



Gastronomic Le Marche

Food, wine, art and hilltop towns in undiscovered Italy

13–20 May 2024 (MK 276)

8 days • £3,560

Lecturers: Marc Millon
& Dr R.T. Cobianchi

Unspoilt and exceedingly picturesque – one of the least-visited yet most compelling regions of Italy.

A gastronomy that reflects a varied geology, along ancient byways from the Apennines to the Adriatic.

Two lecturers: Dr R.T. Cobianchi, art historian; and Marc Millon, gastronomic specialist.

Located on the Adriatic coast in the centre of Italy, Le Marche is one of Italy's still-to-be-discovered regions. Its wonderful cuisine and wines, which display influences from mountain and sea and range from sophisticated flavours in the north to more robust tastes in the south, are a well-kept and delicious secret.

The region's history dates back to ancient times. Vivaly strategic Roman roads passed through: Via Salaria, the salt road that ran from Rome to the Adriatic through Ascoli Piceno; and Via Flaminia, which reached the sea at Fanum Fortunae (present-day Fano), and from there linked up with Via Emilia to the north.

Gastronomically there is splendid variety: hearty mountain stews contrast with fresh seaside dishes; the refined foods of northern Italy melding with the more robust and sometimes *piccante* flavours of the Mezzogiorno. Here *coniglio* – rabbit – is stuffed with fennel, garlic and chilli 'in porchetta', while mussels – *moscioli* in local dialect – are served over spaghetti. *Vincisgrassi* is the local baked pasta, a fulsome concoction made with *lasagna*, *ragù*, chicken livers, *prosciutto*, béchamel and sometimes black truffles from Acqualagna. These are foods to satisfy the appetites of hunters, country folk and fishermen. Yet, notwithstanding the simple pleasures of *cibo della strada* (street food) such as the fried *olive ascolane* or *piadina* hot off the griddle, Le Marche is also home to some of Italy's greatest temples of gastronomy: at Ristorante Madonnina del Pescatore we'll experience modern seaside dining at its most sophisticated.

Le Marche's cuisine is pleasurably washed down with some of Italy's most undervalued wines. The Verdicchio grape, once used to produce indifferent wines bottled in the distinctive *lollibrigida* (the 'sexy bottle' was



Ascoli Piceno, panorama

supposed to suggest a Greek amphora), has become one of Italy's most characterful white grapes, producing wines of concentration and elegance. Little-known Pecorino can be equally delightful. Red wines, notably Rosso Piceno and Rosso Conero, are simply outstanding.

The region has plenty to delight and much of great merit in terms of art and architecture. Two painters in particular are associated with the area, Carlo Crivelli and Lorenzo Lotto, and we see some of the best of the pictures by these wayward geniuses.

Itinerary

Day 1: Ascoli Piceno. Fly at c. 8.15am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Rome Fiumicino. Drive to Ascoli Piceno (c.3 hours, a break is included), an exceptionally attractive little city, ringed by rivers and wooded hills, where the first three nights are spent. Evening *aperitivo* in a historic café in Piazza del Popolo – the town-centre seat of a family run distillery of *anisetta*.

Day 2: Ascoli Piceno. Explore the centre of Ascoli, an unspoilt agglomeration of medieval, Renaissance and Baroque buildings around arcaded squares and narrow streets. The walk ends at a producer of the delicate *olive ascolane*: sweet and juicy green olives stuffed with aromatised meat and fried in breadcrumbs. Watch how they are made and taste them here.

Day 3: Piattoni, San Savino di Ripatransone. Visit the Borgo Storico Seghetti Panichi, a bioenergetic garden and park. Tour of the garden with the Principessa Giulia Panichi Pignatelli. North-east of Ascoli lies the Piceno

wine region, a landscape characterised by vineyards interspersed with olive groves and farms. Tasting and lunch at the Cocci Grifoni winery and vineyards, a historic estate whose owner's vision and tenacity facilitated the revival and success of Pecorino wine.

Day 4: Monte San Giusto, Castelfidardo, Montecassiano. At Monte San Giusto see the great Crucifixion by Lorenzo Lotto, described by Berenson as the finest of the 16th century. Continue to Portonovo, home to the *pescatori dei moscioli* (designated a Slow Food Presidio product). Meet the fishermen and taste the mussels over lunch. Continue to Montecassiano, where the following two nights are spent.

Day 5: Montecassiano, Tolentino, Colmurano. Now something of a backwater, the shrine of S. Nicola da Tolentino once made the town a major pilgrimage destination and the sumptuous church has fine medieval frescoes. Continue to an *agriturismo* for a visit to the *orto* (vegetable garden) a tasting of local beer, salami and cheese and a traditional Marchegiano lunch.

Day 6: Marzocca, Urbino. In the morning, visit a vineyard to taste and see some of the Marchigian wines produced from local grapes. Continue to Marzocca for lunch at Madonnina del Pescatore, an exceptional seafood restaurant, with two Michelin stars. Continue to Urbino, Duke Federico da Montefeltro's principal residence and one of Italy's loveliest towns, where the following two nights are spent. See the exquisite Gothic frescoes in the Oratorio di S. Giovanni.

Gastronomic Le Marche
continued

Day 7: Acqualagna, Urbino. Some consider Acqualagna to be Italy's truffle capital. There is a truffle hunt near here this morning; sample the truffles over lunch in a nearby restaurant. Return to Urbino to visit the Palazzo Ducale, a masterpiece of architecture which evolved over 30 years as the perfect Renaissance secular environment.

Day 8: Cartoceto. Visit a cheesemaker and vendor, and see the *formaggio di fossa*: Pecorino cheese aged in wells. Olive oil and cheese-tasting before continuing to Rome Fiumicino airport to fly to London Heathrow, arriving c. 8.15pm.

Lecturers

Marc Millon. Wine, food and travel writer. Born in Mexico, he was raised in the USA before studying English Literature at the University of Exeter. Together with his wife, he has pioneered a series of illustrated wine-food-travel books including *The Wine and Food of Europe*, *The Wine Roads of France*, *The Wine Roads of Italy*, *The Food Lover's Companion to France* and *The Food Lover's Companion to Italy*. He is also the author of *The Taste of Britain* and lives in Devon, where he is closely involved with the food scene of the West Country. Marc has his own wine company, importing Italian wines from small family estates, and is a Vinalty International Academy Italian Wine Ambassador.

Dr R. T. Cobianchi. Art historian and researcher specialising in Italian art and architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque. His interests range from the iconography of the late Middle Ages to the sculpture of Neoclassicism.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,560 or £3,390 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,890 or £3,720 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 5 lunches and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; 3 wine and food tastings equivalent to light meals, all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturers.

Accommodation. Palazzo Guiderocchi, Ascoli Piceno (palazzoguiderocchi.com): a

converted Renaissance palace in the heart of the city, which retains many original features.

Villa Quiete, Montecassiano (villaquiete.it): 18th-century mansion, now a country hotel & spa, the rooms are furnished and decorated in a contemporary style. **Hotel San Domenico, Urbino** (viphotels.it): converted from a monastery building and the most centrally located hotel, opposite the Ducal Palace. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? There is a fair amount of walking involved. Participants need to be used to walking unaided on uneven terrain, and surefootedness is also essential for truffle hunting in the woods. The tour also involves walking in town centres, sometimes uphill and over unevenly paved ground. Some days involve a lot of driving through hilly terrain. Average distance by coach per day: 78 miles.

Gastronomic tours. On a tour that focuses on food, wine and cooking traditions, we regret that participants with special diets may not have the same gastronomic experience as those with no restrictions. Please discuss your requirements with us before booking.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.