

REGIONS OF ITALY



A Quick History Lesson

Puglia's history, like that of so many parts of southern Italy, is a tangled web of conquerors and occupation. Its strategic position and its fertile soil made it an attractive proposition for colonization and all the usual suspects invaded at one time or another. The Greeks, Romans, Turks, Normans, and French have all ruled here. The region was always a strategic area for Mediterranean people and was first colonized by Mycenaean Greeks, who founded the colony of Taranto. In 272 BC, the Romans expanded throughout the territory conquering Taranto. In 216 BC, the city of Cannae was the site of one of the worst Roman defeats of all time, when the Imperial Roman Army was resoundingly crushed by General Hannibal and his forces.

With the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, Puglia's continuous occupations ended with the Byzantines who kept it for nearly two centuries.

In the 10th century, the Eastern Roman Empire defeated the Saracen/Turks and came into control once again only to soon cede their prize to the Normans.

Starting from 1059, the Norman, Robert Guiscard, formed the Duchy of Apulia. Later in the century, the Normans conquered Sicily where they established their power base. Puglia became a provincial outpost under Norman rule. In 1200 AD, Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, aka "Stupor Mundi", inherited Puglia where he spent much of his time when absent from Sicily. His enlightened reign saw a flourishing of the arts and a period of relative peace and prosperity. The Normans gave way to the French Angevins (13th century) and Puglia became part of the Kingdom of Naples.

In 1500, Spanish King Ferdinand V took the reins and Otranto, Bari and Taranto were fortified against Turkish invasions. The Spanish rule lasted until 1713, when Naples, Puglia, and Sicily were ceded to the Austrian House of Habsburg. Eventually, in 1759, the Kingdom of Naples returned under Spanish influence with King Ferdinand IV. The French revolution hit the south of Italy in 1799, when a revolutionary French army invaded Naples, expelling Ferdinand and turning the kingdom into a republic.

Puglia (or Apulia in English) is a region of Italy that comprises the heel of Italy's boot. It is in the southern peninsular section of the country, bordering the Adriatic Sea to the east, the Ionian Sea to the southeast, and the Strait of Otranto and Gulf of Taranto to the south. It has the longest coastline in the Italian peninsula and is bordered by the other Italian regions of Molise to the north, Campania to the west, and Basilicata to the southwest. Its capital city is Bari.

The region is divided into six provinces: Bari, Brindisi, Foggia, Lecce, Taranto and the recently constituted province of Barletta-Andria-Trani. The area around Lecce and the southernmost tip of the 'heel' is called the Salento.

Most of Puglia, and particularly Salento, is geographically flat with only moderate hills. The famed Appian Way starts in Rome and ends in Puglia. Apart from some lower mountains of the Southern Apennine chain, it is the least mountainous Italian region mostly occupied by plains and hills. Half of Puglia's territory is flat and occupied by a wide plain called Tavoliere delle Puglie which is the second largest plain in Italy.

The region comprises 19,345 square kilometers and its population is about four million, ranking it as the 8th most populous region of Italy. Tourism in the summer is a large source of income thanks to over 500 miles of coastline (the longest coastline of any Italian mainland region) and 10 Blue Flag resort beaches.

The climate is typically Mediterranean with hot, dry and sunny summers and mild, rainy winters. Snowfall, especially on the coast, is rare but has occurred as recently as January 2019, March 2018 and January 2017. Apulia is among the hottest and driest regions of Italy in the summer with temperatures sometimes reaching up to and above 40 °C in Lecce and Foggia.

After the final defeat of Napoleon in 1816, the Kingdom of Naples and the Kingdom of Sicily merged into the new Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. There were modest improvements in the roads and infrastructure during this period but for the most part it was neglected by the French overseers.

In 1860, Puglia joined united Italy during the Risorgimento and Puglia was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy under King Vittorio Emanuele II. In 1922, Mussolini intensified the production of grain, olives and wine through an elaborate irrigation system for the region as Italy attempted to become self-sufficient.

The Allied invasion in 1943 ousted German forces and the ports of Bari, Brindisi and Taranto experienced heavy bombing from both sides. Bari was the scene of the only chemical weapons attack in WW2 when the Germans blew up the US

Liberty Ship John Harvey that was carrying mustard gas. (*On the orders of Allied leaders, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Eisenhower, records were destroyed and the whole affair was kept secret for many years after the war. The U.S. records of the attack were declassified in 1959, but the episode remained obscure until 1967 when writer Glenn B. Infield exposed the story in his book **Disaster at Bari.***)

April 25, 1945 was the day of the liberation of Milan and Turin. The Nazi occupation army surrendered and left Northern Italy after a general partisan insurrection. Since that time, **April 25th is a National holiday in Italy.**

Cuisine and Wine

Puglia's iron rich soil makes it one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country. Durum wheat grows in abundance and is used for making pasta and bread. The pasta from Puglia is made without eggs as they were once considered to be a luxury. The most famous pasta made in Puglia is orecchiette (meaning little ears) which is still made daily by the elder women in most of the small villages. This type of pasta is round and has a concave shape like an ear. They are typically served with leafy turnip greens called cime di rapa or in a tomato cheese sauce. The



USS John Harvey Explodes in Bari Harbor



region's original types of homemade pasta, strascinati, mignucchie, fenescecchie, troccoli, sagne 'ncannate and cicatadde are all still made according to historic traditions.

Frisella is one of Puglia's most famous foods. It is this amazing, crunchy, very dry bread normally baked in a stone oven and sometimes has a hole in the middle. These little crunchy breads have been around forever and are best when served, like bruschetta, with tomatoes, basil and some olive oil.

Some describe Puglian cuisine as "poor" because it uses simple ingredients. Its three basic elements are durum wheat, vegetables, and olive oil which are combined with meat and fish to create original dishes with genuine and unmistakable flavors. Puglia offers some unlikely combinations between pasta and vegetables, like strascinati with cabbage and fried bacon or spaghetti with string beans, tomatoes, and cacioricotta cheese.

Some other popular food/dishes from this region are Polenta frita (fried polenta) a popular street food typically enjoyed as a snack in the early evening and Panzerotti (fried calzone) usually filled with tomato and mozzarella cheese. Polpo, a type of octopus available in Puglia which is large and meaty, is simmered in a flavorful tomato onion sauce. Cozze gratinate are mussels baked with a garlicky breadcrumb topping or cozze and patate e riso is a baked casserole of mussels, potatoes and rice in an onion tomato sauce. Ostriche Arrosto is grilled oysters with parsley, garlic, oregano, breadcrumbs, olive oil, and lemon juice.

Cipolla acquaviva is a rare sweet red onion from the Pugliese town of Acquaviva. Unlike a regular red onion, cipolla di acquaviva is sweeter, larger and not as pungent. It's great on pizza or simply baked in the oven as a side dish. Taralli are southern Italy's answer to crackers. They are small and circular and eaten as a snack. You can eat them sweet glazed in sugar or savory with garlic and black or chili pepper.

Pane di Altamura bread in Puglia comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. It is cooked in traditional wood burning bread ovens and some of the villages still have a communal bread oven where the locals go to bake their bread every day.

Altamura bread is particularly special, as it is the only bread in Europe that has Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status from the European Union. Indeed, the Latin poet Orazio in 37 BC was hailing it as the best bread he had ever eaten. The bread is therefore highly regulated; if bakers want to use the name Pane di Altamura DOP, they



must meet all PDO benchmarks to ensure that they are using traditional methods and ingredients. These requirements include using specific varieties of wheat, a certain specification of water, a consistent production method and a final crust which must be more than three millimeters thick.

While the PDO for Pane di Altamura does not specify a shape, there are generally two traditional ways the loaf is formed. Before being placed into wood-burning brick ovens, bakers will work the dough into a round ball and cut a cross into the top to make u cappidde de prèvete (or priest's hat). Once baked, the bread will split, forming four distinct peaks.

The other common shape is called u skuanète in the Puglian dialect, meaning 'overlapped bread'. This looks like a large, rustic knot which is high and crossed over. What makes this bread so delicious? It all comes down to its inimitable texture and taste; a three-millimeter crust gives Pane di Altamura a crisp, compact shell, which makes for a hearty, crunchy bite. This honey-colored crust conceals a soft, straw-colored crumb with a fluffy, aerated texture. The multitude of small holes are a proud indication of a successful natural leavening, and show off the bread's moist, chewy qualities. The bread's distinctive yellow color comes from the use of semolina which has a 10–15% higher capacity of water absorption than traditional flour. This allows the bread to stay fresh for up to two weeks without any chemical preservatives.

For dessert there is Pasticciotti. These oval-shaped, cream-filled pastries come from the Salento area. There are different flavors of pasticciotti and in the morning they are served warm. Zeppole, also known as "St. Joseph's pastries, is served on Father's Day (March 19th) throughout Italy. The sugar-coated pastry dough can be made fried or baked and then filled with cream.

Puglia has many delicious local cheeses, perhaps the most famous being Burrata which is made by mixing strands of mozzarella cheese with heavy cream. It is unique because it has the outer skin much like fresh buffalo mozzarella, but the inside is filled with cream. The result is a richer, softer cheese that has the best flavor when eaten at room temperature.



Olives and olive oil are the top exports of Puglia. Puglia accounts for 38% of the total land in Italy dedicated to cultivating olives. It all started in the 18th century when a young Charles Bourbon proposed a reduction in taxes to the larger landowners in return for their help in cultivating olives. Today, Puglia is home to over 50 million olive trees which exist from those initial saplings. There are around 240,000 farms operating in the sector. Many of them are centuries old. Puglia is responsible for over 60% of the olive oil produced in Italy and 40 percent of the country's extra virgin olive oil. Olives harvested amount to around 300,000 tons every single year! Puglia needed to enact laws to deter people from other parts of Italy from coming down and digging up those valuable olive trees to bring them back and plant them on their land. It's now illegal to dig up a tree from Puglian soil. *(Editor's Note: Please see an earlier addition of Siamo Qui to follow the tremendous damage done to the 2019-2020 Italian olive industry due to insect infestation).*

Italy is the largest producer of wine in the world and can thank the province of Puglia for that distinction. 17% of the total wine production of Italy comes from this region. Viticulture is deeply rooted in local traditions but until



20 or so years ago, a large proportion of Puglia's grapes were used to add "substance" to wines produced in the rest of Italy and France. This is no longer the case and

Puglia now boasts 25 different DOC licensed areas. The most widely grown grape variety is Negroamaro (literally 'black bitter'). Almost exclusively cultivated in Puglia, Negroamaro is used to produce some of the region's best wines, including Salice Salentino.

Things to See

Puglia is an absolute hub for history and one of Italy's most archaeologically interesting areas. Lecce, one of the region's most prominent cities, is often named 'Florence of the South' due to many Roman ruins including a





The Sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo

Roman amphitheater, as well as significant examples of Baroque architecture. Lecce is one of the most well-known cities for the craft of Paper-Mâché, second only to Venice in its production.

The Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari is named for the saint who is known as Santa Claus. The church holds a tomb that contains his relics.

There are three UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Puglia, the most famous is the Trulli located in the town of Alberobello. The Trulli are ancient huts unique to the region. These stone dwellings date back to the Middle Ages and were once used as homes for peasant farmers. The town of Alberobello is the best place to experience these with streets lined by these unique dwellings! There are also several castles in the area. Many of them were built by the Holy Roman Empire.

The second UNESCO World Heritage Site is the Castel del Monte, located in Andria. It is known for being the world's only eight-sided castle and is pictured on the Italian one-cent Euro. The history and architecture of this building is spectacular with strategic views that extend and monitor the surrounding coastline.

The third UNESCO World Heritage Site is The Sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo. This cave formerly used for pagan worship is where in 490 A.D. the apparition of San Michele Arcangelo (Michael the Archangel) came to a shepherd. There have been three more reported appearances of the archangel at this site. His intercession caused armies to be defeated, and sickness and plague were abated due to his intercession. The cave-based Sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo has become a pilgrimage favored destination for pilgrims from around the world that continue to seek blessings.

Did You Know

Puglia has many beautiful small towns in shades of white and gold, with unique architecture like the conical Trulli of Alberobello and the extravagant baroque of Lecce. The region has a remarkable population density

mostly concentrated in cities while the countryside is occupied by large scale agriculture. This is how Puglia became known as the 'breadbasket of Italy'. This is due to the area's large production of pasta and bread, again due mostly to Mussolini's government installing modern irrigation technology in the 1920's.

The region, which is predominantly agricultural, is among the biggest Italian producers of tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, olives, eggplants, artichokes, almonds and citrus fruit like their famous clementines. Wheat, barley, and oats are grown on the plain and in the more fertile parts of the plateaus, while olives, grapes, almonds, figs, and vegetables are mainly grown farther south. Tobacco is a specialty of the Lecce Plain. Salt is produced from seawater at Margherita di Savoia near Foggia. Fishing is a major industry in many ports, particularly those of the Gargano Promontory and in Barletta, Monopoli, and Taranto. Nomadic sheepherding is still extensive, although it has decreased in importance.

Musicians and composers including Matteo Salvatore, Umberto Giordano and Tito Schipa all hail from Puglia, and are celebrated with the annual celebration of Italian folk music called the Pizzica.

