

Italy's Green Heart

Despite being one of Italy's smallest regions, Umbria certainly has an extensive food selection. From wild boar sausages to black truffles there is something for every speciality buyer to tap into, says Louise Miles

Two of the reasons British customers are so attracted to Italian cuisine, is firstly because of the diverse flavours, but secondly due to the retail culture. Rather than having big supermarkets which dominate the market share Italians stay close to their roots and prefer to support their local bakeries, delicatessens and smokehouses. This has meant that artisan products are still able to be prepared in the traditional way, without fear of mass production. This way of life means that small, family businesses flourish, and in turn means Italian retailers can still keep their products fresh and locally sourced.

Regions such as Umbria are still very much rooted in these traditions, and its eclectic mix of quality olives, delicious truffles, and fine wines is starting to become more recognisable even in UK fine food shops. The word is spreading that provenance is focused more on individual Italian regions rather than as a single country, and British retailers would be wise to watch this trend. Here find a roundup of key Umbrian products that retailers should be stocking up on.

From peasant to plate

Umbrian food was once the choice of peasants because of its simple, affordable yet nutritious ingredients. However in recent times, the dishes of the poor have found their way into some of the finest restaurants in the world, and this is certainly true of Umbrian specialities. There are several foods which dominate Umbrian culture and they mostly include salamis, pasta, bread and truffles. The black truffles are very distinct of this area and can be grated on many dishes including pasta, meat and egg dishes. The exact location of the truffles is kept a secret and only passed on to the hunters' family members. However, to celebrate this speciality's uniqueness, there are three main truffle fairs in

Umbria every winter, where you can sample truffle products from across the region.

Another renowned category is the cured meats collection as they make up a large part of antipasti dishes and can also be used in main courses. When touring a salami factory in Umbria neatly called Umbrian Salami, I discovered a key product which makes this region's meat selection stand out. Norcia ham is a type of meat that is similar to Parma ham and it has a IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta) which holds the same bearing as a British PGI.

The hog meat is cured in the city of Norcia which is also famous for being the ancestral home of pork butchers known everywhere as 'norcini'. The online deli, Peco sells the prosciutto crudo, Norcia online. Peco Nicodemo, owner of the company, describes its tasting notes. "In the preparation process the ham is lightly flavoured with salt and pepper. After seven days it is washed and the salting process continues for another two-three weeks. After this it is washed again and left to mature again, the whole process taking over 12 months."

The best way for customers to sample the meat in-store is to have Umbrian bread with it. Because the bread is unsalted (sciapo) it complements the rich, savoury flavours of the meat successfully. The unsalting of the wheat goes back to the 1500s when the Italian government decided to put a higher tax on salt – as a result local residents decided to revolt and not use it in their bakeries. Other popular breads include 'pan nociato' – a speciality made with pecorino cheese, walnuts and pine nuts, and the local 'torta al testio con i ciccol' – a typical focaccia bread baked on a stone disk and stuffed with the little pieces of pork obtained when melting the fat to make lard.

Or to keep sampling simple, retailers could just pair the bread with a fruity, dark green Umbrian oil. Famous for its fresh olives and flavoursome oils, Umbria offers some of the best oils in Italy, and this is often noted in the annual national olive oil competition, with towns such as Spoleto, Terni, Struttura and Assisi scoring highly. Stock up on the ones which have been awarded DOPs and they can also be used as table oils for salads, garlic bread, soups and cooked vegetables, and for use in cooking roasts and stews.

Sweet treats

However, it is not all savoury specialities that this region has to offer, in fact Umbria has a renowned reputation for its confectionery offerings. The capital of Umbria, Perugia produces some fine chocolates, and even hosts the



International Chocolate Festival – when the city is transformed into a huge open-air chocolate market. The most famous chocolate is called Baci and it contains nougat and ground hazelnuts. The word, Baci translates as 'kisses' as the wrapped sweet contains a little note which features a loving expression. Other sweet items that are local to the area include cakes called ciaramicola and torcolo. Confections such as these could sit well in an Umbrian themed hamper or as part of an Italian meal deal offered in-store.

Umbria meets cumbria

On a final note, Umbrian cuisine is proving so popular that British producers are starting to create their very own versions here in the UK. 'Umbria meets Cumbria' with Lizzie's Hand Made range of Italian inspired fruit compotes. The Cumbrian Frutta Cotta takes its inspiration from the Umbrian region, but is given a subtle Cumbrian twist by combining whole fruits steeped in Jamiesons Rum and spiced syrup to create a fusion dessert.

Lizzie Smith, owner of the company, comments, "The inspiration for Cumbrian Frutta Cotta came from a family holiday in Umbria, Italy. The local restaurants were fascinating and delicious, inspiring an exploration of Italian recipes when back home in Cumbria." This borrowing of Umbrian cuisine has meant the region is well and truly celebrated in the British fine food industry, as well as the Italian.

