

The Wines of Puglia

Primitivo and negroamaro take center stage in Puglia, a land of old vines and great buys in the heel of Italy's boot.

Story and Photography by
Patricia Thomson

They say if you find yourself in Puglia, down in the heel of Italy's boot, it's because you intended to be there. No one casually passes by. So what's the draw? Miles of coastline dotted with beaches and ancient watchtowers; ornate architecture in the Baroque towns of Lecce, Otranto, and Gallipoli; hobbit-like dwellings called trulli; century-old olive trees; and, if you travel for wine, primitivo and negroamaro. Puglia has long been identified with bulk wine, supplying northern Italy and France with sun-kissed, high alcohol *vino sfuso* to blend with local product. While this kind of industrial wine still dominates the region (which ranks second in overall wine production, after the Veneto), there's a parallel world of quality wine at wallet-friendly prices. Now, *that's* worth a visit.

Primitivo, Zin's Twin

Puglia's flagship is primitivo, the genetic twin of zinfandel. Americans like it for much the same reason: it's a fruit bomb, with soft tannins and a jammy finish. Back in the day, growers were paid according to the grapes' sugar level, so they let the clusters hang...and hang. These late-harvest grapes resulted in wines with high alcohol, low acidity, and lingering residual sugar.

Those days are gone. Today the goal is balance, even when alcohol



WINES OF ITALY



Luigi Seracca Guerrieri, 4th generation owner of Castello Monaci.

tips the scale at 15 to 16 percent. Clean, modern primitivos are widely available, with entry-level labels running \$11 to \$18. Good examples come from Cantele, a negotiant turned winery; Castello Monaci, named after the monks (*monaci*) who built the property in 1475; Ognissole, part of Feudi di San Gregorio's Magna Grecia project; and Tomaresca, an Antinori estate.

When talking about quality, the top appellation is unquestionably Primitivo di Manduria. But vine age matters as much as territory. Zinfandel label-readers know that "old vine zinfandel" implies greater concentration, depth, and character. So too with *vigne vecchie* Primitivo, which can reach a hundred years or more—if allowed. Unfortunately, many Pugliese farmers have abandoned these high-quality, low-yield vineyards, but obstinately won't sell the land either. Or they take the financial incentive offered by the European Union to replant, destroying a precious heritage. Last year the uprooting was so bad "it was crying time," Ognissole general manager Matteo Santoiemma recalls. "There was a massacre; that's the word that comes to mind. Old vines substituted with new vines, paid for by the EU."

A few winemakers are fighting to preserve these legacy vines. Ognissole, for one, keeps some old primitivo going for its Primitivo Essentia Loci (\$38), and Cantine San Marzano makes a Primitivo di Manduria Sessantanni (\$32), literally "60 Years."

But the winemaker most closely identified with old-vine primitivo is Gianfranco Fino. "I've been called 'the archaeologist of the vineyards' because I have *only* old vines, as far as Es is concerned," says the winemaker, speaking of his cult Primitivo di Manduria (\$80), which critics universally rate as Puglia's best wine. Es means *id*, suggesting pure, unfettered pleasure. Succulent blackberry and black cherry hit you up front, followed by sweet spice and tobacco undertones from a year's maturation in French barrique. But there's also a distinct minerality and pleasing acidity, which adds up to a supremely elegant primitivo with a dry, lingering finish.

Es is sourced from 14 organically farmed parcels whose vines average 60 years. We visit several, and it's easy to see how painstaking is the management of these *albarello* (bush-trained) vines. Unlike the tidy rows of modern viticulture, these sprawl, throwing out starbursts of canes. Since they're densely



Top left: Three Puglian wines. Top right: Baroque architecture in Lecce's main square. Lower left: Leone de Castris' Salice Salentino Riserva, one of Puglia's best buys. Lower right: A centuries-old olive tree.





WINES OF ITALY

planted in a haphazard arrangement, not even Fino's horse can navigate through the field. But the old vines are a beautiful sight: Rooted in clay-rich earth that's a brilliant shade of vermillion, they're as twisty and gnarled as Puglia's centenary olive trees, the leaves a russet red under the October sun. It's easy to understand Fino's passion for this land. Harder to imagine that he almost had a life at sea.

That was his father's plan. A functionary in the ministry of marine defense in Taranto, padre Fino wanted his son to go to a military marine academy. But while the youth was adept at sailing, he was precociously gifted with the vine. That was discovered when a neighbor let the 13-year-old tend a few rows of his partially abandoned vineyard. "I remember at Christmas, they gave me a manual of viticulture and my first pair of pruning shears. And I'd wanted a bicycle!" Fino recalls. "But that's how it began." When a cousin from Milan inherited a vineyard nearby and returned to study enology in Locorotondo, he invited Fino to visit the school. The rest, as they say, is history.

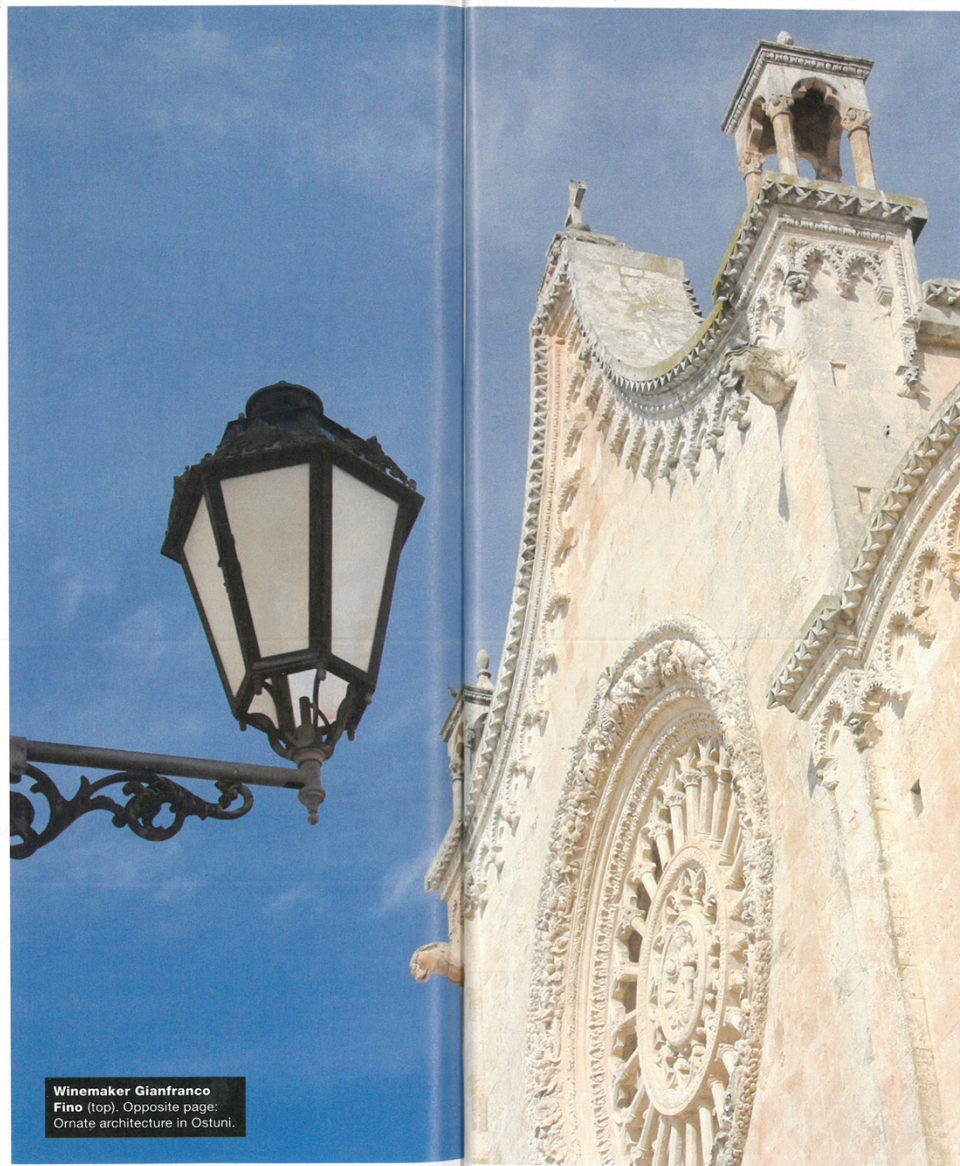
Fino founded his eponymous winery in 2004 and makes four labels, totaling 23,000 bottles. That's a tiny production by any measure, but especially in Puglia, where enormous cooperatives rule. "To maintain a winery of this size isn't easy at all," Fino concedes. He'll expand to 30,000 bottles once his new 25-acre vineyard comes on line. That's where his new cellar will finally break ground in 2017, after seven years of wrangling building permits. But if there's one thing Fino has learned, it's that good things come to those who wait.

Best buy: Salice Salentino

To my mind, the best price/value in Puglia is Salice Salentino. When I was young and counted my pennies, it was my go-to wine both because it was cheap and delicious. Decades later, I'm happy to say that both are still true.

Salice Salentino is a *denominazione di origine controllata* zone centered around a town of that name. (Salento is a subregion of Puglia comprising the heel proper.) The wine is a blend with negroamaro playing the lead role. Negroamaro literally means "black black," a mashup of the Latin *niger* and Greek *mavros*, and its flavors go dark, suggesting black cherry and plum. Compared to primitivo, negroamaro has less alcohol, more acidity, more spice, more tannin.

In the days before temperature-controlled fermentation became an exact science, those tannins could spell trouble. When Castello Monaci built a new cellar in 1928, initially the fermentation set-up wasn't capable of



Winemaker Gianfranco Fino (top). Opposite page: Ornate architecture in Ostuni.

taming the wild beast. "My grandmother remembers the negroamaro being very disgusting during the first few years after bottling. It needed five to six years to become bad but drinkable, because the tannins were like this," says fourth-generation winery owner Luigi Seracca Guerrieri, knocking on wood. "So my grandfather Antonio Provenzano, Leone de Castris, and some other people got together and said, 'What can we do with negroamaro?' Primitivo was easy to sell. Negroamaro no."

Their solution was to build on what farmers were doing in the field. "Historically, it was a practice to plant four rows of negroamaro and one row of malvasia nera di Lecce, the varietal that has the softest tannins and lowest acidity," Seracca explains. That laid the groundwork for Salice Salentino DOC, which adopted the same 80/20 ratio. Since then the rules have relaxed; now it's minimum 75 percent negroamaro, minimum 10 percent malvasia, and an option of 30 other permitted grapes.

The first Salice Salentino to be sold in bottle came from Leone de Castris, one of the region's oldest wineries. The farm was founded in 1665 by a Spanish duke who'd arrived from Naples, and the town of Salice Salentino literally grew up around that estate. Leone de Castris' Salice Salentino Riserva, a 90/10 blend, has been a lifelong favorite of mine—and of many value-conscious consumers. The wine is eminently drinkable but complex, offering layers of ripe cherry, baked fruit, spice, and vanilla—all for a mere \$15.

Rosé aka Rosato

One can't mention Leone de Castris—or Puglia, for that matter—without talking about rosé, or rosato in Italian. Nowhere else in Italy is rosato drunk so commonly nor so rooted in tradition.

The reason takes us back to Puglia's history as a bulk-wine supplier. Pugliese farmers sold their main harvest to negociants to ship north. But they could wring out a second harvest for themselves from the small, late-developing clusters known as *racemi*. These runts of the vine had higher acidity, less sugar, and thus less potential alcohol. While they might make tart, rustic reds, they were perfectly fine for rosato. Thus the tradition began. Today virtually every winery makes at least one modern-style rosato—most often with negroamaro—and there's nothing more refreshing on a hot summer night when dining on Puglia's fresh seafood.

Here again, Leone de Castris is a pioneer. Leone de Castris produced not only the first rosato bottled in Puglia, but in all of Italy. The year was 1943, and winery owner Piero Francesco Leone was fretting over the vats of wine sitting in his cellar, unsold. The German occupation of Italy had made it impossible to ship to his regular customers in the north. He needed new clients—and fast, since another harvest was about to start. The entrepreneur thought up a daring scheme: Vinify the entire harvest as a rosato and sell it locally, young and fresh. If anyone wanted to buy red wine, he'd sell them last year's.

Then he took a second risk. American soldiers were stationed in Brindisi, Bari, and Lecce, and they were big drinkers. Beer, mostly. Through a few strategic party invitations, Don Piero managed to get the general in charge of Allied procurements, Charles Poletti, to taste his rosato. The general liked it. Since his troops had drained their last beer bottle and needed something else to keep their spirits up, he ordered 35,000 bottles. That created another problem for Don Piero. He had no empty bottles, since the glass factories were all in the north. His solution: Collect as many discarded beer bottles as possible. His workers successfully rounded up a motley assortment of 20,000 American, Australian, and British beer bottles and bottled the first vintage of rosato that way. It was christened Five Roses, a translation of Cinque Rose, the vineyard's name, and today runs \$15. This became Puglia's first famous wine and served as an inspiration for subsequent generations.

Whether or not rosé is your cup of tea, one thing is sure: Puglia offers a wine for every season (and yes, even whites), so familiarize yourself with that corner of your wine shop and give them a try throughout the year.

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