

THE HEALTHY ITALIAN Tastes of Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

JUNE 2017

28

easy to make
**SUMMER
RECIPES**



Water World

**Foods and Traditions From
Italy's Fabulous Lake Como Region,
Plus Puglia and Sardinia**

**Healthy Fresh
Salmon**

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NATIVE SOIL



One of Puglia's
rocky coasts.



PUGLIA: HIDDEN TREASURE

Located on the heel of Italy's "boot," the region of Puglia is known for its cool coast, charming hill towns, and vintage farmland.

STORY BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

NATIVE SOIL

W

e are on our way to Puglia, a region which takes its name from the Latin phrase *a pluvia*, meaning without rain. In a little over three hours, my husband Rino and I arrive from Naples to Conversano, an ancient small town near Polignano a Mare. It's a destination like no other in Italy: unspoiled beaches, unobstructed views, and delicious Pugliese food and wine, all in an undiscovered part of the southern boot.

The villa where we will be staying is in a restored medieval court in the heart of Conversano. Tall, sand-colored terracotta vases spill with oregano,

lavender and rosemary. Their pungent Mediterranean scents saturate the air. Before we even open our car door, Signora Letizia, the owner, comes to greet us.

She welcomes us with warm southern hospitality. Although Letizia graduated from the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro with a degree in economics, she made a plan with a fellow classmate, Nicola, before graduation to refurbish an abandoned villa. Today, the property is luxurious.

We follow Letizia through lofty arches that lead to an oversized living area. She serves chilled glasses of Martina Franca, a blend of Verdeca and Bianco d'Allesano white wine, and a bowl of curled taralli, salty biscotti with a hint of wild rosemary.

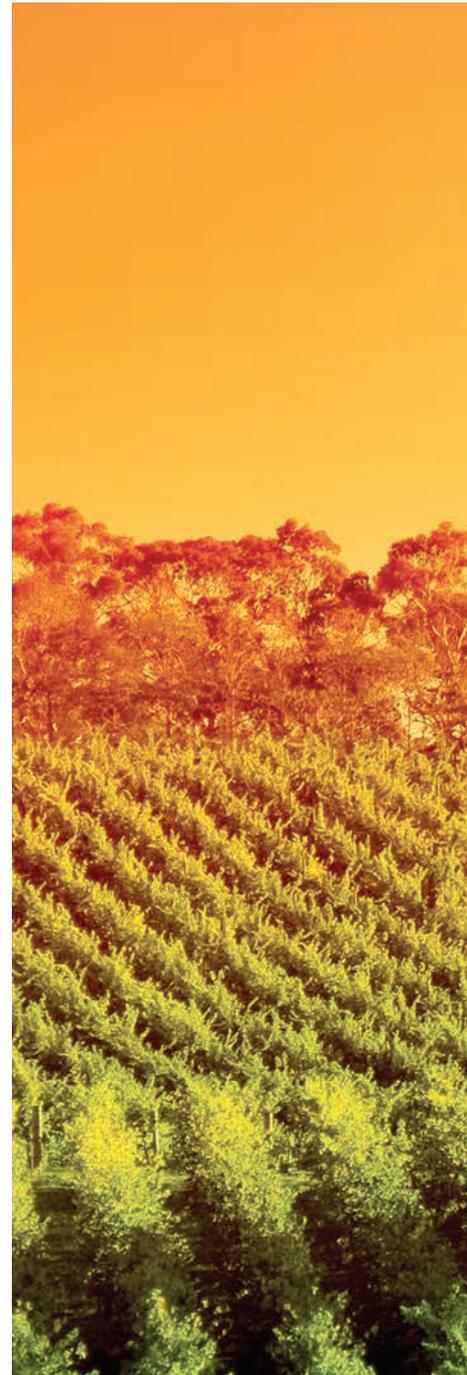
She's our hostess, but talks like a tour guide. "Although during the week we'll do some Pugliese cooking and drink our local wine, we'll also visit Alberobello, the ancient town known for trulli, iconic coned houses of the region, dating back to the 14th century," she says. Alberobello is a Unesco World Heritage site and not far from the villa.

"The oldest trulli were built out of stone, without any cement, and all have pointed coned roofs," says Letizia. "This method of building was imposed on new settlers so they could dismantle their shelters in a hurry. This was an easy way to evade taxes on new settlements under the Kingdom of Naples, and a way to deter unruly lords. Historians who study trulli note that their building design and technique came about due to the area's abundant supply of limestone. Each trulli resembles the next, painted with crosses, planetary signs and mythological symbols believed to protect the home and bring good luck to the family.

"Alberobello is also known for its pungent olive oil and ancient olive trees. We call it the land of olives. Not only do local artisans produce almost half of Italy's oil, they also hand carve olive wood into wooden spoons, cutting boards, furniture, and weaved baskets. You'll see the wooden goods displayed throughout the area by the artisans," she adds.

Following our aperitivo, we check into our room: an elegant, all white suite with a dreamy view over the Romanesque cathedral.

Conversano, once part of the Roman Empire, is a charming small city known for its cherries and almonds. After exploring the town, we return to the villa for our cooking class. The cooking here is *cucina povera*, translating to "poor man's kitchen," using local



"Conversano is known for its cherries and almonds. They're often used in our cooking; we even make cherry wine."

Left: A walkway in the Puglian town of Monopoli.
Right: A vineyard in the Adelaide Hills.



NATIVE SOIL



Top: Pecorino cheese is ready for sale at a market in Puglia. **Bottom:** The town of Alberobello with trulli houses in the Puglia region.



Sea urchins for sale in Bari.

vegetables, produce and fresh fish in a simple cooking style.

At 5 p.m., we are in the kitchen preparing Puglian dishes, including sole gratin with pecorino and bombetta Pugliese, a pork loin delicacy. An Australian couple, a grandmother and granddaughter from New York City and a fisherman from Iceland are in our group. Friendly conversation and exchanging cultural differences add to the richness of our new-found friendships.

The next morning, Letizia comes with us as we drive to Ostuni, a small town near the coast in the Province of Brindisi. It's called "la città bianca," the white city, for the whitewashed houses and palazzos that crown the hilltop. The town's ancient walls encircle the city, and from the hilltop historical center, views encompass pristine beaches, olive groves and farm estates. Olive oil is the main product of this area, and just a taste reveals the unique flavor of the liquid gold. We step into a quaint café and, without even asking, the waiter brings us glasses of bianco di Ostuni, local white wine, a plate of burrata, a creamy fresh white cheese made from cow's milk, and pane Altamura, an ancient Pugliese bread made with lievito madre, a natural rising agent, and semolina, giving it a corn yellow hue.

"I heard your Neapolitan accent," says the waiter, pointing to Rino. "Benvenuti. Try our wine and cheese. I'm signor Bruno and this is my bar." He tells us everything we need to know about Ostuni and other nearby towns. When we've emptied our glasses, we thank him for his generosity and insist on paying, but there is no bargaining. We take the rest of the afternoon visiting Ostuni, then return to the villa.

The next morning, we drive to Martina Franca, which is set in an historic center enveloped by ancient stone walls and accented with Baroque architecture. The main square, Piazza Roma, features the prominent 17th century Palazzo Ducale, today used as a civic center. Martina Franca is also famous for its summer opera festival, Festival della Valle d'Itria.

About noon, we stop for lunch at a trattoria where a blackboard displays the daily pasta specials: orecchiette, also called "little ears," are a traditional Pugliese pasta. It is served with broccoli, or chicory with cannellini beans. Cavatelli with mussels or cavatelli with sausage are also being served. We order family platters of each and everyone shares accompanied by a bottle of Ostuni Ottavianello, local red wine. We end lunch with a homemade flaky pie filled with a creamy custard and local black cherries.

After lunch, we explore the historic center of this small city brimming with local products, including the Martina Franca DOC sparkling wine as well as artisan-produced salumi and capocollo.

Puglia is a melting pot of races, conquered by the ancient Greeks and settled by the Romans, the Goths, Lombards, Byzantines, Turks and French. The heel of Italy is so vast and feels remarkably undiscovered, I note.

"Tomorrow we'll visit Lecce," says Letizia. "Known as the Florence of Southern Italy and true to its nickname, it's a city rich in art and culture. It's a beautiful Baroque city with monuments, Medieval castles, Renaissance churches, Roman amphitheaters and Greek ruins. Lecce produces ceramics, red and white wine, and olive oil," she notes. But it's not the only gem in the region.

"There's Matera, too," Letizia says. "It's a Unesco World Heritage Site. But, we'll leave that for another day. It is, after all, just one hour away."

During our week-long stay, we've cooked, tasted local cuisine, discovered the region's wines, made new friends and, put more than 1200 miles on our car. Italians do love to eat and drive! To cook and tour with Letizia, see cooking-vacations.com/tour/puglia-women-cooking-classes-schools.

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