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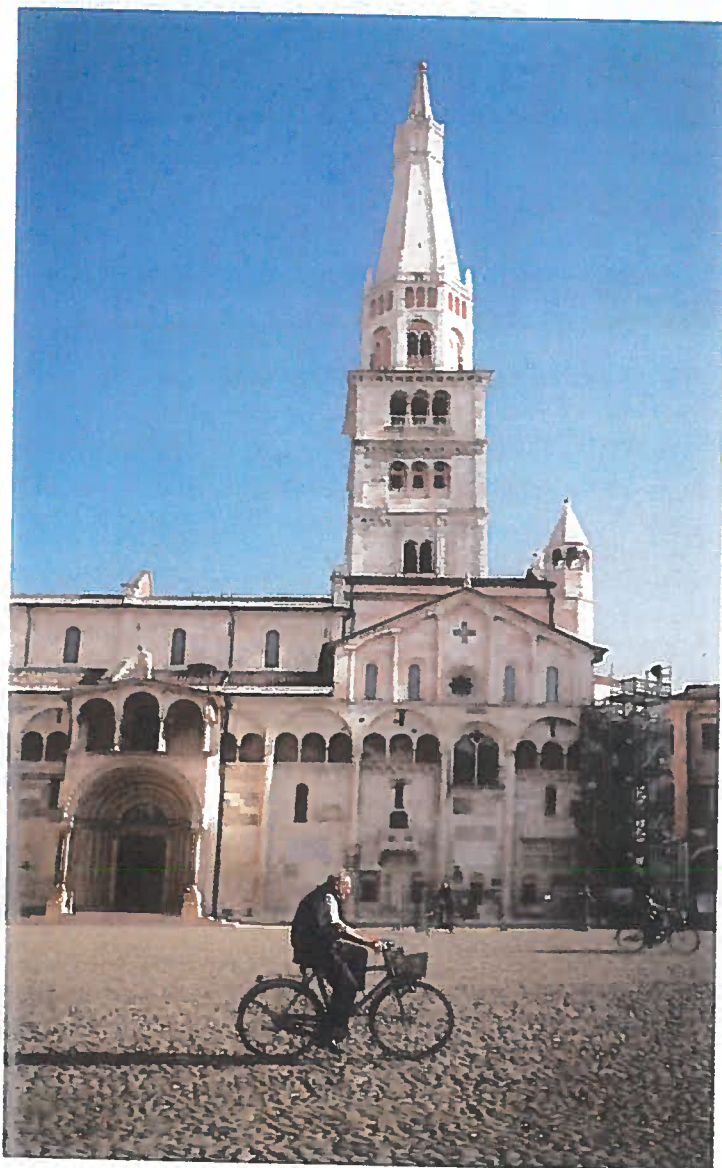
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Saints and Artisans Umbria



Its name evokes a gentle chant: OOM-brrree-ahh. The small region of Umbria, landlocked in the center of Italy's boot, welcomes travelers to slow down on country roads that wind through oak forests, hazy

slopes of olive groves, fields of wildflowers, patchworks of farms, and then—ta-dah! Hill towns appear—shimmering visions of ivory-pink stone, frozen in medieval time. Wherever you land—perhaps in Orvieto's elegant Piazza del Duomo or Gubbio's majestic Piazza Grande—plan on staying for sunset. You're in for a breathtaking show of shifting shadows over verdant valleys, streams of gold spilling over steeples and distant horizons.

Umbria's mystical aura, felt in those sunsets, is personified in this Land of Saints, the birthplace of numerous holy people. Most renowned is nature lover Francis of Assisi, honored in the eponymous town's 13th-century basilica with its 28 frescoes by Renaissance artist Giotto and his school. Hikers relish nearby trails; a favorite takes them to the spot where Francis preached his famous sermon to the birds.

Unlike neighboring Tuscany, where you're surrounded by tourists, in Umbria it's easy to mix with locals, and a joy to discover each hill town's workshops, meeting craftspeople who preserve traditions passed down for generations. There's Deruta, perhaps Italy's most famous ceramics town, where production has been going on continuously since Renaissance days. At its ceramic art school, you can arrange for a few hours of ceramic painting class, learning techniques from a master, and take home what you've painted. Or in the chic capital of Perugia, visit the Brozzetti workshop, run by weaver Marta Cucchia, who'll show you how she creates medieval-inspired designs on antique looms. "Here is where you can discover the art of a simple quality of life," she says.

Not so simple, but a fabulous way to immerse yourself in local spirit, are Umbria's elaborate festivals, from Spello's flower-filled May/June feast of Corpus Domini to Spoleto's annual summer arts festival. "Except for the festivals, Umbria is a place where visitors are stunned by true silence," says Letizia Mattiacci, co-owner of Alla Madonna del Piatto Cooking School and B&B, outside Assisi. "The medieval architecture, the rural landscapes, have a particular stillness, unchanged over time. My guests come down for breakfast, telling me they slept better here than they have in years." —Susan Van Allen

"Mangia," he might say, pointing a threatening finger at your heaping plate of his famous cuisine.

The epitome of Modena's soulful gastronomy, this tiny, no-nonsense local institution, bedecked with faded photos and long-expired calendars, offers daily-changing lunches that bring more residents than tourists. Eat enough (from options that might include tender rabbit or tortellini *in brodo*), and you might earn a smile from crusty Rinaldi, whose life's work is to make sure you've been well fed. Seated at a shared table, you may watch a mother feed her baby his first solid food. "The doctor says that Parmigiano Reggiano must be first. It's full of protein," she says, handing the infant a grainy cheese chunk perfectly sized for his chubby fist. As he gnaws, wide-eyed with culinary glee, his mother drizzles thick-as-molasses, 40-year-aged balsamic vinegar on her own cheese plate, a simple umami-explosion invented by the Modenese.

As Rinaldi says, before more platters of his satisfying food emerge from the kitchen, "Food is love." —Becca Hensley