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ITALY 2011

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names to know this year**



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The return of the native

Puglia is slowly losing its reputation for cheap, cheerful Primitivo and Negroamaro, moving to wines of real quality made from its ancient native grapes. Ian d'Agata picks out the varieties to look for

YOU COULDN'T INVENT a better red wine than Primitivo or Negroamaro,' says Piernicola Leone de Castris, owner of the century-old De Castris winery. He *would* say that, of course, but there is merit in his argument. 'Good primary aromas, rich flavours, ripe tannins, decent acidity and great with food. These wines don't have to be cheap and cheerful. The best reds from Puglia rank with the top wines of Italy.'

Unfortunately, while these top wines, such as De Castris' own Donna Lisa Rosso, or Candido's Cappello di Prete, can hold their own in such lofty company, a visit to the region's vineyards shows that alongside producers who focus on quality, many more feast on quantity. And it is precisely this high-output wine (Puglia is Italy's biggest producer of grapes and wine) that does the region a bad turn, ruining the image that others are trying hard to improve.

It's a source of great frustration – the region's best wines are worlds away from such basic fare. In fact, they have never been better. Yet while much has been written about Puglia as an emerging wine region, it seems to have been 'emerging' for some time. You can't blame those who wonder exactly when, or if, it is ever going to arrive.

Quality over quantity

How, then, does one go about finding the best examples of what Puglia has to offer? For a start, we should move away from the lake of Primitivo and Negroamaro, much of which is cheap and rustic. The real interest lies in more obscure indigenous varieties. **Nero di Troia** is Puglia's hottest commodity right now. Very few single-varietal Nero di Troia wines were made before the early 2000s, yet today there are almost 30 producers making these.

Historically, Nero di Troia (the more correct name of Uva di Troia is slowly falling out of favour)

was blended with Montepulciano for added colour. But Rivera's Puer Apuliae showed the variety was good enough to stand on its own, as did Torrevento's Vigna Pedale. Part of Nero di Troia's appeal is that its wines are so different from those made with Negroamaro and Primitivo. Lighter hued, with a fragrance of violets, red berries and minerals, the wines are medium bodied and have greater finesse than Puglia's other, better-known red varieties. The best wines are made in central Puglia from the Castel del Monte DOC near Bari, but some good ones (such as those of D'Alfonso del Sordo) are also found in the northern part of Puglia, near Foggia.

Nero di Troia is just one of many Puglian native grapes being rediscovered: Bombino Bianco, Susumaniello and Fiano Minutolo are generating excitement, too. And Ottavianello, traditionally grown in central Puglia with lacklustre results at best, today has wines that are worth seeking out.

Ottavianello and Susumaniello are at home in Salento, the lower third of Puglia. The former is much better known as Cinsault, grown in Puglia for centuries, and attracting interest now as a source of perfumed light reds and rosés. Rosé is undoubtedly Ottavianello's real calling, with copious aromas of red berries, delicate herbs and plenty of crisp, fresh acidity making it hard to put the glass back down.

More interesting for fine wine is **Susumaniello**, recently rediscovered thanks to the groundbreaking work done by two estates in particular, Santa Barbara and Racemi. It is characterised by a very black fruit-dominated nose, and a syrupy, glyceric mouthfeel rich in blackberry and cherry flavours. It is neither particularly spicy, nor does it exude

Right: forward-thinking producers in Puglia are focusing on more niche varieties over the mass-produced Primitivo ➤





black pepper, coffee or cocoa aromas and flavours.

'Susumaniello is different from Primitivo and Negroamaro,' say Gregory Perucci and Salvatore Mero of Racemi, probably the biggest experts on the variety today. 'Wines are less alcoholic and ripe than Primitivo and more perfumed than Negroamaro.' Though not everyone is as convinced the variety is interesting and complex enough to stand on its own (many still prefer to blend it with Negroamaro), it is telling that even those unsure about its exact merits, such as Donato Lazzari of Agricole Vallone, have recently planted entire vineyards to it. Lazzari, who with over 40 years' experience is one of Puglia's – Italy's even – most distinguished viticulturists, told me: 'It may prove too tannic to stand on its own, but our vines are too young to be sure. Still, we like what we've seen so far, and there's considerable promise.'

Having cut my teeth on Barolo and Barbaresco, I don't find Susumaniello's tannins noteworthy: the better versions, such as those of Racemi, Vallone and Li Veli, prove both balanced and smooth.

Francesco Candido, a leading Puglia estate located in San Donaci near the seaside town of Brindisi, is another prime example of a producer moving the region away from its cheap and cheerful image. While wine names such as Cappello di Prete or the Duca D'Aragona harken to traditions past and are loaded with tannins that need years to resolve fully, the estate now also offers a bevy of flashier, modern-styled wines that maintain a sense of place; a tactic used by other wineries, too.

Sebastiano De Corato of Rivera says: 'In Puglia many of us – unfortunately not all – have done some fine tuning. We still make hearty reds, but also produce lighter wines with lower alcohol levels and crisp fruit aromas and flavours that the modern lifestyle asks for.' The recent increase in

Find your way around Puglia

Puglia offers wine lovers everywhere a plethora of different wines that are the result of the region's extremely varied climate and geology. Running roughly 360km from north to south, the heel of Italy's boot can be divided in three main sub-regions.

The northern third of Puglia is known as the Capitanata (previously known as Daunia after the Dauni people), where Foggia is the most important city. Grape varieties such as Bombino Bianco (white) and Nero di Troia and Bombino Nero (red) dominate here, with a historically significant presence of Montepulciano, first brought over from nearby Abruzzo.

The central third of Puglia is the Peucezia, of which the main city is Bari. The landscape here is dominated by the very poor, rocky, calcareous-limestone plateau of La Murgia and the geologically similar Valle dell'Itria. For this reason, the majority of Puglia's white wine, and certainly its best, is produced here.

The last third of Puglia is known as Salento (previously Messapia, after the Messapi tribe) and is the home of both Primitivo and Negroamaro grape varieties, which seem to thrive and yield very different wines from elsewhere in the region, thanks to the many different types of soil.

the popularity of Puglian wines rests not only on lighter and fresher wines, but also on the dedication that many new wineries are devoting to once forgotten native grape varieties. So not just a matter of wine style, but substance too, if you will.

The whiter side

It is telling that in any discussion of Puglia's wines, whites are rarely mentioned. Some commentators (and producers) dismiss them altogether, believing the region's natives to lack body and complexity. Others have tried to remedy this by over-eager additions of Chardonnay or Sauvignon, the end result being a wine that tastes only of the international varieties. 'This [approach] completely defeats the purpose,' says Lino Carparelli, former winemaker at Torrevento, who now runs I Pastini winery near Locorotondo. Another problem, Carparelli adds, is that in much of Puglia during August, when these international varieties are usually harvested, there is little difference in temperature from day to night.

In fact, though, there are some fine whites being produced from native grapes. More Puglian estates are turning to Fiano, an import from nearby Campania that has long been grown in Puglia. And there are signs that local ancient varieties have more to offer than previously believed. Carparelli's belief is such that he makes only white wine, concentrating on the local Bianco d'Alessano, Verdeca and **Fiano Minutolo**. The latter is especially interesting, a native white with true world-class potential. Not related to Fiano (its name will officially change to Minutolo next year), it yields aromatic wines best described as a cross between white Muscat and a light Gewurztraminer. Fresh, mineral, and with a floral, crisp finish, it has turned many heads.

Unfortunately, Minutolo is becoming a hot item in Puglia, and already bottlings of dubious aroma and flavour profile have appeared on the scene. The onus is on the authorities to ensure things don't get out of hand.

Carparelli has also had rather amazing success with other natives such as **Verdeca** and **Bianco**

Below: the best Nero di Troia is found in the Castel del Monte DOC, named after the castle pictured



Photograph: Spila Riccardo/SIME-4 Corners Images



Above: Primitivo has long been Puglia's calling card, but is known mainly for value, rather than quality wines

d'Alessano. He manages to coax just enough aromas and flavours from them to make something interesting happen; what the wines lack in structure and complexity they make up for in crisp herbal and white fruit aromas. Just like with his Minutolo, he aims for an elegant wine, far removed from the heavily oaked styles of other Italian whites, and this non-interventionism, coupled with strict vineyard work, delivers. I would have never believed it possible for Bianco d'Alessano, the main player in the Locorotondo DOC white wine, to be interesting, '... yet it's my best-selling white' beams Carparelli.

Verdeca has actually gathered more attention in the region, with a few 100% Verdeca bottlings on the scene. Crisp and lemony, the wines have a mineral and herbal sheen reminiscent of a delicate Sauvignon Blanc. Some producers prefer to blend it with other varieties – producing some very fine wines that don't really speak much of the variety at all.

Other wine-producing regions have an easier time commercially than Puglia – it's hard to create strong brands from the likes of Verdeca, Bianco d'Alessano or Susumaniello. And while blends loaded with Cabernet and Chardonnay may hold initial appeal, it has become apparent to Puglians that reckless blending is not the answer.

Even though neither Puglia's native grapes nor sub-regions are yet well known, producers generally accept that today, serious wine lovers are keen to hunt down something far removed from the boring Cabernet and Chardonnay set. Hence the onus is on Puglia's producers to promote the high quality of the new wines that are being made. Recent efforts have included winemaker dinners and tastings in Canada and the US, with similar events planned in the UK and Europe over the next few years.

Puglia may have made its name with Primitivo, Negroamaro and blended red table wines such as Salice Salentino, but there's much more to the region. The quality of the old, well-established wines has never been better and, despite issues with public awareness, Puglia's many native grape varieties, both white and red, are giving wine lovers everywhere reason to be increasingly on the lookout for Puglian wines in the future. **D**

Ian d'Agata is director of the International Wine Academy, based in Rome

The natives: d'Agata's great dozen

d'Arapri, Riserva Noble Metodo

Classico 2006 ★★★ 16pts/20

N/A UK www.darapri.it

100% Bombino Bianco, a high-acid variety that gives sparklers of surprising complexity. The yeasty nose gives way to pure tropical and apple fruit. Finishes clean and long, with mouthwatering acidity. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

I Pàstini, Rampone, Fiano Minutolo

2009 ★★★★★ 16.5

N/A UK www.ipastini.it

Aromatic variety grown on poor, rocky soil. Dominant spiciness on the nose with hints of flowers, grapefruit and mint. Bright and gloriously fresh on the long finish. **Drink:** 2011–2012.



Cantèle, Alticelli Fiano

2009 ★★★ 16

£10.70 **Armit**

Floral and dried herbs, ripe tropical fruit, good lift and freshness. Fiano is becoming the white grape of Puglia. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

Leone de Castris, Five

Roses Rosé 2009 ★★★ 16

£70.62 (case 6) **Everywine**

This bright rosé is almost always one of Italy's best. Almost flowers and red plum aromas, then gentle red fruit and marzipan flavours. Juicy and fruity, meant for early drinking. **Drink:** 2011.

Gianfranco Fino, Es, Primitivo di

Manduria 2008 ★★★★★ 17.5

£40 **Premier Vintners**

From up to 80-year-old vines on ferrous oxide rich, red soil. Powerhouse wine, with almost Amarone-like richness; flavours of cherries macerated in alcohol, chocolate and sweet spice. **Drink:** 2011–2018.

Tormaresca, Bocca di Lupo Aglianico

2006 ★★★★★ 17

£19.15–25.99 **Berkmann, Slurp**

Rare 100% Aglianico. Fine, mineral nose with fragrant wild berry fruits and a hint of smoke. Great clarity, depth and precision, with a restrained but pure mouthfeel. Polished tannins and long finish. **Drink:** 2012–2015.

Agricole Vallone, Vigna Castello

Rosso Salento 2008 ★★★★★ 16.5

£20.66 **Lay & Wheeler**

Brand new wine. Interesting blend

of 70% Negroamaro and 30% Susumaniello; lovely nose of violets, crushed berries, minerals and herbs. High but smooth tannins, juicy fruit and cocoa; flinty finish. **Drink:** 2012–2018.



Rivera, Puer Apuliae, Castel del Monte Rosso

Riserva 2004 ★★★★★ 16.5

£34 **Mondial Wine**

100% Nero di Troia. Maturing nose of faded violets, tobacco and crushed blackberry. Full bodied and creamy, with mineral, gamey and forest berry flavours. Fine and ripe

tannins, classy finish. **Drink:** 2011–2015.

Alberto Longo, Le Cruste Rosso

2007 ★★★ 16

£19.99 **Lea & Sandeman**

Savoury, earthy notes of red berries, truffles and underbrush. Harmonious, with fresh acidity and grippy tannins on the pleasant, long finish. Another new, high-quality estate. **Drink:** 2011–2015.

Francesco Candido, Cappello di

Prete 2005 ★★★ 15.5

£10.50–12 **AG Wines, Everywine,**

Great Western Wines, Slurp, Swig

Mature, herbal nose with hints of dried red cherry, underbrush and shoe polish. Good fruit intensity and decent power and structure; savoury finish. For many, the best example of traditionally made Negroamaro. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

Li Veli, Passamante Negroamaro,

Salento 2008 ★★★ 15.5

£11.49–13.50; **Frank Stainton, Highbury**

Vintners, Harvey Nichols, Liberty Wines,

Swig, The Vineking, Vinoteca

Attractive nose, with a hint of volatile acidity. Juicy red and black fruits on nose and palate with above average freshness and intensity. **Drink:** 2011–2012.



Conti Zecca, Donna Marzia Primitivo 2009 ★★★ 14.5

£7.99 **H&H Bancroft, Waitrose**

Nose of bright red and black fruit, tobacco and liquorice. Initially forward and juicy, then slightly drying.

Easygoing and uncomplicated but well made. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

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