



SIMPLE PLEASURES

On the edge of the Monti Sibillini National Park, the ancient walled town of Norcia is the centre of pork salami making and one of Umbria's best-kept secrets, says Rachel Truman

PHOTOGRAPHS MARK PARREN TAYLOR



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Olive groves near Priego de Córdoba. RIGHT Dani García's fêted purée of chickpeas dotted with cheese and slices of anchovy



Glimpsed from above, Norcia looks like a squat ship adrift in a shimmering sea of undulating fields. You'd never think that this blink-and-you'll-miss-it town is where the Italians' love affair with salami first began. But then Italy never ceases to surprise.

Norcia lies in the remote Valnerina (Black Valley) and is one of the best-kept secrets of Umbria, an unsung region of hilltop villages, craggy valleys and jagged peaks. Happily, its cultural treasures are as prolific as the landscape, from the religious, artistic and historic gems of Assisi and Perugia to the fine food and excellent wines of Montefalco and Orvieto. It is also an extremely manageable region to discover on a short break, with most towns an easy and scenic drive from each other.

Tucked away in the far south-eastern corner, 90 minutes from Perugia, Norcia is slightly out on a limb, but all the better for it. Enclosed by fourteenth-century walls, its high-arched gates and towers look out over the town's narrow streets, Gothic church and graceful piazza on one side and the looming Sibillini mountains on the other. Norcia may

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not have the roster of sights of Umbria's larger towns, but neither does it have the crowds. It does however lay claim to serious spiritual credentials, as the birthplace of St Benedict, and to natural beauty as the gateway to the untamed wilderness of the Monti Sibillini National Park. It is a popular base for hikers and weekenders from Rome wishing to explore this little-known part of Umbria.

Others come on a pilgrimage of a different kind: to discover why Norcia is the pig capital of Italy. The tradition of pork butchery dates back to medieval times when pig farmers, *norcino*, skilfully preserved their pork for the harsh winters ahead. The town soon became synonymous with these expert butchers; the Italian term for pork butchery is now *norcineria*. The scent of wood-smoke and roasted pork pervades the air, wafting from the numerous *norcinerie* that sell juicy slices of herb-flecked porchetta



Chianina beef tartare, black truffle and charcoal-infused oil at Vespasia. LEFT Salami at the Brancaleone da Norcia. RIGHT Chef Flavio Faedi. PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Castelluccio lentils with black truffle at Vespasia. Traditional Cinturino-breed pigs. Historic map of Norcia. The tower of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria, Norcia



to go. Brancaleone de Norcia, one of the more upmarket shops, draws me in. Antonio Graziani, who has been in the business for 50 years, greets me brandishing a knife before dexterously carving long ribbons of *prosciutto de Norcia*, two-year-old ham with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status. It is salty and spicy and not as sweet or soft as other Italian hams. A thick coin of wild boar

salami swiftly follows. Marbled and an intense shade of burgundy, it is gutsy and fragrant with the wild herbs that the boar has eaten.

Here, and in the other *norcinerie* that huddle along the streets, is a staggering selection of salami: *ciauscolo* (soft, young salami that is spread on bread, like pâté), *la bomba* (shaped like a hand grenade) and *coglioni di mulo* or 'mule's testicles'— an oval-shaped salami with a glistening slab of lard through the centre and so-called as it is always sold in pairs). Strings of *goccine* (small, spicy sausages) dangle next to huge haunches of wild boar ham and ropes of dark liver sausages curl next to stacks of *guanciale* (cured pig's cheeks). Grey and rather withered, the *guanciale* doesn't look particularly appetising— until I try fatty slithers of it enriched in an implausibly flavoursome passata atop twirls of fresh *bucatini*, served at Vespasia, the fine-dining restaurant at the charming Palazzo Seneca, my home-from-home for the weekend.

It is at Vespasia that I also have my first sniff of Norcia's other pungent speciality, *tartufi* (truffle), whose aroma hits me as a slow-cooked stew of local lamb and mountain potatoes arrives at my table. Wafer-thin shavings are sprinkled over the top of this earthy, rich and deeply satisfying dish. Varieties of truffles are sniffed out by hounds in nearby woods for most of the year but the most precious, the black truffle (*melanosporum Vittadini*), is in season from December to March. Darker and more consistent in colour than summer truffles, they have an incredible odour and are celebrated each February with a truffle fair in the town.

Truffles are used with wild abandon in the local cooking: they are shaved over pasta, minced and slathered over bruschetta, and studded through salami, pecorino and chocolate. It's a touch of luxury in an otherwise simple regional cuisine where the food is hearty and wholesome. Filling and protein-rich legumes and spelt are ubiquitous in this part of Umbria. Sheep are used both for meat and cheese, including ricotta and pecorino, while wild mushrooms, woodland berries such as bilberries, game, freshwater trout, char and crayfish are plentiful. The same dishes crop up in the town's *trattorie*— lentil and sausage soup, *cinghiale* (wild boar) ragù and Chianina beef cooked ►

alle brace (over a charcoal fire). It's humble fare. One chef striving to preserve age-old traditions while adding a gourmet twist is Flavio Faedi (who earned his stripes in Michelin-star restaurants around Italy before moving to Norcia). He pored over ancient Norcian recipes and sought out small, like-minded producers to create the menu at Vespasia.

'We might add more freshness, different colours and use modern techniques but all of our dishes include the original flavours,' he explains. The *roveja* (field peas) with shepherd's ricotta gnocchi demonstrates his philosophy perfectly. A silky velouté of the small pea-like beans fills a curled crisp bread. Delicate crimped gnocchi, made from dried fresh ricotta cheese, are mixed with slivers of *guanciale* and a lick of ricotta cream. It's scrumptious – rustic but refined.

'I have all the traditional elements of the dish – crunchy beans, soft beans, bread and gnocchi,' says Flavio. 'It's a got a simple taste but strong flavours which is very typical of Umbria.'

Preserving Norcia's traditions is a life-long passion of the hotel's owners, brothers Vincenzo and Federico Bianconi, who took six painstaking years to restore the sixteenth-century Palazzo Seneca into the gorgeous boutique hotel that opened in 2008. There is a cookery school and the Bianconis can arrange for guests to visit local producers for an authentic experience of Norcia's gastronomic traditions. They also work with local schools to keep the young people connected with their land and traditions, by introducing them to people like pig farmer Giuseppe Fausti, whose family have farmed on the Sibillini foothills for 400 years. We find him surrounded by his prized porkers, a small breed called Cinturino that used to be typical here but fell out of favour with larger producers due to the low yield. The pigs are free to roam the

The Piano Grande is a vast and beautiful upland plain where wild ponies graze and Sibillini sheep cling to the steep inclines

woodlands, snuffling wild herbs, fruit and nuts and drinking from the river until winter when they are slaughtered for hams, sausages and salami. 'They live free and they're happy– so they taste good,' he says.

Rita Rossi is another artisan producer who has revived ancient traditions. As well as making excellent pecorino and a sharp, creamy goats' cheese called *caprino fresca*, she also cultivates saffron. The small hamlet of Colforcella and nearby Cascia, 15km south-west of Norcia, were known for the precious spice during the Middle Ages and so 20 years ago Rita and her brother Francesco and a few other growers re-instated the prized crop. Their saffron and goats' cheese feature on Flavio's menu in a rich, creamy risotto.

That evening, back in Norcia, the *passaggiata* has begun. Locals mill around the piazza and linger at café tables for *aperitivo* – a chilled glass of pale lemon Orvieto Classico, perhaps. In Granaro del Monte, tapestries, boar heads and hunting paraphernalia adorn the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A Norcian breakfast. Summer truffles. Horses in the Sibillini mountains. Lentil and sausage soup at Rifugio degli Alpini. Piazza San

Benedetto, Norcia. Regina sells lentils in Castelluccio. The Sibillini mountains near Castelluccio. Cappelletti pasta with Chianina beef stuffing at Vespasia



Potato gnocchi with fresh truffle at Vespasia

walls and a cavernous wood-fired oven belches out woodsmoke as heroic slabs of meat and sausages spit and sizzle on the grill. Waiters dance between the tables delivering honest dishes in generous portions. The signature dish is pork fillet with truffle and slices of *sibillini lardo* with creamed sheep's milk cheese and pears, which sounds incredible but after a day spent in the *norcinerie*, might be a step too far. But, the wild boar ragù is inviting: meltingly tender

nuggets of slow-cooked meat and a deeply flavoured sauce envelop soft ribbons of tagliatelle. A plate of local cheeses, including an achingly salty but moreish hard ricotta, with wood-berry jams is a satisfying end to another hearty feed.

The next day, the mountains provide the opportunity for some much-needed exercise. The drive up affords staggering views back across the Valnerina. Even more thrilling scenery awaits as we pass up and around the mountains into the Piano Grande, an unexpectedly beautiful vast upland plain. Flanked by mountains and strewn with clumps of chestnut trees, this is where wild ponies graze and wolves roam, Sibillini sheep cling to the steep inclines and eagles circle. Landlocked Castelluccio rises out above these burnt gold plains. The hamlet is famed for its sweet, delicate-skinned lentils and is a good starting point to tackle the national park's web of hiking trails. It makes Norcia seem like a bustling metropolis: the population peaks at 200 in summer, dwindling to just 20 families in winter. We meet Regina who is in her seventies and has lived here all her life. Perched on a rickety chair, she balances a tray of the tiny lentils on her lap as she deftly sifts out stones. I buy a bag for a snip at €4 and she tells me to boil them gently with a little garlic, some carrots and olive oil to finish. Nothing else is required. The only other sign of industry is a small dairy where bundles of salted ricotta hang outside to dry. I ring the bell – a rusty cow bell with an animal bone as a clapper – in hope of sampling some, but there is no one around. Sleepy is not the word.

Instead, I head upwards to Rifugio Degli Alpini in the high pass of Forca di Presta where walkers set off to for Mount Vettore, the highest peak in the Sibillini mountains, and officially in the Marche. The cosy, wooden lodge is a hungry hiker's dream. Owner and 'man of the mountains', Gino Quattrococchi, talks of where to find the tastiest truffles, the fleshiest porcini, the sweetest chestnuts and the fattest char. And I've arrived just at the right time to try his special lentil soup, made to his grandmother's recipe. He won't divulge the secrets of this handsome bowl of steaming soup, thick with lentils and chunks of herby sausages. As I greedily gulp it down, it strikes me that this humble dish epitomises this area, with its simple but seductive pleasures. No wonder the Umbrians have kept it quiet. 🍴

NURSIAN ADDRESS BOOK

WHERE TO STAY
PALAZZO SENECA
10 Via Cesare Battisti
00-39-0743 817434

www.palazzoseneca.com
More like a grand home than hotel, with its attentive staff, flagstone floors, huge fireplaces, pianos and reading room. Wood-floored bedrooms are simply but finely furnished and breakfasts sensational. Truffle hunting, food and wine-tasting excursions, guided hikes and winter sports can all be arranged.

Abercrombie & Kent offers three nights' B&B at Palazzo Seneca, with flights and transfers, from £895pp. 0845-618 2213; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk
WHERE TO EAT AND SHOP
BRANCALEONE DE NORCIA
17 Corso Sertorio
00-39-0743 817534; www.brancaleonedanorcia.it
A fine *norcineria* brimming with salami, hams, cheeses, jars of Norcia honey and all kinds of truffles.

CAFFE TANCREDI
10-12 Corso Sertorio
Small, low-key café that is charmingly stuck in the 1950s: stop for an espresso hit at the bar or *aperitivo* at an outside table.
FRATELLI ANSUINI NORCINERIA
Viale della Stazione
00-39-0743 816809
www.fratelliansuini.com
The town's oldest and most famous *norcineria* has been selling salami, fresh sausages, lentils, and truffle products since the 1940s.

GRANARO DEL MONTE
12 Via Alfieri
00-39-0743 816513
www.bianconi.com
Restaurant in a former papal granary that does a lively trade in Norcian specialties.
PASTICCERIA POLENTA 2 Via Roma
Fresh breads, spelt biscuits and other sweet specialties.
RIFUGIO DEGLI ALPINI Forca di Presta
00-39-0736 809278
A humble refuge with sensational food that draws hikers from far and wide.

RISTORANTE BECCOFINO
12 Piazza San Benedetto
00-39-0743 816086; www.ristorantebeccofino.norcia.com
Family-run truffle restaurant on the main piazza.
VESPASIA Palazzo Seneca (see left)
The smartest option in town, Palazzo Seneca's elegant dining room sees accomplished chef Flavio Faedi add creative flair and gourmet twists to Norcia's rustic cooking heritage.