

Umbria Uncorked

An epigraph to Montefalco should start with reference to the "Veranda of Umbria" the perched town of falcons. Montefalco is the most beatified village in Italy with eight Saints emanating from its ramparts. It is not hard to find this gem amidst myriad guidebook recommendations to Italian hilltop towns.

A major highway threads the Central Umbrian Valley 40kms south of Perugia spewing forth via grassy fields across what was a swamp drained in Roman times . To hit the wrong roundabout here is to enter into the bowels of Foligno and to be surely ringroaded forever in a maelstrom of traffic mayhem.

A bypass skirts the town onto the SS12 and threads through the plain trees bordering the hamlets and roads. The road is a bitumen chord that meanders forever upwards to the distant hilltop town walls.

A seriously oxygen deprived Carabinieri in a facsimile SS uniform was stationed at the Tee intersection before the last climb to Montefalco. He cast about ostensibly directing traffic for an untranslatable purpose. He shrugged, looked about and nonchalantly waved directing the newly acquired rental vehicle to proceed up the hill.

Our leisurely climb was interrupted by a convoy of official looking motorcycles and klaxon blaring trucks beating a path on the centreline at great speed.

A shout of "Jesus Elpifco", a veer to the precipice, and a phalanx of 50 head down cyclists on the Tour d'Italia peloton took the line of no retreat straight at the poor defenceless Peugeot. Gasps and shouts from all occupants and a never ending punch on the horn saved the leading Australian from being killed by compatriots.

A swerve dragged the field away from a possible decimation of the United Nations of riders following. The reaction of all passengers was to cower in the seats and barely breathe even above the staccato blurring of the followup vehicles.

Montefalco seemed a haven in the clouds when the walls were reached and a meander along Via Leopardi to the 15th Century Agritourism Cottage took on a sanctuary like status. Disembarkation at the Moncelli Farm stay seemed somewhat melancholic only broken by the prolonged wait for Celestina the proprietor. A clean and simple cluster of buildings overlooking the vineyards, gardens and olive groves brought home the reality of our Internet holiday choice.



Dumping chattels led to a foray into the walled Village to find a good Osteria to spread our largess. It appears we should have booked but a plaintive look and the prospect of eccentricity brought a shuffle of chairs and tables.

Four complimentary proseccos and a round of baked flat bread were bounced onto the table pronto. A flurry of Prousts a quick bottle of Rossi Black Cock Chianti Classico at E9 and the food was ordered.

The pace was astounding at all points of the operation and in no time Pasta Tartufo, Pasta Sacrantino, Pizza Fungoli and a Montefalco pomodoro with local sausage hit the killing floor. Big serves and tasty to boot was followed up with gratis limoncello.

Replete after the previous nites excesses the hard work of touristimo-ing requires fortitude. The term non-agrotourism should be feted about this style of travel as the narcolepsy precludes early rising on the de-stressed.

The country noises of untested testosterone challenged bantam roosters, croaking instead of crowing, do not intrude upon the sleeping beauties. The opening of the shuttered windows reveals a sky with floating oncospheres of plain tree pollen permeating the atmosphere.

This cloud causes a spring haze like industrial pollution to hide the green countryside.



Awakening to another hazy day with pollen wrecking havoc upon nasal passages dispenses with any photographic ambitions. The Umbrian malaise is caused by the Montefalcon Tsetse Fly an early onset psychosis that sets in upon the unwary setting unmanageable timetables already delaying an early start to touring.

A morning walk to the Monday Markets at the old wall is the proscribed activity but a wander up through the Hilltown is mandatory. A smattering of locals is taking the layday coffee break to extremes with active movements severely limited. Now is the time to use up the email introductions and make contact with new friends.

Italy is a country that exists for you if you can sneak into its cerebellum but even if you cannot be this Italian its fun trying. A chance email to an advertisement in the New Zealand Cuisine Magazine for a Villa stay introduced us to Alison Ryde an Artist 14 years an Italian expatriate residing near to Montefalco.

The introduction was a catapult into the lifestyle she has established outside the Montefalco walls in the realms of peasant wine, olive production and Cuisine Rustica.

Her studio and Villa is a beacon to what an expatriate lifestyle retreat can do for a talented wanderer. Her passion has infused even into the Italian psyche leading to a rare fusion of old and new worlds.

She has ingratiated her soul into the local community and provides lodgings and advice for any visiting traveller. Her work has led to her being the first non Italian artist to be asked to paint the wonderful posters for the annual Festia on three occasions.

On any travel forum the first question after accommodation is where is the best place to eat. No matter the food, if the psyche is not in place, the planets not aligned to Mars then the Age of Aquarius is not going to happen.

The Montefalco Pizzeria/Trattoria "Il Verziere" on the main drag in has the irrepressible owner Pietro making the infirm, dispossessed and itinerant a part of his enthusiastic life. He has the rare "C"(charm) gene where bonhomie means the food is not necessarily the main game.

This Trattoria has ambience, friendly repartee plus his obvious pleasure culminates in a free nites entertainment. The interactive nature of the chatter, blues, other tables and the never ending supply of limincello and grappa poste hoc du proc almost diminish the intrusion of good food.

The idea of coperto (bread money) with this style of service is not usurious to the wary traveller unused to this Italian nuance.

An introduction to the Director of the Museo San Francisca gains a 3 hour personalised guided tour of the Paintings of Perugia . St Francis of Assisi stopped here and a learned explanation of the symbols of deistic revelation is a must for the non-pious.

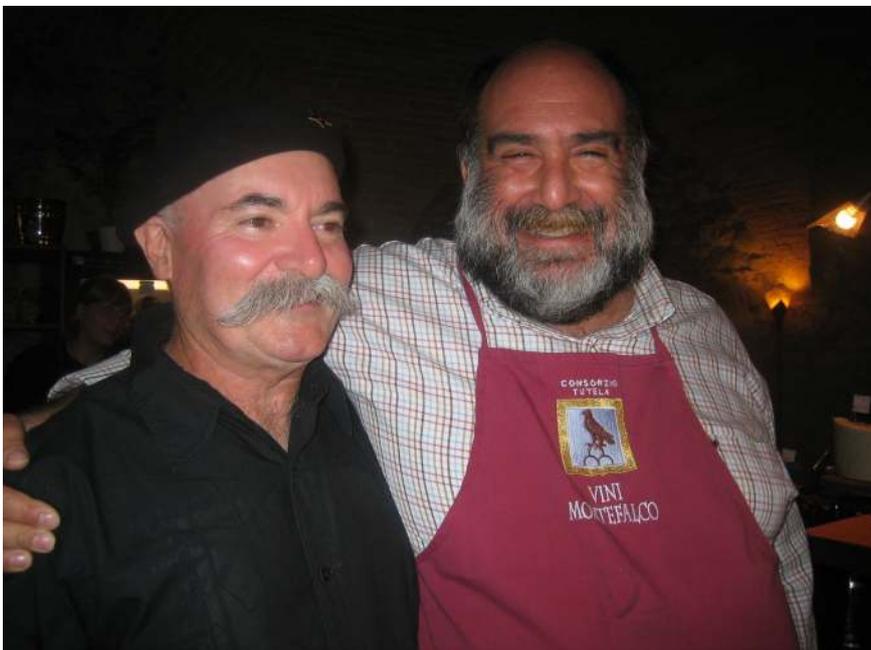
Montefalco has a second great claim to fame in the rarity of its wine. Sagrantino is a wine of 11th Century origins but is only made under DOCG restrictions, which limit production to areas only around Montefalco under strict allocation.

This drop has allusions to being based upon the sacramental wine of the Roman Catholic Church and has had the blessed life since.



The 12th Century gates of Antonelli vineyards on the lower slopes lead into an 18th century villa that stands beside a modern tasting room. A vertical tasting of the current crop finished with the sweet sacrantino passito and the price of vintages are now spiralling toward the E100 mark.

The drive back through the countryside led to a visit to the home of one of the characters of local food. Giorgio had a Pavarotti like appearance with a largess to boot as he cracked open an aged Pinot Grigio, wrestled the covers off a batch of Sicilian pastries and commenced a rapid tour of the surrounds.



A giant hog harrumphed in the mud a few meters from the house, dogs barked, chooks and pigeons fluttered squarking losing feathers about the perimeters. The visit was as fast as the tour and the car left him contemplating the preparation of a Communion dinner.

A peasant farmer was spied prodding the undergrowth with an outlandish set of pincers. Enquiry with long explanations elicited an excited dissertation on the tactics of avoiding bites by death adders.

The prodding scared the snakes and enabled the pincers to grasp the reason for his search in the long grass. This is where wild asparagus grows and this local delicacy is boiled and tossed along with local olio into pasta. The taste is somewhat tarter than Australian asparagus and not as easy to eat raw due to its stringy nature.

Return to the Village square and a wrestle with the vagaries of another calorie attack interspersed with yet more vino Rossi. The Trattoria perched on the small piazza has a basement dining area with lights shinning into a series of caves.

Enquiry leads into the story of the reason behind the tunnels, which no doubt Dan Brown could expand into a measured mystery.

The Priests from the monastery had constructed a passage down under the town to the local Convent. Tales abounded of baby skeletons and spurious remains discovered in the caverns covered by Church and time.

The tenure of the meal seemed to have a solemnity due to the proximity of the dark abyss. The antipasto proved a stumbling block and the secondos were cancelled after a veritable degustation of primis lobbed never ending onto the long table. Sleep comes easy to the indolent.

After only weeks into the next yearly soiree a trip into Umbria is on the agenda at the spiritual home of the wary travellers. It is hard recovering from the near death experience of Giorgio who since last visit has opened his ristorante inside a walled village of 30 houses in the hills.

First visions of pulling up at the small grey village of Torre de Colle perched high above Bevagna on the Foligno flats is something out of the Boccaccio of the Decameron crossed with the village of the dammed and Gin Alley.

This place has been lifted out of solitary confinement by the insertion of a Gambero Rosso recommended uber Umbrian masterpiece of culinary overload. This is an outrageous experience if lucky to strike a vacancy but being with his expatriate benefactori Alison Ryde helps to procure a seat.

Alla via di Mezzo Torre del Colle, is a mouthful in more ways than one and is now a secret venue that must be visited in Umbria by celebs and palate ponces. Giorgio is an awesome site blasting his way around the old stone building laconically directing high calorie traffic in an unhurried nonchalant way and lucky to have met him 2 years ago as his house guest before he was a near death gastronomical experience.

The restaurant has stonewalls ,a cloistered and secular inner with a hubble bubble of diners filling it out presenting a somewhat sombre first up glimpse. A comfortable clangour of intervention and comaradre soon envelopes all as the anthem is played and the gustitatory games commenced.

The contest started with grace and ease ,that line stolen from an ancient ribald poem seemed apt, as the antipasto of 15 plates of dried/cured meats, faro, relishes, spices, olives, olio, a choice of 10 cheeses of hard/pecorino variety, unpasturised Gorgonzolas and local sheep cheese are loaded onto random spaces.

The platters were resting on the bar ,tables and handy ledges creating a casual milling effect as all dinning tables interacted. The tastings commenced as the Italio-pidgin English conflag had the minority anglaise reaching a communicative level with local Italian participants.

Next course was local faro zuppa splashed onto the boards soon followed by 2 primi pasta dishes....wild boar/ beef spaghetti and wild spinach, pesto Ravioli.

No rest in this masticatory marathon as by this time we are deep into the prosecco/whites and sancrantino rosso and talking fluid Etalion to the 15 strong scrimmage when the rabbit and roast wild boar secundos start dropping onto the killing floor.

Giorgio weighs in at about 25 stone or 250ks and he is eating what dishes we leave at the same time having a conversation with any one of the other 70 odd diners.

Whilst this is going on Franco and Angelo our inherited local Montefalco compadres are yelling out "Viva la Revolutione"..... "salute " or trying to crack onto young (read middle aged) fringe dwellers and the riot continued into plates of sweets....coffee.....grappa shooters by the truckload.

All this at about E20 per person but of course that did not take into account the Montefalco rossi and Sacrantino from the legendary Antonelli 12thC vineyard.

Next day is a slow start but after a stop at the bakery just outside the walls for doppio coffees and soon the locale vino rosso was on the deck by 9.30am at Café del Corso in the main Montefalco drag strip.

Touristing never stops in these little villages as the days itinery means off to Spello at lunchtime.

Back home again at 3.00 to let the troops sleep some weariness off..... Then after this off out to Bevagna and some "world" famous sculptors house and maybe some sheep milking ?????

Medi-evil towns can bleed the soul with replication and there are only so many Duomos and Icons that can be assimilated. The real reason behind any Italian sojourn is that the true sport of Italy is wine, food and conversation done to the max. If ever there was a nation that had a culinary triathlon, as a prerequisite to daily living, Italy is it.