



THE FLAVORS OF *PUGLIA*

Head to the heel of Italy's boot for meals grown just outside your window.

Text and photography by **KIMBERLY MINAROVICH**

SALVE, A WORD WITH ROOTS MEANING "TO KEEP in good health," is the greeting that echoes in the winding streets of Puglia's ancient towns. No wonder the Pugliese have found a beautiful way to stay healthy: Eat natural foods that blend different cultures and wash them down with wines descended from ancient vines.

Puglia's strategic positioning — at the heel of Italy's boot where the Ionian and Aegean Seas meet — made it a prime target for invasions. The region exchanged hands numerous times since its founding in 2000 B.C., when Mesopotamians settled in. Greeks, Saracens, Normans, Turks and Romans also conquered

it, leaving the imprint of their cultures on the region's cuisine. The Swabians brought their radishes; Arabs brought citrus fruits, raisins and almonds; the Spaniards brought back potatoes and tomatoes from the New World. The blend of influences results in a gastronomic kaleidoscope of colors and flavors in every dish.

Tomatoes hang above the dining room of Masseria Cimino, where the dinner menu changes based on the season.



Puglia's cuisine is often referred to as *cucina povera*, the "cooking of the poor." This means that — rather than being defined by the influence of well-schooled chefs — the cuisine comes from the traditions of its homes, often rejecting strict recipes in favor of being *all'improvviso* (unplanned). The menu depends on who is coming and what can be picked from the land at that moment.

During the summer months, the penetrating sun ripens local olives, grapes, fennel, chicory and artichokes to perfection. Puglia is also a leading producer of wheat, olive oil and wine. Known as Italy's breadbasket, it produces most of the country's pasta. Though made without eggs, the pasta is rich with variety, offering more than 600 different shapes to savor: *Orecchiette* (little ears) and *tapparelle* (large ears) are disc shaped, making them best to hold rich, ripe tomato sauce; meanwhile *strascinati* and *cavatelli* are rolled with a thin metal wand to give them a tight spiral shape.

The local bread — made with hard durum wheat — was designed to keep an extended time for the benefit of shepherds who'd be away tending the herds. The bread's hardness morphs into a soft texture when it is dipped in boiling water or saturated in olive oil. It gained notoriety as early as 37 A.D. when Horatio, in his *Satires*, described it as "so delicious that the discerning traveler stacks up on it for the rest of his journey."

YOU ARE WHERE YOU EAT

Puglia is home to the *masserie*, or fortified farms, that were originally the residences of the landed gentry. With sprawling acres of olive trees and vineyards, many still employ traditional farming and olive oil making practices. North of Bari in the village of Montegrosso, **Lama di Luna** (lamadiluna.com) is the region's leading biomasseria. Run by the jovial Pietro Petroni, the property is situated on a hill overlooking vineyards and olive, cherry and almond groves, which are cultivated using organic principles. Its rooms, formerly inhabited by 26 tenant farmers, have been turned into guest rooms that exude harmony with nature. The sheets and towels are made from unbleached organic cotton. The soaps are made from the oil of the olive trees grown on the land. Even the Pecorino cheese served at breakfast comes

from the 250 sheep that live on the premises. Solar panels heat the pool, and the floors are heated by burning olive wood during the day and slower-burning ground olive pits throughout the night.

Not far from Lama di Luna, in Andria, is where Burrata, a creamier, more luscious version of mozzarella cheese, was first made in 1959 on the **Branchini Farm**. Stuffed with fresh cream, or panna, it is best eaten within 24 hours of its creation. Because of the short duration of its peak freshness, it was only enjoyed locally until the 1950s.

With over 50 million olive trees, Puglia is Italy's largest producer of olive oil. So, it should not surprise that the oil is often a dish's first ingredient and another light drizzle at the end is the last. Armando Balestrazzi and Rosalba Ciannamea, the dashing team who are the proprietors of **Il Frantoio** (masseriailfrantoio.it), know their olive oil. With a 600-year-old underground olive oil press on the premises of their boutique hotel in the outskirts of Ostuni, they produce (and sell) five different kinds of varieties that range in flavor from sweet to pungent. Guests can enjoy all five kinds in either a tasting or in multi-course lunches and dinners concocted by Rosalba, who cultivates the olives, fruits and vegetables on the premises. Armando is delighted to escort guests around the 150-acre estate, with its orange, lemon, fig, pear and olive trees. A detour takes you to a secret garden filled with the fragrant herbs and edible flowers that season their delightful meals. We were treated to an eight-course lunch that left us satisfied (but not overstuffed). Our favorite dish was delicate bread pasta topped with tomato sauce and drizzled with homemade olive oil. Shrimp arrived covered in a paper-thin fried batter balanced with a spicy pepper cream. Our mixed salad was topped with fresh almonds and decorated with tree blossoms directly from the 16th-century herb garden.

When developing the menu at **Taverna della Gelosia** (tavernadellagelosia.it) in Ostuni, proprietor Leonora Gametti hit the history books. Gametti scoured tomes in search of recipes from the medieval age. "Recipes were not written down in books during the Middle Ages. Cooking was combined with other topics like medicine, culture and philosophy; so we had to understand the dish and then trans-

late it into what would taste good in modern times," says Gametti. Specialties include the pasta of Pope Martin V (who held the office from 1417-1431); the dish is a sensory delight prepared with almonds, herbs, the cheek of pig and wild fennel. "Platina," a 14th-century dish, marries steak with the sweetness of black cherries, myrtle and bay leaves. Traditional dishes also have a historic flair, like a grilled entrecote of veal of Bonifacio VIII, served with herbs and the full-bodied local red wine, Nero di Troia.

AND WHILE WE'RE POURING...

Most menus serve local wine, since Puglia is the sixth-largest winemaking region in the world and is best known for the production of Primitivo — a clone of the Zinfandel grape — and Negroamaro.

"Wines from Puglia come from ancient vines like the varietal, Nero di Troia," says Gianfelice Sordo, president of **D'Alfonso Del Sordo** (dalfonsodelsordo.it) in the countryside of San Severo, where winemaking has been a family passion since 1860. (Local winemaking dates back to the Phoenicians and the Greeks, who called Puglia *enoteca*, or "wineland.")

Up until the last three decades, grapes from Puglia were mixed into other blends to provide body to wines made in the north or other European countries. But today they are developing a stand-alone reputation.

"The market is very interested in the Apulian wines as a novelty," adds Sordo, who exports his vintages to the U.S. and select countries in the EU. "The sun is the most important factor on the maturation of the grapes, but the soil is composed of clay and limestone which adds a distinct flavor."

Maybe there's some secret in the green and turquoise waters of the two seas that lap at the edges of the region that helps season the food that grows there. Or perhaps it's the fact that the trip from the soil to the dinner table is as short as possible that makes Puglia a recipe for health and happiness. ■

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Clockwise from top: 1. The gates to Masseria Il Frantoio's citrus garden. 2. Lama di Luna's resident sheep. 3. Aging wine barrels at D'Alfonso del Sordo, where winemaking began in 1860. 4. Panna cotta topped with berries finishes the medieval-inspired dinner at Taverna della Gelosia. 5. Fields of red poppies and ancient olive trees are the beautiful landscape of Puglia.

