottles

With its unique bubbly red Lambrusco and its signature Sangiovese di Romagna, which was immortalized in Fellini's film *Amarcord*, the region called “La Grassa”, for its robust cuisine, is home to some of Italy's most friendly wines.



### **CASTELLUCCIO Ronco dei Ciliegi Sangiovese di Romagna IGT, 2005**

Classic Sangiovese aromas of black tea and dusty spice boxmake way for butterscotch and toffee nuances that carry through on the palate, balanced deftly by medium-bodied tannins. Overall, this is a juicy, delicious wine thatlingers on the palate. \$32.00



### **FATTORIA ZERBINA Torre di Ceparano, Sangiovese di Romagna Superiore, 2005**

Che bel profumo! Bouquet of violets and jasmine topped with fresh-cracked black pepper. Soft, chalky, violet candy nuances on the palate commingling with sweet red and black fruit, and peppery spiciness, straight through the medium-bodied finish. \$23.00



### **PEDERZANA Lambrusco Grasparossa, NV**

This is an unusually powerful style of dry Lambrusco, with great depth and complexity. Dark fruit aromas and flavors seem all-encompassing, and then comes mouthwatering acidity with a lift of frizzante to carry it through to the lively finish. Drink this with everything! \$18.00



### **UMBERTO CESARI Sangiovese di Romagna Riserva, 2006**

Smoky, caramelizedaromas are spiked with a whiff of spicy salumi. The wine has medium-bodied, juicy-sweet black cherry fruit. There is a good balance of mild tannins, which become softer and chalkiertoward the even, streamlined finish. \$21.00