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Two Guys and an Unwanted Vineyard

The New Abruzzo, How Binomio joined Italy's elite

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Though set amid stunning scenery, the vineyard that now produces Binomio attracted only the label's partners as bidders in an auction; today it yields Montepulciano reds that earn outstanding and classic scores.

The first days of September in Italy can be pretty thrilling. As the weather cools to perfection, the sun shines on and the seas stay warm. It's an ideal time to squeeze those last bits out of summer.

On the not-so-merry-go-round of COVID-19, Italy has been OK. Its vaccination rate blew past the U.S., and new cases have remained relatively low. If you overlook the masked waiters and the ubiquitous "Green Pass" needed to get into restaurants and public

transport, things seem “*normale*.” The piazzas are once again full, handshaking and kissing are slowly coming back, and wine is flowing.

Personally, I've been eager to get back to exploring vineyards after the dog days. Last week, I hopped on a train heading southwest to the Adriatic coast and one of Italy's least understood wine areas: Abruzzo. On the calf of the Italian boot opposite Rome, the Abruzzo hills are a stunning agricultural area that can rival anywhere else in Italy with its olive groves, wheat fields and vineyards that extend from the Apennine mountains to the blue-green sea.

Abruzzo is misunderstood because of its wild contrasts. Historically, most or much of its wines—including those with [D.O.C.](#) designations such as red Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, deep-colored rosé Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo and white Trebbiano d'Abruzzo—have been sold off in bulk to northern bottlers of inexpensive supermarket brands. (That figure is now 45 percent, according to the regional wine association, Consorzio di Tutela dei Vini d'Abruzzo.)

But Abruzzo also boasts prized, collectible wines from some visionary producers like Emidio Pepe, Masciarelli and Valentini.

Against this backdrop, Abruzzo is on the move, with a slew of new-generation producers reshaping the region bit by bit. In forthcoming weeks, I will be discussing a pair of passionate, determined winemakers—black sheep who have changed the wine landscape. Today, I will talk about [Binomio](#), one of the first new-wave stars of the 21st century.

Binomio isn't a winery, but a wine project started by a pair of friends who decided to push the envelope. In 11 of 14 examples tasted by *Wine Spectator*, this Montepulciano d'Abruzzo has scored 90 to 95 points, or outstanding to classic, on the publication's 100-point scale. The most recently reviewed vintage was [the 2015 Riserva](#) (90 points, \$52).

The pals behind Binomio are Abruzzo native Sabatino di Properzio and Soave-based northern Italian producer [Stefano Inama](#).

The two men met in Germany at the Prowein trade fair in 1997. There, they discovered they had lots in common and quickly struck up a friendship.

Both had come from experiences outside of wine. Di Properzio had studied business but was thrust into running [La Valentina](#) in Pescara province in the early 1990s after his family bought out the other partners in an estate investment. Inama, who worked in biotech, became a winemaker in 1991 when he joined his family's [Inama](#) estate.

The two also shared a love of Abruzzo.

“For me it’s paradise,” says Inama, now 62. “The first time I arrived there, I felt a vibration ... its authenticity.”

“Montepulciano d’Abruzzo is not rated among the kings of Italian wines,” Inama adds. “But I love its flavor profile—and the way it can be strong and gentle at the same time.”

After a couple of glasses of wine one evening at dinner in Dusseldorf, Inama daringly suggested that the two could team up to make a Montepulciano.

“I made the mistake to say that Montepulciano d’Abruzzo was the Barolo of the South and that we should do something together,” says Inama with a laugh. “And Sabatino immediately said, ‘OK, let’s do it.’”

For the first two vintages, 1998 and 1999, the men experimented with a selection of Montepulciano from La Valentina’s 20-plus acres of vineyards in the rural hills of Spoltore, just 5 miles inland from the Adriatic.

Di Properzio—who recalls Italian customers being shocked by his “high” wholesale bottle prices of La Valentina at 3,000 lira (about \$2 in the mid-1990s)—was eager to reach for greater heights.

“The idea was to make something richer, more powerful, finer, more international—not a rustic Montepulciano,” says Di Properzio, now 58.



Sabatino di Properzio felt the vineyard he and Stefano Inama bought for Binomio would be well-suited to a high-end, richer-style Montepulciano because it was planted to a clone that produces low yields and small berries. (Robert Camuto)

At La Valentina, Di Properzio had begun a shift to organic agriculture and vineyard-based winemaking under Tuscan enologist Luca d'Attoma, its now-longtime consultant. In tune with trends at the time, Inama and Di Properzio slashed yields and aged the Binomio wine in new French oak *barriques*.

But it wasn't until 2000 that they separated out Binomio and built its own identity. That year, Di Properzio was tipped about a Montepulciano vineyard up for sale in a bankruptcy auction.

The 10-acre vineyard was in ancient, rugged *terroir*. Situated on a windy, south-facing slope of clay and silt at about 1,100 feet in the foothills of the limestone Maiella massif, its main neighbor is a national park. The *pergola-trained* vineyard was planted with an ideal clone of Montepulciano for a boutique wine—a low-yielding, rare heirloom that produces small, thick-skinned berries and is known locally as “Clone of Africa” for the lobed, top-heavy shape of its bunches.

At auction, Inama recalls, they were the only bidder. “Nobody wanted that vineyard because it produced so little.”

From its first vintage in 2000, the wine from that vineyard proved generously rich and spicy.

Over time, the partners have dialed back on the new oak and extraction during fermentation. “Tastes changed, and we changed,” says Di Properzio. “Experience makes you more mature. And now we look more to elegance than power.”

Binomio hasn't grown beyond those 10 acres, which produce a maximum of 1,500 cases annually. “It's not a business. It's something Stefano and I do for the passion of Montepulciano,” says Di Properzio. “It's sustainable. But we take no money out.”

Over the past four vintages, Binomio has used French consultant *Stéphane Derenoncourt* to study the vineyard and delineate four different micro-*terroirs* within it for separate *vinifications*.

“Montepulciano is not naturally an elegant grape, and the clays of the Apennines are not the finest,” Inama says, “but it can be developed in a way to bring out more elegance.”

“We are midway in this project,” he adds, a statement that could sum up where Abruzzo is at today. “We're working for excellence to see how far we can go.”