

LAMBRUSCO LANDS

It boasts natural beauty and an abundance of culinary delights, but the unexpected highlight of Emilia Romagna is a wine that's reinventing itself. Let Lambrusco be your guide through a tour of the gastronomic heartland of Italy, says **Sarah Lane**



Today's Lambruscos are finally shedding the stigma of their cheap and cheerful predecessors thanks to a new wave of small, independent wineries that are exploring the full potential of this ancient family of grapes.

It's time for Lambrusco to come to the fore in all its glorious variety and claim a place among the many excellences of Emilia-Romagna, alongside world-favourite foods such as Parmigiano Reggiano cheese and balsamic vinegar. With 13 officially registered grape varieties, eight DOCs from Modena to Mantova and two millennia of history (even Mantova-born Latin poet Virgil mentioned it in his work), Lambrusco has plenty to offer.

Add into the equation the territory's magnificent and under-explored cities of art, supreme sports cars and glorious countryside, and a trip through the Lambrusco lands becomes a must.

Modena: slow food, fast cars

Modena, home to Ferrari and balsamic vinegar: two extremes in terms of speed (a balsamic earns the 'traditional' label after minimum 12 years' ageing), both among the elite of Italian distinction. This is where Italy's Food Valley and Motor Valley intersect, with Maserati, Pagani and Lamborghini, as well as countless gastronomic delights, all nearby. In a perfect union of the two, the historic Cavallino restaurant near the Ferrari factory is soon to be relaunched by top world chef, Modena-born Massimo Bottura.

Lambrusco, one of Italy's most historic wines, is present everywhere in Modena, from the huge sculpture of grapes made of Murano glass just outside the city to the restaurants and bars of the city centre, which include **Lambruscheria** (www.lambruscheriamodena.it), a tiny wine bar promoting all types of Lambrusco with city-wide events.

Just north of Modena, the best known of the Lambruscos is produced near the village of Sorbara. Pale in colour and high in acid, Lambrusco di Sorbara is traditionally made as a field blend of the Sorbara grape and Lambrusco Salamino, the deeper red, softer variety needed to pollinate naturally sterile Sorbara. Nowadays, however, in line with global trends, there's a move towards monovarietal wines such as the delicately fruity Leclisse and deliciously fresh Radice ➤

Left: vineyards at Castelvetro, the hilly village south of Modena

Photograph: Stefano Valeri/Alamy

bottlings, both by **Paltrinieri** (www.cantinapaltrinieri.it). Sorbara's characteristics make it perfect for traditional-method winemaking too, and Christian Bellei at **Cantina della Volta** (www.cantinadellavolta.com) is considered a guru of the style.

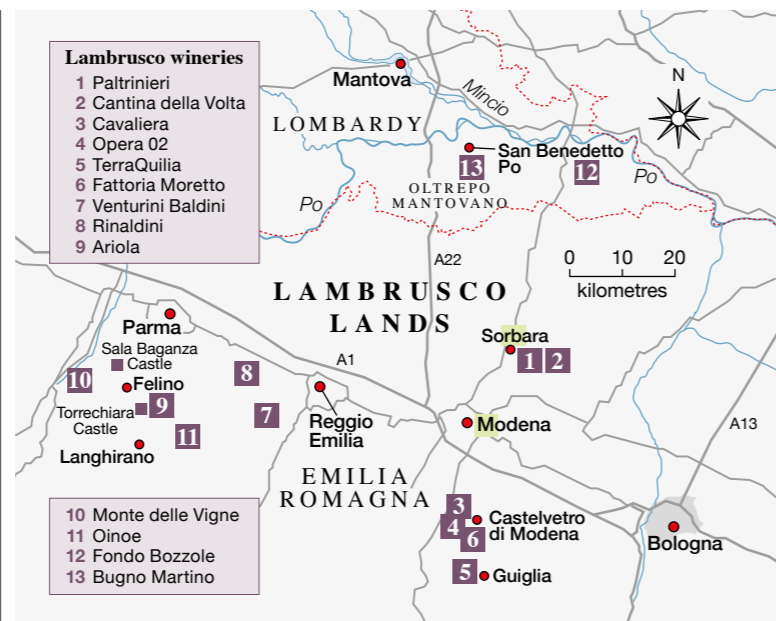
TRAVEL TIP Visit Ferrari's factory museum in Maranello and Enzo Ferrari's birthplace in Modena. www.ferrari.com

The hills: old meets new

The hills around the charming village of Castelvetro, south of Modena, come ablaze each autumn with foliage and the red stalks (*graspe*) that give Lambrusco Grasparossa its name. Here, a group of wineries has created a new high-quality consortium, Montebarello 155, with regulations including manual harvests, low yields and the use of monovarietal Grasparossa.

They include **Cavaliera** (www.cavaliera.it), where both lusciously purple and rosé Grasparossas are bottle-fermented; the next project is a blanc de noir with the 2020 Grasparossa harvest. The winery is a countryside idyll with home-cooked food served under a vine-covered pergola and country-style bedrooms. Like most Modena wineries, there's a loft for traditional balsamic, which is made with grape must by the solera method in rows of at least five barrels of diminishing sizes and in different woods.

Across the valley at the contemporary **Opera 02** winery (www.opera02.it), balsamic was the sole use for grapes when the Montanari family bought the land; their son Mattia took charge 15 years ago, putting into practice his dream of making wines that express Grasparossa's versatile and convivial



Below: a scenic view at Opera 02 winery



‘Our grandfather would have loved the possibilities of today’s winemaking technology’

Fabio Altariva, Fattoria Moretto

nature, picking early the traditionally late-harvested grape, for a clean, fresher acidity. The resort has stylish accommodation, a restaurant and an infinity pool overlooking the vine-covered hills.

At Guiglia, known as the balcony of Emilia for its wide-open views, **TerraQuilia** (www.terraquilia.it) specialises in cloudy ancestral-method wines, while Fabio and Fausto Altariva of **Fattoria Moretto** (www.fattoriamoretto.it) use the Charmat method. ‘Our grandfather would have loved the possibilities of today’s winemaking technology,’ says Fabio, whose son Alessio has joined the firm, planting the family roots ever more firmly.

Their Grasparossa Monovitigno inspired the late wine critic Luigi Veronelli to add an enthusiastic stop-press to his wine guide, praising the ‘love and respect’ with which they treat the ‘very human’ grape; they also produce a Modena DOC Pignoletto that’s herbier and less fruity than its better-known Bologna counterparts. Top restaurants serving Fattoria Moretto wines include Bottura’s



Above: the Cavaliera winery, complete with restaurant and rooms

three-star Michelin Osteria Francescana in Modena, where waiting lists are several months long.

TRAVEL TIP Each September, Castelvetro hosts the Grasparossa festival and Renaissance-themed events around the chessboard piazza. www.visitcastelvetro.it

Reggio Emilia: cheese country

Midway between Modena and Parma, Reggio is often overlooked but, as the birthplace of the Italian flag, it has a quiet dignity and plenty of gastronomic delights. Reggio Emilia’s traditional balsamic vinegar is made the same way as Modena’s, and the town contributes half the double-barrelled name of Parmigiano Reggiano, some of the best of which is made with milk from Reggio’s breed of rusty-red cattle; regular winner at the World Cheese Awards, Matteo Cattelani of the **Grana d’Oro** dairy (www.granadoro.it), has a herd of 280.

Cheese-making procedures have remained unaltered since medieval monks introduced them: the evening’s skimmed milk is combined with full-fat morning milk in copper vats, and cheeses age for a minimum of 12 months.

Consortium checks are rigorous; only the best bear the official firebrand.

In this area, Lambrusco Salamino, so-named for the salami-like shape of its bunches, comes to the fore in its own right.

Once abandoned, the historic **Venturini Baldini** estate (www.venturinibaldini.it) has been given new life by Giuseppe Prestia from Sicily (via London) who, although a newcomer to the area, believes in strengthening the image of Lambrusco as firmly as anyone. ‘It’s fantastic that Giacomo Savorini, head of the newly united Lambrusco consortia, has a clear-thinking, dynamic approach,’ comments Prestia, who foresees a new territorial branding strategy. Like other quality winemakers, however, he has come up against Lambrusco prejudice, notably with his Cadelvento rosé, a Sorbara-Grasparossa spumante: ‘With Lambrusco on the label nobody was interested, but when we moved the word to the back, it shot to popularity, winning top awards.’

Two new Venturini Baldini wines, both made from local varieties, are a bottle-fermented Lambrusco Montericco and a still version of the typically appley local native white, Spergola. ➤

The château-style winery has country-house accommodation, a pool and a 300-year-old balsamic vinegar loft; Prestia has even joined the tradition of starting a set of balsamic barrels for each of his four children. Footpaths lead from the estate to Canossa castle, home of 11th-century ruler Matilde di Canossa. According to legend, Matilde, a famously bold leader, used Lambrusco at the battle of Sorbara in 1084 to beat enemy troops who overindulged in the wine, fell asleep and lost the battle.

The **Rinaldini** winery (www.rinaldinivini.it) is run by another independent-minded woman, Paola Rinaldini. ‘We did things differently from the start,’ she explains. ‘My father, who bought the estate, was a restaurateur and we were used to lots of different wines.’ The family’s passion for Amarone, for instance, led them to make a dry passito with a rare type of Lambrusco, Peduncolo Rosso. Rinaldini remembers cold winters when the family went without heaters to save cuttings of the vines from the frost. Their Vigna del Picchio is an intriguing still Lambrusco Maestri with extended skin contact and 30 months’ barrel ageing.

TRAVEL TIP Book an early morning dairy tour to see Parmigiano Reggiano being made. www.parmigianoreggiano.com

Parma: tasteful and tasty

Colli di Parma DOC Lambrusco must contain at least 85% Maestri grapes, making the wines more tannic and structured than most Lambruscos and particularly inviting for many drinkers. The hills here are dotted with castles including the landmark, multi-turreted Torrechiara just outside Langhirano, home of Parma ham, which is celebrated (in normal times) at a dedicated festival each September. Another of Parma’s numerous charcuterie specialities is Salame di Felino, named after the town of Felino (nothing to do with felines!) where the castle cellars house a salami museum, one of several small yet interesting food-themed museums around here; the wine museum is at **Sala Baganza castle** (www.museidelcibo.it).

Near Langhirano, Marcello Ceci at the **Ariola** winery (www.vinariola.com) is satisfied with his decision to leave the colossal Ceci family wine empire to grow his own grapes rather than buy them in, as many larger wineries, not just the cooperatives, do here. In addition to making several monovarietal Lambrusco Maestris, he too is investing in Spergola, replacing existing Chardonnay with it.

Monte delle Vigne winery (www.montedellevigne.it) has a glorious hillside position between two nature reserves, with footpath access to the Via Francigena pilgrim’s way. Here, it’s two still wines that stand out

Below: the cantina at Ariola winery



Photograph: Dario Fusaro



Above: the view overlooking Mantova's historic centre and the Mincio river

from the rest: spicy, fruit-filled Nabucco, a Barbera-Merlot blend; and Callas, a zesty Malvasia di Candia Aromatica.

Parma is still touchingly attached to the memory of Marie Louise, Napoleon's second wife and Duchess of Parma, whose 30-year rule left a far-reaching impact on the local culture, even extending to choice of vines, as she favoured the introduction of international varieties from France. At **Oinoe** (www.oinoevini.it) they are put to good use for wines including a traditional-method Pinot Blanc-Chardonnay. There's also yet another variety of Lambrusco: Viadanese. Like Alex Cerioli who runs the winery, the vine is from Mantova province; it gives a rich and tannic, deep-purple wine.

TRAVEL TIP Antico Borgo di Tabiano Castello, a former cheese farm at the foot of Tabiano castle, is now a characterful hotel. www.tabianocastello.com

Mantova: water, water (and Lambrusco) everywhere

Surrounded by lakes, with a skyline that's particularly striking from the water and countless artistic treasures thanks to 400 years of Gonzaga rule, Mantova is surprisingly underexplored by tourists. Rivers criss-cross the province: the Mincio, which bursts into bloom each summer with exotic lotus flowers, joins the Po just east of Mantova. The area's fertile land is largely agricultural, with pumpkins for the local-speciality pasta

(tortelli di zucca) very much in evidence. Although this is Lombardy, the Oltrepò Mantovano, south of the river, has plenty in common with neighbouring Emilia: Parmigiano Reggiano can still be made, for a start, and there's a strong tradition of cooperative wineries. Recently, however, several small producers have started making some exciting wines.

Franco Accorsi at **Fondo Bozzole** (www.fondobozzole.it) named his first wine Giano, a Lambrusco Salamino with notes of black cherry and chocolate, after the god of new beginnings. His Incantabiss, intense and fruit-driven with a pleasantly bitter finish, is made with the most recently registered Lambrusco variety, Grappello Ruberti, previously thought to be a clone of Viadanese.

Nearby at San Benedetto Po, famous for the vast Benedictine monastery where Matilde di Canossa was buried, Giuseppe Zavanella of the **Bugno Martino** winery (www.bugnomartino.com) has just completed his first harvest of Grappello Ruberti. Although the family has farmed this land for two centuries, Zavanella only began making his own wine a few years ago, concentrating, until now, on Salamino with some superb results, including a herby, bottle-fermented version, Essentia.

TRAVEL TIP Osteria da Bortolino, a 120-year-old woodland eatery with atmosphere, offers local wines and delicious food. www.locandabortolino.it



Based in Emilia Romagna, Sarah Lane is a wine, food and travel journalist, also organising private wine experiences in the area

Photograph: Andrea Comi/Getty