Colle Torretta is the name of a small steep hill in the town of Controguerra in Teramo, the northernmost of the four provinces of Abruzzo in central Italy. The hill is two kilometers, measured in unobstructed view, from the southern border of Italy’s Le Marche region. At the end of a sharp climb up it to stand 300 meters above the level of the Adriatic Sea five kilometers away, it is the center of a 360-degree look-around and home to a little vineyard, Montepulciano grapes grown under the regionwide Montepulciano d’Abruzzo DOC, that bears a closer look.

I stood at that lookout spot for less than an hour more than a year ago, but I brought the image of it back with me and I have been carrying it ever since as a tool for understanding places by way of the wine and food that come of them. With Torretta hill I want to explore a point about wine and food terminology, about finding the word that in Italian gathers up Italy’s notions of taste tied to site, the way that the French are said to do with France’s by way of their word terroir. Writing about place across time takes traveling there, talking, reading, and remembering. Since my research and memories come as much from books and reading as they do from walking, looking, and listening, from my vantage point on this hill I want to make obvious the jaggedness of how these unlike sources meet, to experiment with writing them the ways they come to us, fragmented or as searches that are long and winding. Instead of making any narrative paths between these disparate inputs artificially smooth, I want to reflect and follow the natural bumpiness that gets me to that word.

A way in: a 2012 presentation of a zonazione study for an Italian appellation three regions north of this hill and led by Attilio Scienza (grapes genetics professor at l’Università degli Studi di Milano and practically a household name for anything to do with Italian wine) states that “in the notion of terroir, a French term by now of international use and of difficult translation, there are four aspects.” (Scienza et al 2012: 2) He identifies materiale (agronomic characteristics of the territorio … biophysical potentials), territoriale (geographic … expression of a long historical past … community of winemakers … protection and enhancement in the designation of origin), identitario (wine lived as a collective consciousness … representation of the qualitative ideal of winemakers), and comunicazione (associate the term terroir with words like rural, environmental, social). But with its inclusion of “a long historical past” and the unavoidable reliance on territorio to explore the French word, his layout moves beyond an attempt to define terroir into Italian usability and toward a description of what makes up wine as quality-correct expression of its soil and climate and taste of an environment’s uniqueness that stem specifically from Italy’s winemaking world. What’s missing is the word capable of doing that work for the whole of Italy, and I propose that it is one that is already used to talk about these wines of place, or vini di territorio.

The term terroir “as applicable to wines that are inimitable products of the human and physical geography of French wine regions arose from a distinctive French disciplinary permeability between History and Geography,” writes Julie McIntyre (2019: 3) in the introduction to a recent issue of Global Food History dedicated to wine. In that introduction McIntyre calls attention to the work of twentieth-century French geographers Paul Vidal de la Blache, Roger Dion, and Jean-Robert Pitte as following a nineteenth-century academic practice of blurring the lines between the natural world and the one of politics and economic development to in effect render terroir an ahistorical word. Stripped of its history in France, terroir is then free to travel; to become a French-reminiscent internationalism, timeless and de-placed so that it can instead serve as a vague placeness that is also a tool to sell wines by first selling a word meant to give all where-fromness the same shape while remaining tied to an aspirational lifestyle-accessing French notion easy to sell everywhere. Frustrated and frustrating attempts to apply terroir to either France or other places meaningfully, accurately, helpfully are many. In his book Terroir, James E. Wilson (1998: 55) describes the word as a “unique French term.” He combs through written sources—Larousse, Hugh Johnson, Matt Kramer—in search of definition and finds “the sensory differences between two wines grown under the same physical conditions … the spiritual aspect that
recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustration of its history … certain severely limited environments … the unknown something … key to understanding the wines of France” to arrive at an inevitable end. “Why not just use the more familiar word ‘vineyard’—especially in a book avowed to be easily readable?” he wonders about the task he has set himself. “As a matter of fact I confess that I am inconsistent in the use of terroir and vineyard” (Wilson 1998: 55-56). Another well-known wine writer, Jamie Goode, muses online on guidelines for using terroir everywhere: “the site- or region-specific characteristics of a wine and broad enough to encompass all the useful potential meanings of the term, yet narrow enough to exclude the controversial or plain misleading ones”; but this too comes with little helpful information, has little to do with any somewhere (Goode n.d.). What’s left for the word is a life as international selling point, cousin to what the wine world calls international varieties and which are of course cultivars native to France, planted everywhere because sellable everywhere. It is a word more helpfully defined as the cultural capital of Pierre Bourdieu—ian thought, and which Italian producers are not above using, in particular to reach global markets.

It is far less a word that knows how to describe this hill. Topographically an in-between space where mountains and plains flow into each other, steep with twists and turns, Torretta hill is not just a good place to grow grapes. It is also an irreproachable choice for hiding out and keeping an eye on things, and here were once bandits.

Briganti. In Italian, the word still shimmers.

For centuries, they had roamed throughout central and southern Italy, figures of both history and myth, thickly atmospheric presences fed by local blends of fear and admiration, nature deities more immediately practical than river sprites or trolls beneath bridges and powered by missions that ran from petty thievery to heroic rebellion to shape legendary leaders like the sixteenth-century Marco Sciarra, born in Rocca Santa Maria, a small Tenam village near the hill. In the nineteenth century, during the Risorgimento which dragged a precarious mix of Papal States, the Bourbon-ruled Kingdom of Two Sicilies, proud once-empire Venice, Papal seat, and various duchies into one Italy under French-food-and-outlook-inflected Piedmont rule, bandit numbers swelled in a last hurrah as impoverished salary workers and farmers and army deserters (“armies of unemployed workers, disbanded Garibaldian volunteers, sacked Bourbon officials, disillusioned democrats and supporters of the former regime” personalizes Christopher Duggan in The Force of Destiny (2007: 231), joined the originals in like-minded resistance to that Piedmont-led unification, local hostilities so fierce that between 1861 and 1865 almost two thirds of the new national army were sent to southern Italy to “maintain order” (Duggan 2014: 140). The clash was also cultural. The new Piedmontese leaders would insist on a system of compulsory military service and free-market money-making crowned with new taxes and a strong anti-clericalism, to the dismay here of people steeped in a centuries-old Bourbon governing that was socially and economically protective and deeply religious. By the 1870s, that army had swept through Italy’s most hidden places, bringing the bandits’ age to an end, but poorly fixing their lands’ place in the now market-minded Italy. The clash remains. The new nation “was a scheme to steal from the south,” people around Torretta hill still say to you today. These two economic systems have existed side by side since unification, echoes Jonathan Morris in “Challenging Meridionalismo,” and I would say territorio automatically grants this essential facet, too—“the extent to which development in one region had been constrained (both economically and as a result of political choices) by subordination to the needs of the other” (Lumley and Morris 1997: 2-3)—to any discussion of an Italian wine of place.

In an effort to shake off any more conquest-minded influences, I want to not use the word terroir here.

I want to translate. Or rather to pre-translate, to find a word as autochthonous as Italy’s estimated two thousand wine-grape cultivars (D’Agata 2014: 1), hundreds now grown and vinified again and more on their way back, untranslatable expressions of Italian places. As traditional as a French cultivar, such as Friuli’s Sauvignon Blanc that grew alongside native Friulano for more than two centuries. As of Italy as Spanish cultivar Garnacha Negra’s centuries-old Veneto biotype Tai Rosso and Sardinian biotype Cannonau, which by now do not take well to territori other than their own. To start, I think that a word “of international use and of difficult translation” is problematic, especially when applied to anywhere with its own concept of self. Then, why use a word in, and in talking about, Italy when it is a word that brings in a strange blend of international and France, setting you off in the wrong direction from your first step, akin to the everywhere-looking role globally planted grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay play? An international word meant to appeal above all to those who access Italian wines through words in English? The relationship between Italy and France is that the Romans brought the vine to the latter, never mind the jostling between the two countries for international market share and recognition that has been ongoing in various forms, to jump in somewhere, since late-eighteenth-century French claims to Italian territori, since a century later when the grapevine-destroying phylloxera louse from the southeastern United States landed first in France, since Italy then lost ground from World Wars and poverty, since
The twenty-first-century Italian success in resuscitating its native wine-grape cultivars in the hundreds of geographical and historical territori in which they grow and which are now joining the conversation on their own terms. Even without the question of this jostling, outside of selling in a global market what is to be gained by reading one country’s traditions and views of the world in terms of another’s or in terms of an everywhere-vague word when the notion of wines of place is constructed differently by place? Why introduce misleading reference points and misinterpretations and misses of what wines from somewhere are trying to tell us? A look through websites of producers throughout Italy provides an easy, casual clue to what a word both analogous and pertinent looks like: on many pages written in Italian, the heading of territorio gathers together vineyard sites and history both personal and larger. On the internationally minded pages written in English, the word is translated sometimes to territory and far more often to terroir.

“Territorio is a word that entered the world of Italian wine-making at the end of the last century and has broader connotations than the analogous French expression terroir,” write Scienza and winemaker and communicator Walter Filiputti in Filiputti’s Storia Moderna del Vino Italiano. “The qualities of the territorio and their effect on the wine sector (media culture, tourism institutions, wine quality etc.) are the basis of a grand interdisciplinary project in favor of viticulture, which finds its ideal synthesis, as we’ve seen, in viticultural zoning” (Filiputti 2016: 203). Leaving out criticisms of what denominations are protecting, or not, I want to linger for a moment on Italy’s ongoing work with vineyard zoning, specifically the philosophies that guide those efforts. “It is not the genius loci [the special qualities of somewhere which make it a place] that animates the winegrowing territory but the genius saeculi, the spirit of time that allows us to think and tell stories,” write Scienza and Filiputti (Ibid). Italy’s regions are historical entities, not just political boundaries. Territorio is historical. It is also actual place, Google Maps—able, its actuality some culture that exists in equivalence with some land on which people have lived, fought, worshiped, picked up what came before, passed it forward, veered left or right, planted what soils and their lives supported, for came-to-be-expected dishes and wine styles: wines and foods of territorio set you off knowing that Italian place is land, traditions, history inseparable. In terroir, if anything the wine, food, comes first; the place and all it comes with is meant to be some explanation for what you are eating or drinking. Territorio is place first, its presence and movements and populations and practices through history, with wine and food indelibly also parts of its definition.

There is no such place as a terroir.

The vineyard on Torretta hill is owned and farmed by Luigi Valori, who planted Montepulciano grapevines here in 2008 and whose winery founded in 1996 is a few minutes’ drive down the hill, in the town of Sant’Omero. His words about it are another way in. The history of Italy’s countryside foods has long been an oral one, with oral history methods common to studies of it, a condition established in the 1600s when a vogue for books on French cuisine throughout Italy forced local foods underground, thereby “validating the links between gastronomy and territorio,” write Italian food historians Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari (1999: 29), and setting oral history-keeping as a primary source for information on local traditions. That setup continues today, a tool, it turns out, also for surviving national missteps such as Pellegrino Artusi’s 1891 classic, 790-recipe La scienza in cucina e l’arte di mangiar bene, which re-upped Italian cuisines while leaving out Abruzzo along with the lion’s share of southern and central Italy, and the attempts by Mussolini’s regime to twist ties between local and regional foods and lands into some kind of supporting truth about fascism. Valori is a walking encyclopedia and champion of this region. “The problem of this part of Italy is that it’s too easy to make good wine,” he tells me during my visit. Before he started doing that, he played football for Italy’s Ascoli club and seems to have stayed incapable of standing still. “The most important thing is the project,” he says excitedly, “and then you can produce good wine, or anything.” His project is three vineyards, one on this hill, that all lie between the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Apennine Montagna dei Fiori rising 15 km inland. Of this geographical face-off comes an unrelenting breeze that runs steadily through this vineyard planted on a sloped site of delicate clay soil clearly right for wine grapes and still affectionately called Vigna Nepa after the farmer who owned the site before Valori—and used it to grow broccoli. “The breeze is the secret” to his wines, Valori says, and to at least this part of Abruzzo in general. “You can grow everything here because of it.” It allows him to grow all his grapes organically and to dry-farm, saving irrigation for emergencies only in this dry hot land: “Ninety-nine percent of the water a vine takes in is used for evaporation,” he explains about the plant’s version of perspiration, “only one percent is used for photosynthesis.” Following the example of Irma Taddia, who left materials she collected from oral sources unchanged so that they might be “read in their expressive immediacy, for that which they tell us directly” (Taddia 2005: 211), I want to leave his words unedited, unchecked, to allow a part of this hill to speak to us straightforwardly.

To understand what he, what Teramo, what Abruzzo are about, the least important thing, Valori says after I have looked at the vineyard, is to look at the vineyards. Check out
the architecture here, he says. Controguerra is home to a handful of churches, no less glorifying for their humbleness: barely frescoed brick Santa Maria a Vico and stained-glass-and-marble-bejeweled Madonna delle Grazie, where Montepulciano wines grown close by have long been poured at altar. Down below the hill there is a small town park for sitting, with a monument to those lost in World War II, some of whom left vines and gardens unguarded to be planted to broccoli and then reclaimed in the name of Montepulciano wines. Were we to travel to this hill two hundred years ago, we would be standing in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. We would be looking down the same sweeping valley, staggered slopes, outcroppings taller than any palace, onto the Tronto river that is also border and into a Papal State, squinting for glimpses of its grander buildings that are evidence and personality of Rome’s lands until but also after unification. I ask Valori if I can get away with calling this vineyard—vines breathing, wartime memorials, briganti, line between Vatican and Two Sicilies, gentle quiet Santa Maria a Vico—territorio, and I think that he agrees. “Yes. Territorio doesn’t exist without the intervention of man, otherwise it’s just forest,” he bursts out in Italian. “Three hundred years ago this was forest. Vineyard territorio is cultural territorio.”

Italy is famously shy about tying its wines simultaneously to grape and place in the ways terroir assumes. “One wonders: why is this sensitivity towards restricted terroirs never valued in Italy, while in France it is at the base of the most famous denominations of origin?” write Scienza et al. (2012: 2)

Among my guesses is that the thought habits of working mixed plantings (pre-denomination and pre-phylloxera plots) were generally planted to several varieties, and often grapes and other crops, that worked well together for survival, determining wine styles in the process and in contrast to the specialized vineyards more commercially minded voices have demanded here since the late 1800s) survive even where such vineyards do not. And that throughout the country’s hundreds of geographically and culturally separated winemaking and agricultural centers, local attention to special sites with specific effects on what grows there is perhaps so obvious that for a long time it seemed too much to bother making official for the rest of Italy, let alone the world. And that often the wines of them were seen as blending components, richly shaped and identifiable ingredients destined for the expression of some local whole. These are among the wine traits we lose sight of when we speak of terroir in Italy. The lack of talk about territori is not for lack of them existing. Once territorio gets you to Italy, genius saeculi helps again as the country’s zonazione terms keep you going in the right directions: rich in information specific to wines made in certain zones, the many local words to do with place are right now growing official so that they might be added to wine bottle labels and from there offer more accurate and complex readings of the wine within. Although they may differ by concept, all of Italy’s official wine zones share two traits: each is based on inherent conditions long in existence (Sottile 2019) and each is charged with geographical and traditional information. As names that carry a land’s full story, zonazione terms are both description of a place and explanation of how to understand it through its wines. They are horizontally organized classifications, land divided not by ownership or quality level but by topography, climate, history, and usage into subsets reflected in the properties (most immediately taste and often longevity and readiness to drink) of the wine or wines that come from it. Look at the MGAs, the Menzioni geografiche aggiuntive, or added geographic mentions, into which Piedmontese zones Barbaresco and Barolo were divided in the early twenty-first century by content, texture, and longtime working methods of the areas’ celebrated Serravallian sandstone and Tortonian limestone-marl soil types, divisions sharpened by factors like exposition and altitude and within which words like brico and sorì indicate the vineyards considered top sites by trustworthy local historical standards. (With its own twists of place and its most attentive winemakers’ thoughtful responses to them, the regionwide Montepulciano d’Abruzzo denomination could use some geographical mentions itself to tell for example about the wines that come, could only come, of this hill.) In Veneto look to Conegliano-Valdobbiadene’s Rive, a Venetian dialect—derived word for each of 43 especially vertical sites that brings you immediately to this famously steep venerable Prosecco denomination; in Tuscany to Chianti Classico’s varied notions of site-driven wines that will soon resolve into about a dozen official zone and village classifications coexisting with local notations of poggio, vineyard place by soft hillside and where along the slope and a word of everyday use in this region only (Treccani n.d.); in Veneto again to the three subzones that together cover and define the whole of Bardolino and to Soave’s 2019-approved 53 UGAs (Unità geografiche aggiuntive or added geographic units that carry a hint of unity, agreement in their wording), both far from the French understanding of the word cru, though often—though they are indicators of wine traits by where the wine was grown and, very un-French, not hierarchical tales of quality—using that word anyway. Italy’s shyness might also have to do with the effect of age on lands: that zonazione study reminds us that France’s “most renowned vineyards, those of Alsace, Burgundy, the upper Rhone, are placed on the margins of large faults, deep fractures of the Earth’s crust,
which are formed at the end of the secondary era (about 70 million years ago) when the African Plate, moving northwest, pushed into the European Plate, forming the Alps and the Pyrenees and leaving depressions filled by landslides and the remains of marine creatures and a legacy of faults that jumbled the existing geological layers, for hugely varied soil conditions even within small sites there. “Italy, a geologically much younger country, does not offer these particularities.” And so presumably needs less-precise cataloguing for its soils “mainly of different origins, presenting a greater compositional homogeneity at least over medium distances” (Scienza et al 2012: 2-3). A shortage of record-keeping bodies such as the monasteries in France which noted vineyard observations in writing for centuries (wine-journalist-turned-wine-mapmaker Alessandro Masnaghetti, his career another clue that understanding Italian wines is deeply tied to where and why, has called his mapmaking efforts Carthusian [Sottile 2019]), and the fractious nature of Italy due as much to its political and cultural systems as its mountains should probably be in there, too. Territorio as specific specifics.

Unyielding in the dictionary definition of territorio is that of confini, boundaries, confines. Even pre-Italy, Teramo drew an important line. On this border hilltop, a customs-house torre once stood, a tower to regulate passage and exchange of goods between two territories for a unique cultural mix: the Bourbon kingdom on this side and the Rome-headed state just across the Tronto river now a couple of minutes’ drive from the hill, twisting helix-like with the regions’ map line, political and topographical garland at what is today the Abruzzo–Le Marche border and immediately across which lies the municipality of Ascoli-Piceno, represented by the calcio club Valori once kicked for and also by Montepulciano-based wines that unlike the ones on this side are blends with Sangiovese grapes. The air mixes borderly here, too: Torretta hill’s climate is Mediterranean pushing toward subtropical, undulating land filled with palms and oranges. A short drive in the other direction, due west and inland, mountain influence sets in and evergreen trees begin to line the semi-continental roadways.

You could start with wine and food or history: both lead you to the same place, which is territorio. I will begin with what is grown here so I can see the history here, told in all of Italian’s tenses, that is a key ingredient, too. Regionwide, Abruzzo’s wealth of things to eat and drink starts with its Montepulciano grapes, cultivated throughout the region, native to it, and turned single-varietally into local renditions of deep-red Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, and endearingly cherry-hued Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo, wines. It continues with its native Trebbiano Abruzzese, Pecorino, Cococciola, Passerina white-wine grapes. Inward, in the Chieti province south of Teramo, grow some native grain cultivars that along with its native wine grapes I continue to root for in Italy’s taste of territorio: in Fara San Martino, Abruzzo is more rich in pasta-makers—De Cecco, Cocco, Del Verde, Rustichella—than
it is in local strains of wheat grown, but grano solino, used by a handful of pasta- and pizza-makers here today, is a variety that is being grown again and the paste, doughs, from it are chewy, sweet, nutty, and with the jolt of nutrition it is easy to forget these days that pasta and bread are always supposed to have. Here also grows some of Italy’s best produce: sweet chestnuts and bright woodsy walnuts, boldly earthy saffron that ranks in taste and cost among the world’s best and grows in Navelli in the mountains of L’Aquila, Abruzzo’s only province that does not touch the sea. (“A few weeks ago you would have seen it all in yellow,” a mid-twentieth-century explorer-writer of Italy’s foods and wines, Mario Soldati, transcribes his local companion’s guidance in the 1970s. “Here is grown the most famous saffron of Italy, the saffron of Aquila. But it’s the saffron of the plain of Navelli” [Soldati 2017: 570]) Seventy kilometers southwest of Torretta hill, stretch, newly, the Fucino plains, the bottom of a shallow lake until the nineteenth century; plans to liberate the ground from the malaria-harboring water lingering over it had been made since at least the time of Caesar, who was assassinated before his Fucino vision was put into place. Territorio carries that vision into this place and that a few decades after the lake was drained Italy entered World War I, in the same year an earthquake struck here and killed 5 percent of the population, while at least a few of the long-lasting yellow-skinned potatoes that had long been grown here were grown regardless, as were some beets and herbs and greens. Today, la carota dell’altopiano del Fucino, grown 600 meters above sea level, is the name of an IGT that protects a carrot concentrated – orange, sweet, and crunchy, and nourishing both earth and inhabitants while keeping away pests that threaten potatoes and beets. In 2016 those patate were named an IGT for their pronounced potatoey flavor, yellow flesh, and starch content: a red-skinned version is especially famous for the elastic strength it offers makers of the soft, chewy gnocchi that are staples nourishing households of this northernmost Italian southern region. Made of the grapes growing on this hill, a small far-looking land that I am observing momentarily in history’s now, a century and a half after a new map required lines changed to dashes at what is still conceivably and importantly a southern border, Valori’s wines speak of territorio as a place that moves in time, genius sacelli talking about that boundary.

Today, “in Teramo alone, there are 350 dishes from the cultural richness here,” Valori tells me as we walk along the hill. Fucino’s patate and carote make it to Nereto, just south of the hill and home to the region’s capra, goat, herds, and then into an inevitable dish—the rich sweet peppers-and-tomatoes-slow-cooked capra Neretese, lifted by scents of limone and chiodi di garofano. Throughout Abruzzo are chitarra-cut spaghetti, handmade square-edge pasta dressed with tomato sauce studded at times with, uniquely in Italy and far smaller than their translation across the Atlantic Ocean, the tiniest of meatballs. And one of Teramo’s ancient dishes, an embedded celebration of this territorio’s richness in both land and ingredients if not in unified-nation-style market value: virtù is soup from the always-changing and seemingly never-ending roster of vegetables grown here. It is made in the spring for eating on the first of May, when the sum total of fresh (peas, fava beans, beets, chicory, artichokes, marjoram, the indispensably pungent fennel-like annit, to name a fraction) and dried (beans, chickpeas, lentils) produce is most bountiful. Because patience goes with the virtue of frugality, virtù is prepared over two days and further strengthened in flavor by meat scraps like pigs’ feet and prosciutto bits and in heartiness by pasta both flat and stuffed. In it, too, sometimes, those tiniest of meatballs, territorio-shaped pearls strung along its timeline.

“This solitary hill was always dear to me,” begins “L’infinito” of poet Giacomo Leopardi, who was born in the last days of the eighteenth century in Recanati across that river border impossible not to look out onto from here as rebel, soldier, farmer, winegrower, visitor also do/have done and whose words bring us back to this particular Montepulciano territorio of medium-size-particle clay soils and a breeze that never stops and that today is also about Valori (Leopardi 2012). The wines he makes from it count farmer Nepa and his frustratingly planted greens, they add Sciarra and superadd his rugged, excitable, spiritual descendants with land ideas of their own. Rooting into Vigna Nepa, these grapevines look “more wild” than they do in other places, Valori says pointing to them. I follow his fingertip just a little farther north to see the poet’s birthplace on a hilltop south of Ancona: “seventeen churches … a thirteenth-century bishop’s palace, a fine cathedral with the sarcophagus of the saintly fifteenth-century pope Gregorio XII, towers and monasteries … the substantial palazzo in which the Leopardi family lived for over 500 years” (Duggan 2007: 115).

The concept of taste, quality, tied to place, “was not discovered by French winemakers as the French term for territorio would seem to suggest,” write Raffaele Testolin and Michele Morgante in The Modern History of Italian Wine. “Pliny wrote in his Naturalis Historia that some vines are so in love with their territory [translated elsewhere as native land] that they leave all the glory to the place and they cannot be transferred anywhere else without suffering poorer quality” (Filippiti 2016: 215-216). Territorio traces Italy’s wines from Pliny to producer websites. It runs with that collection of the spirits of Italy’s times, stretches viticulture beyond soil,
climate, winemaker to touch land that is the same thing as
the histories of what happens/happened/has happened there.
Valori’s Montepulciano d’Abruzzo territorio is a collection of
what and when, seen by a pair of eyes trained firmly on a hill,
a place that stretches back and forth in time and which from
the outside if not for the wine and food that come of it you
might never know its churches, its soldiers, as part of the soil
in every way. I mean this essay as a beginning and as an in-
stance. As a first move from the international concept terroir,
which gives only some gentle sense of the whole world com-
posed of taste and story, and into territorio’s pointing and spe-
cific one with its own vocabulary and systems that would
make sense nowhere else, as a way to understand Italy’s myr-
iad wines, as a word usefully applicable to here because it was
made here. As a way to go back, finally, to what territorio also
tells us which is a taste of this wind-denominazione-Valori-
protected Montepulciano d’Abruzzo DOC wine.

It is all dried flowers, June cherries, earthy like the gray
geraniums that grow here too, powerful and nimble like a
player on a football field, assisted by briganti, churches, cus-
tom officers, broccoli, days-long soup of a yearly singular mix
of vegetables and herbs that have been grown continually
and often at their best here because of soil, Rome, drainage
project, weather, wind, the Bourbons, restaurants, home, and
habit. It is the place of this breezy hilltop territorio in
Controguerra, Teramo, Abruzzo from which Sciarra, Valori,
I have looked out, have tasted wines as rich and self-contained,
vini di territorio as delicious, as intently telling, as in this time-
strung moment as are those tiny and accurate meatballs.

Author’s note

Instead of italic for first usage, both “terroir” and “territorio”
have been set sometimes in italics and sometimes in roman:
the former is to indicate when the term is meant to be read
solidly as term, the latter for when it’s meant as concept or
thought of as spoken language. This same thinking was
applied to other Italian terms in this piece, in keeping with
the language a visitor to the hill would hear. The italicized
passages featured on pages 1-2 and the quotes from the zona-
zione study, Storia Moderna del Vino Italiano, the article
“È corsa al terroir: Ma i cru all’italiana possono funzionare?”
and Leopardi’s poem “L’Infinito” are all my translations from
the original text.

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