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PUGLIA, ITALY

Regional ingredients, tradition and wellness merge in the Salento region of Puglia, Italy

BY MICHELE PETERSON

BEST KNOWN FOR ITS GELATOS AND PASTA, Italy at first glance might seem an indulgent destination rather than one of wellness. But I'm on the Salento Peninsula of Puglia and its *cucina povera* - or peasant food - could possibly be Europe's healthiest cuisine.

Dictated by what resourceful cooks could afford to buy or grow, the cuisine of Puglia is simple, plant-based and mostly unprocessed. It's also one of Italy's most diverse. Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, Spaniards and Normans invaded and conquered this strategic peninsula, leaving a culinary legacy in the ingredients, techniques and traditions - all of which makes it a fascinating destination for culinary fans like me, someone ready to kick-start a new, healthier approach to food.

Situated between the Adriatic and Ionian seas at the southern tip of Italy's Puglia region, the Salento is comprised of the province of Lecce and the southern parts of the provinces of Brindisi and Taranto.

I begin my explorations in historic Gallipoli on the Ionian Sea. Its Old Town is situated on an island accessible by a stone bridge and wrapped by a seaside promenade leading to a crescent-shaped beach. An early morning walk leads me to the marina where fishermen are doing brisk business selling pink shrimp straight off their boats. In the fish market tucked beneath the arched bridge, bins overflow with glistening squid, sea urchins, clams, live lobster and other *frutti di mare* plucked fresh from the sea.

"Our tradition is to eat them *crudo* while they're still alive," says a fishmonger who offers me a raw, still-twitching shrimp. ▶

Crossing the peninsula, it's easy to see why Puglia's name derives from the Latin phrase a pluvia, meaning "without rain."



Gallipoli, Italy

It's a bit early in the day for a mouthful of wriggling seafood, so I opt for raw oysters, which taste fresh as the sea air.

The Ionian Sea played an important historical role in linking the Western and Eastern Mediterranean with the Adriatic Sea. Major trade routes passed through its waters. The impressive 13th century Angevine-Aragonese Castle, originally built by the Byzantines, dominates the harbour. Gallipoli's narrow streets, lined with graceful pale-yellow Baroque palaces, hint at its historic wealth.

To get a taste of traditional ingredients in a contemporary setting, I head south along the coast to Solatio restaurant near Torre Suda. Popular among a stylish crowd, its modern glass-filled dining room is suspended on a cliff slope offering 360-degree views of sea and sky. Here, sea urchins appear with linguine and are tossed simply with garlic, olive oil and parsley to let their freshness shine. Other highlights of lunch include *fave e cicoria*, a fava bean purée with chicory, high in protein and fiber yet low in fat. Wafer-thin fennel comes lightly grilled and drizzled with olive oil.

Later, I see these ingredients in the weekly market in nearby Racale, a village with its original, 600-year-old stone walls and traditions intact. Ancient grains and vegetables lost in other parts of the world have been carefully preserved here. It's possible to find *mugnalo*, an almost extinct member of the cabbage family beloved in regional recipes due to its aromatic, delicate flavour, as well as black artichokes, plump Salento figs, yellow and purple carrots and rosy apricots plucked from centuries-old trees.

Also prominent are olives in a range of shapes and sizes. With an estimated 50 to 60 million olive trees, Puglia is Italy's top producer of olive oil. Key to the Mediterranean diet is replacing butter with healthy fats such as olive oil. Olive oil production in Salento is based mostly on two varieties, the Cellina and the Ogliarola, the older variety bearing a purple-black fruit.

The thick gnarled trunks and long slender leaves of these ancient trees are unlike those I've seen elsewhere, yet these venerable beauties are at risk. A deadly plant disease, *xylella fastidiosa*, has been decimating the olive groves of Puglia and other parts of the Mediterranean.

Still, some farms such as the Adamo farm in Alliste, where they cultivate more than 8,000 plants, are battling the disease without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Three generations of the Adamo family have been harvesting olives for extra virgin olive oil, crushing them using a traditional granite mill, thus preserving the quality and flavours of the more than five varieties.

Here, I'm surprised to learn that the olive oil of Puglia was once used for lamp oil in northern Europe. Prized due to its low smoke factor, the "liquid gold" was processed in underground olive oil presses carved into the porous limestone.

At La Grottella Trattoria on the outskirts of the town of Melissano, the underground olive pressing facility has



Top to bottom: Fisherman in the harbour in Gallipoli, olive market

been carefully restored. Its cool interior houses the heavy millstones, as well as workers' sleeping quarters set into niches carved in the soft stone walls. Lunch in the trattoria features *orecchiette alle cime di rapa*, the ear-shaped Pugliese pasta so beloved in Puglia, accompanied by Negroamaro, a ruby red wine with black fruit notes.

Next, I head northeast towards the Adriatic Coast to the town of Minervino di Lecce, with origins dating back to the 10th century. Crossing the peninsula, it's easy to see why Puglia's name derives from the Latin phrase *a pluvia*, meaning "without rain." The sere landscape is dotted with ancient olive groves, prickly pear cactus and almond trees. Asparagus, arugula and fennel grow wild among *dolmen*, megalithic stone monuments dating to the Bronze Age that are scattered throughout the countryside.

My base for several days is Palazzo Ducale Venturi, a 16th century fortified palace that has been restored as a luxury boutique hotel and spa. During the restoration, workers uncovered impressive star-vaulted ceilings, an underground olive mill and a secret passageway built - according to local legend - to facilitate liaisons between the Duke Venturi of Minervino and the abbess of a nearby convent. ▶

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Allyway in Lecce



Left to right: Tavola di San Giuseppe, fresh pasta

In modern times, the underground mill has been transformed into a grotto swimming pool and the Duke's life (minus his liaisons) has been immortalized on a ceiling fresco within the dining room. Here, I enjoy a taste of the Salentine cuisine with typical dishes such as *finocchi gratinati alle Mandorle con mousse di ricotta forte* (fennel in an almond gratin with ricotta) and stuffed artichoke accompanied by organic red, white and rosé wines from Duca Carlo Guarini Winery. The evening also features live music by accordion and tambourine, and a performance of the *pizzica*, the Salentine version of the tarantella dance.

According to legend, the fast pace of the *pizzica pizzica* (which translates to "bite bite") was a method workers used to rid their body of poisons contracted when bitten by spiders while working the local fields. While my own attempt to dance the *pizzica* is rather heavy-footed the next morning, I have more success when trying my hand at preparing some regional dishes.

Food plays a central role in the region's religious festivals and I've arrived in time for one of the most significant spring festivals, the *Tavole di San Giuseppe* (St Joseph's Tables) in March. During this religious celebration, families within the community create a *Tavola di San Giuseppe* in their home, according to precise rules and traditions. Ritual foods include decorated *pane* (bread), *massa* (a pasta with chickpeas) and pickled onions (representing the transition to a new season).

At Caroppo Bakery, where more than 300 loaves of St. Joseph's bread will be produced for the community's annual celebration, a baker coincidentally named Giuseppe directs me as I knead, roll and shape a loaf of bread into its traditional donut shape. Made of yeast, salt and a special local flour of durum wheat, the bread is firm to the touch and decorated with shapes representing the Holy Family or saints. After being baked and blessed by the priest, the fragrant three-kilogram loaves will be set on the ceremonial tables and later distributed to charity.

There's much to experience every season in the Salento. Each November, the tiny town of Taviano celebrates the Festival of San Martino (St. Martin of Tours). While it coincides with the *vino novello* (new wine) harvest, it also recognizes the patron saint of winemaking, horsemen, the poor and the injured. During the festivities, the statue of San Martino is taken by procession through the winding cobbled streets while participants enjoy roast chestnuts and *scapece*, tiny fish preserved in vinegar, saffron and grated breadcrumbs.

In the Salento region of Puglia, the cuisine is more than just food – it's a passion for healthy products, respect for culinary roots and a community of sharing. This balance of mind, body and spirit is the true meaning of wellness. 🍷

SAVOUR THE EXPERIENCE

▶ Opt for the tasting menu at **Origino** restaurant in Minervino di Lecce and you'll be rewarded by inspired dishes featuring seasonal ingredients such as Jerusalem artichokes, almonds and pecorino cheese paired with rare regional wines such as the Menhir Pietra Susumaniello, an indigenous vine cultivated on the owners' organic vineyards.

▶ Dine amid history while sampling the best of Salento's Negroamaro and Primitivo wines at **Vinha Trattoria**, set within the vaulted stone arches of a restored olive oil facility in the heart of Matino, a village known for its winding streets lined by frescoed palazzos and 17th-century churches.

▶ Begin your mornings with **fresh-baked pasticciotti**, the iconic pastry of Puglia. This Italian pastry features a shortbread pastry filled with sweet custard cream and is enjoyed throughout Salento, often accompanied by strong coffee.



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