

When in Rome

The spectacular attractions of Italy's ancient capital need no introduction. But what about the wine scene? While the city and its surroundings may not always have featured highly on wine holiday lists, today they offer enticing prospects for the travelling wine lover

STORY SARAH LANE

Central-western Italy's Lazio region has proved a late starter, but the current trend for small wineries bringing out the best in indigenous varieties is delivering impressive results, especially in the hills just south and east of the country's capital. Punchy and bold or elegant and smooth, the wines are perfect partners for the strong-flavoured local cuisine, dishes such as carbonara pasta, artichokes, porchetta and offal that feature regularly on menus throughout the capital from Piazza Navona and Campo de' Fiori (*see p101*) to the villagey Trastevere neighbourhood. ►



Wine was a fundamental part of life in ancient Rome and the empire contributed greatly to the spread of viticulture throughout Europe. Centuries later, vines were even grown at the city's most ancient heart on the Palatine Hill, in gardens owned by Renaissance aristocrats. At Vigna Barberini, the only one to survive, nine rows of vines have once again been planted, joining the many olive trees and figs already here in the **Colosseum archaeological park** (parcolosseio.it).

The variety chosen is Bellone, a white enjoyed by Romans, according to historian of the day Pliny the Elder, who mentioned it in his encyclopaedic writings. Giovanna Trisorio of **Cincinnati** (cincinnati.it), the winery that's part of the project, says: 'We're curious to see how the wine will turn out, as the terrain on the Palatine Hill is very different to our own volcanic soils.'

HEAD OUT TO CORI

Established in 1947, Cincinnati is a wine cooperative that's drastically different to those of yesteryear. Membership has been closed for two decades, grapes are paid for not by weight but according to 20 quality parameters, and considerable investments are made in equipment, experimentation and training for members. It's located an hour's drive southeast of Rome in Cori, a charming village built on terraces with cobbled lanes weaving up through pretty piazzas to the majestic columns of the Tempio di Ercole (late 2nd-century BC). The celebrated Gardens of Ninfa are 10km away, and the coast 35km.

'We strongly believe in our local varieties, Bellone and Nero Buono di Cori,' says Trisorio. Despite simplistic names, there's nothing naive about the wines, Bellone making enticingly herby whites and Nero Buono intense ruby reds with chocolate and balsamic notes. At neighbouring winery **Marco Carpineti** (marcocarpineti.com),

'Wander under arches, up steps and past frescoed churches to reach the site of the ancient Roman Tempio di Ercole'

amphora versions are made from old vines of both varieties, served in artistic clay carafes. Full of ideas, the Carpineti family has also planted a vine maze, opening next spring along with other multi-sensory vineyard experiences.

WELL-TRODDEN PATH

Between Cori and the capital, the hills of Castelli Romani have drawn city dwellers in search of fresh air and genuine flavours since ancient times. It's a fascinating area of Renaissance villas, lovely lakes and 16 characterful towns each with its own tasty speciality, including porchetta from Ariccia, and countless places to enjoy them, from roadside shacks to smart restaurants. For centuries, Romans have come here for supplies of the local wine that's celebrated each October in Marino with the historic Sagra dell'Uva wine festival.

White wines have always dominated here, and the recent leap in quality of the traditional Malvasia-based blends is impressive, particularly for the two DOCGs: Frascati Superiore and late-harvest Cannellino di Frascati. As winemaker Lorenzo Costantini explains: 'It's partly thanks to a shift from neutral Malvasia di Candia to less productive but more structured and aromatic Malvasia del Lazio.' Likewise, Trebbiano Toscano is being replaced by local Trebbiano Giallo and high-acid Ottonese ▶



The ancient hillside village of Cori, and (left) wide open views across the Lazio countryside from the Tempio di Ercole, Cori



Sarah Lane has lived in Italy for the past 30 years and is based near Bologna. She specialises in wine and food travel, leading private tours as well as writing on the subject for various publications

MY PERFECT DAY IN ROME

MORNING

Waking up under giant reproduction wine labels and finding eight of your favourite wines chilling in place of the minibar, you'd be forgiven for thinking you're still dreaming, but no, this is par for the course at **Hotel de' Ricci***. Drag yourself away from such a paradise, stock up with pizza bianca, the local speciality focaccia, at **Forno Campo de' Fiori***, and say *arrivederci* to Roma to hit the road, heading south for the Castelli Romani wine area just half an hour away.

Make your first stop at the **Villa Simone** winery (see p100) near Monte Porzio Catone – in town there is an interesting wine museum that reopens in 2022 – to tap into the wisdom of local winemaker guru Lorenzo Costantini and try his wines.

LUNCH & AFTERNOON

From here it's just five minutes to the hilltop town of Frascati, the main centre.



Park in front of grand 16th-century Villa Aldobrandini and stroll through the historic centre to **Osteria dell'Olmo*** for an informal lunch of porchetta and cheese served by colourful character Remigio (above). In Castelli Romani you're spoilt for choice with so many villas, villages and wineries to visit, so plan a return trip, but make time for the friendly **Gabriele Magno** winery (see p100) at Grottaferrata. Try the small range at the idyllic cellar

location among the vines or at **La Torretta** villa surrounded by lush gardens.

EVENING

Back on the road, pass scenic lake Albano to reach the charming hillside village of Cori, 45 minutes out to the southeast, the perfect place to stretch your legs and work up an appetite. Wander under arches, up steps and past frescoed churches to reach the site of the ancient Roman **Tempio di Ercole**, with its striking columns and wide-open views.

Back down the hill, check in at the **Cincinnati Wine Resort*** for a delicious dinner with the winery's own olive oil and local-variety Bellone and Nero Buono wines before stretching out under the sheets against a bedhead made from wine barrels, with postcard-pretty views of Cori through the window.

For details of entries marked with an asterisk (*), please see p101.



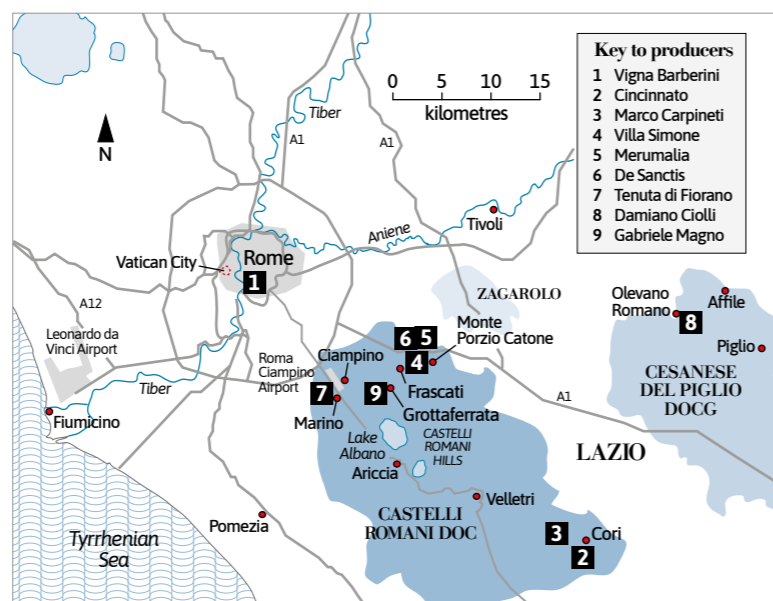
(Bombino Bianco). 'In the past, with the vast consumer market of Rome so near, such fertile land and regular sea breezes together with an old-fashioned cooperative culture, there was no impetus to improve quality,' he adds. Thankfully that's changed.

Consultant winemaker for 22 producers while running his own *Villa Simone* winery (*villasimone.it*), Costantini interprets diverse terroirs through producers' individual visions, creating wines that vary greatly – but all displaying an elegance once rare in this area. 'This whole territory was occupied by an enormous volcano; ancient lava flows and explosions have given us an incredible variety of soils,' he explains.

While work is underway to obtain MGAs (Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive, comparable to a lieu-dit-type vineyard location in France), a few historical Frascati Superiore crus already exist, including Villa Simone's Vigneto Filonardi, and Vigneto La Torretta by **Gabriele Magno** (*gabrielemagno.it*) from 50-year-old vines with three months' ageing on lees. Magno, an airline pilot, is one of today's many part-time producers, pouring energy and enthusiasm into his family estate in Grottaferrata, a town famous for its 11th-century Byzantine abbey.

ROMAN REDS

Two wineries, both organic, that opt for Ottonese in their Frascati blends for a fresh, citrusy vibe are **Merumalia** (*merumalia.it*), which also offers accommodation, just outside the town of Frascati itself, where the Fusco family makes a single-variety Ottonese, too; and neighbours **De Sanctis** (*frascati-wine.com*). Fruit of a passion for Cabernet Franc developed during Francesco De Sanctis' winemaking studies in Friuli, the range here



Getting there

Fiumicino airport, to the southwest of Rome, has direct trains to Termini station (30 mins), while Ciampino airport is 15km southeast of the city. Frascati town lies about 20km to the southeast, and Cori 30km further in the same direction.

includes an excellent rosé and red. Near to Ciampino, just off the old Appian Way – which is pedestrianised on Sundays and lined with the remains of ancient monuments on the way into the city – the **Tenuta di Fiorano** estate (*tenutadifiorano.it*), owned by the Boncompagni Ludovisi family, grows other international varieties. Its prestigious Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot, Fiorano, was first made with input from Tancredi Biondi Santi in the 1950s.

When it comes to reds, the local hero is the Cesanese variety, protagonist of Lazio's third DOCG, Cesanese del Piglio. The grape finds its ideal home in the clay and volcanic soils of the hills a little further to the east of Rome around three centres located on different sides of the same hill: Piglio, Affile (DOC) and Olevano Romano (DOC). The latter, an appealing medieval village much-loved by landscape artists, holds an annual Cesanese festival in late August.

Here, since taking over the family estate in 2001, **Damiano Ciolli** (*damianociolli.it*), with winemaker partner Letizia Rocchi, has honed his Cesanese to bring out the purest qualities that had sometimes been masked by power. Ciolli is a regular at meet-the-producer events in Rome, such as the early-December Festa del Cesanese at the Trapizzino Trastevere wine bar (*see right*), which only ever serves Lazio labels – what better way to start exploring the local wine scene?

Lazio: wine facts

Area planted 19,880ha
– of which 11% is organic
Annual production volume 1,290,000hl
– of which 75% is white
DOP 55%
IGP 26%

SOURCE: ISTAT 2018 / I NUMERI DEL VINO



Hotel de' Ricci.
Marco Carpineti
(left, and see p98)

YOUR ROME ADDRESS BOOK

CITY: ACCOMMODATION

Hotel de' Ricci

This wine-themed hotel is handily located near Campo de' Fiori and is an easy walk from the central sights, the Trastevere district and the Vatican. Each of the eight rooms has a personalised supply of wine and access to a list served via Coravin, with regular producer events, all-day meals and a prestigious cellar shared with top seafood restaurant Pierluigi. hotelder Ricci.com

CITY: RESTAURANTS & BARS

Ai Tre Scalini

An informal wine bar founded in 1895 in the animated Monti neighbourhood near the Colosseum. The decor is warm yellow and wood and daily wines are served by the glass with simple dishes like spicy coppiette salami, oxtail and gnocchi. aitrescalini.org

Armando al Pantheon

A traditional family-run trattoria with an all-Italian wine list – an ideal spot to try Roman classics including pajata (calf intestines) or rigaglie (chicken giblets) with pasta or the house speciality, duck in plum sauce. armandoalpantheon.it

Forno Campo de' Fiori

This historic bakery on the corner of the busy marketplace piazza is good for simple and crispy pizza bianca, Rome's favourite anytime snack; try the rossa version with tomato, too, and buy some moreish biscotti al vino. fornocampodefiori.com

Matricianella

A cosy place near the Spanish steps serving genuine versions of typical dishes such as abbacchio lamb in various ways. On the wine front, there is quality glassware and an extensive and informative list of labels at accessible prices. matricianella.it

Rimessa Roscioli

This wine lover's wonderland offers a variety of formulas from tasting flights to tasting dinners, cookery classes, blind tastings and out-of-town wine tours. The Roscioli family also runs a popular deli-eatery, bakery and bar, all nearby. rimessaroscioli.com

Trapizzino Trastevere

Only wines from Lazio are served here, with two pages of the region's top red, Cesanese, and a dedicated early-December festival.

Come for a drink and a hearty bite – think pizza slabs with meatballs. trapizzino.it

SOUTHEAST OF THE CITY

Cincinnato Wine Resort, Cori

A relaxing haven run by the Cincinnato winery in a beautifully converted farmhouse with simple, stylish bedrooms and lovely views of the hillside village of Cori. The restaurant (weekends only) serves fresh, imaginative dishes using local ingredients. cincinnato.it/wineresort

Osteria dell'Olmo, Frascati

Remigio serves his wine from the micro-cellar where it's made, then crosses the tiny, picturesque piazza to prepare tasty bites such as porchetta, buffalo mozzarella or ricotta and olives presented in vintage kitchenware. *See Facebook*

Taverna Mari, Grottaferrata

A welcoming restaurant with a terracotta colour-scheme, open fire and beamed ceiling plus two spacious terraces. Come for traditional dishes including home-made bucatini all'amatriciana and a good choice of wines, many local. tavernamari.it