



Well-Oiled

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Olivia Greenway takes a food lover's trip to a little-visited area of Italy: a far cry from the fashion houses of Milan, the art galleries of Florence, the churches and canals of Venice – but just as distinctive and no less appealing...

I'm browsing in a food market near Brindisi and I don't speak Italian. A stallholder invites me to taste a black jam-like substance, made from grape juice. I buy a jar. He wants me to try the olive oil too, but I indicate that I can't carry much more. With a shrug and a smile, he insists that I take a small bottle anyway, free. He is typical of the people here: generous and friendly.

Tell someone you're going to Puglia and the chances are that they'll have a vague idea that it's somewhere in Italy. Beyond that, though, this small region remains a mystery. Most people won't be able to tell you that it's on the northern coast of the heel of Italy's boot, facing the Adriatic Sea, or that it has four large towns but that most of its inhabitants still live off the land, in the countryside.

The only reason that Nick Carlucci knows the area well is that he used to come here every summer from Reading to visit his extended family. After university, Nick decided to move to Puglia for good, in the footsteps of his older brother who had already been drawn to the area. It wasn't too long before their mother and father joined them from England and they bought a 300 year-old derelict masseria (farmhouse) together, a mere five miles from the area that the grandfather had left all those years ago.

When friends and relatives came to visit, they fell in love with the food and wine; back home in England they wanted to buy the products they'd so enjoyed under Italian skies, but although Puglia supplies much of the food and wine consumed throughout Italy, surprisingly little is exported. So, a few months ago, Nick set up a Puglian food website, selling products found in the area. Together with the help of a local association, Terra dei Messapi / Land of the Messapi, formed to promote tourism in eight small towns in the region (it is hoped that more visitors will soon be able to enjoy this unspoiled part of the country) he agreed to show me around.

On the short drive from the airport at Brindisi, I notice that the area is relatively poor; you don't see the substantial villas such as those on the outskirts of Florence or the glorious merchant's homes in Venice, or, indeed, any of the grand buildings that one associates with Italian cities. It's also short on luxury hotels – Italy's forte – but for me this is part of its charm. It is the 'real' Italy, where ordinary people live. Little English is spoken, there are odd bits of litter about and a few of the buildings are in a state of disrepair. It hasn't been smartened up for the tourists, mainly because there aren't many.

Our first stop is in Mesagne, a pretty medieval town with 11th century castle and 15th century city walls. We visit Viander, a vegetable processing factory on the outskirts, where the method of production is pleasingly uncomplicated. A group of women stand over simple charcoal grills, hand turning sliced courgettes that will be then cooled and steeped in olive oil ready for bottling. During the artichoke season in April, it's all hands on deck. Two hundred and fifty people are involved in preparing and roasting the most famous vegetable of the area, the Brindisi artichoke, which even has its own IGP (protected geographical status). Italy is the world's largest producer of artichokes and most come from Puglia. Brindisi artichokes are so sweet and soft they can even be eaten raw.

We move on to an olive grove near Latiano. The owner shows us a gnarled specimen that is over a thousand years old and still producing good fruit. We dip chunky, farmhouse bread into the pale green oil and it's easy to appreciate why they don't use much butter in this area. The farmer has an orchard with figs and pomegranates and a field where deep purple aubergines, bright red peppers and green cabbages are bursting out of the red earth. He also has a field of melons that look like lost footballs and grows six varieties. Slices of the fruit are set up on a table in the bright sunshine. The smell is perfume sweet and the flesh so juicy that it dribbles down my chin; I abandon all efforts to prevent it and just enjoy.

Next we visit a cheese maker at nearby Azienda Agricola Marangiosa, a teaching farm. We watch as, after twenty minutes of adding rennet to the milk, the curds separate from the whey. The curds are spooned into small plastic basket moulds and pressed to remove excess water. Then the ricotta is cooled and ready to eat, or matured to make a tongue-tingling stronger cheese – ricotta forte – found all over the region.

On to Francavilla Fontana, another medieval town with cobbled streets. In a tiny shop here, a husband and wife team make sugared almonds, as they have been made for hundreds of years. The fresh nuts are placed in a large flat-based copper pan, suspended from the ceiling on ropes, like a swing. Underneath is a charcoal fire. Fabio swings the pan backwards and forwards over the fire, whilst Maria adds spoonfuls of sugar solution. The process takes about half an hour. Cooled, the nuts keep for several months and are popular on feast days. The vast number of almonds grown here means that they liberally creep into biscuits and desserts, along with honey and figs, other local specialities.

Much of Italy's flour comes from Puglia, so we go on to make pasta at Masseria Triticum, a cookery school and B&B. The popular variety locally is orecchiette or 'little ears'. As a historically poor area, Puglia doesn't use eggs in the making of pasta, so the dough is made from just flour and water. A worm-like piece is cut into two inch lengths, pressed with a simple metal tool and turned inside out to form the ear. It is then left to dry before being cooked. Orecchiette are found on menus all over the area and are delicious with a simple vegetable sauce.

You couldn't come to this area without tasting the wine, of course. Individual vineyards tend to be small, so they have organised themselves into cooperatives. In recent years, there has been an

emphasis on quality over quantity and the region has invested in its own indigenous grape varieties such as negroamaro and primitivo, that it is keen to preserve. We visit three different wineries: Cellino San Marco, San Pancrazio, and San Donaci. Here we see the production process, from the truck arriving with the hand-picked grapes ready to be weighed and the sugar content tested, to the maturing in oak barrels for the speciality wines. Visitors are welcome to taste the excellent award-winning wines before purchase, with few being available in the UK.

At San Pietro, we sampled more oil at olive bar Ciombe, as well as frisellini, a traditional hard savoury biscuit, usually with a hollow centre. These used to be threaded onto string by the farmworkers and worn round the neck, to provide immediate and convenient sustenance as they toiled.

Our final stop is another masseria, outside Torchiarolo, where we learn to bake bread. There's an old pizza oven on the outdoor terrace and we can smell the woodsmoke as we don our aprons and start to work the sticky dough, filled with chopped peppers and onions. We dip it in water and then flour, which will help to form a hard crust. Before long our bread rolls are placed on trays and eased into the furnace with long paddle-like pieces of wood. We sit on the terrace at a communal table, where wire coathangers, fashioned into rounds, hang from the ceiling, threaded with tomatoes for the winter. A cork is popped and hot steam rises from the fresh pasta just placed in front of me. Someone makes a joke and we all laugh. Simple pleasures. In Puglia, they have their priorities just right.

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