



PRIMITIVO FROM PUGLIA

Paul Pettengale sets his sights on rich, intense Primitivo wines from Puglia, and discovers a raft of outstanding candidates, which are perfect for pairing with food

As anyone who's been to Puglia in the summer will testify, it gets rather hot down there. If there's no breeze coming in from the sea it can be rather oppressively hot. And although that's not so great for those who are fair of skin, it's absolutely perfect for the native Primitivo grape variety. Primitivo is a gem of a grape, though, like all precious stones, it needs special care and attention to bring out its best. Intense growth leads to wines that are all power, with little or no subtlety. Such wines were once made in abundance, though never intended for the table – rather, they were exported to other regions in Italy (and beyond) to be blended with fine wines that needed an alcoholic kick.

Primitivo is a gem of a grape, though it needs special care and attention to bring out its best

Thankfully, nowadays, the growers in Puglia have realised the error of their ways. That, and come to the conclusion that they can make a lot more money by growing less grapes but bottling and selling their wines for the table instead of the bulk trade. Primitivo, like a gemstone, is being refined, polished and fully realised as a wine of character as well as of power. And, boy, are there some good wines to be found – just like the ones over the page, in fact. One that we didn't include this time (though it has appeared in Drink Italia! before) is the Old Vines Primitivo from the producer Morella. A wine from Puglia that costs £48.55 a bottle? Who would have ever thought it? ➤





PRIMITIVO 2008, A MANO

From Liberty Wines
www.libertywine.co.uk
 £7.99

The couple behind the A Mano name – Elvezia Sbalchiero and Mark Shannon – recognise the importance of buying the best grapes they can lay their hands on. The Primitivo vines that go on to produce this wine are between 70 and 100 years old, imparting the wine with a really distinctive flavour. Ripe red berries – raspberries and black currants – art tempered by a delicious smokiness thanks to two months spent in American oak barrels. The tannins are full, but give the wine structure.



GREAT WITH...
 This wine cries out for food – drink it with hearty red meat dishes or cheese.

PRIMITIVO 2008, BOTROMAGNO

From Everywine
www.everywine.co.uk
 £13.94

Founded just 20 years ago, the Botromagno winery is a collaboration between the cooperative local to the city of Gioia del Colle and the distinguished D'Agostino family. Old vines are used in conjunction with utterly modern winemaking equipment to produce wines of depth and character – some would argue they are among the best from the region of Puglia. Still fresh with age, this cherry and spiced wine will age superbly – it'll be perfect in a decade or so.



GREAT WITH...
 Roasted red meats such as rib of beef on the bone or a rolled lamb shoulder.

PRIMITIVO 'CUBARDI' 2006, SCHOLA SARMENTI

From Cozzi & Boffa
www.cozziandboffa.com
 £19.99

While you may scoff at the prospect of paying 20 quid for a wine from Puglia, take comfort in the knowledge that this outstanding Primitivo drinks like a wine that's far more expensive. Really. Made using old vines it's a real melting pot of complementary flavours – dark fruit, warm spice, violets, chocolate and a cigar-box smokiness work together brilliantly to deliver a wine that's bound to have you coming back for more. If you can afford it, of course.



GREAT WITH...
 Something special – a fillet steak with a portobello mushroom sauce, perhaps.

PRIMITIVO DEL SALENTO 2008, GIVSPA

From Sainsbury's
www.sainsburys.co.uk
 £6.99

Over recent years Sainsbury's has really been developing its Taste the Difference range of wines, picking some excellent producers and bringing diverse and lesser known grape varieties to the wine-drinking public. This Primitivo, for instance, is excellent for the money. Purple plum fruit is lightly spiced, the tannins are velvety-smooth and it slips down a treat. If you're new to Primitivo, this is a great place to start.



GREAT WITH...
 Pizza or pasta, or grilled meats – even chicken or pork chops.

PRIMITIVO 2009, BOHEME

From **The Drink Shop**
www.thedrinkshop.com
 £5.49

Some Primitivo wines weigh in at the upper end of the alcohol scales. Fifteen per cent ABV is not unknown –and that can lead to all sorts of problems if you have an eager palate! This wine from Boheme is lighter in style than many wines from the region, making it fresh and easy-drinking. With strawberry aromas and smooth tannins it's a wine you can drink on its own. It also has just 13 per cent of alcohol, making it head – as well as tastebud – friendly.

PRIMITIVO 2009, PALASTRI

From **Sainsbury's**
www.sainsburys.co.uk
 £6.99 (see below)

Bargain hunters – let it be known! Sainsbury's regularly discounts this lively Primitivo from Palastrì (as I write, it is offering three bottles for £12), which is great news for all of us as it's a cracker of a wine – especially if you're only paying £4 a pop! It's slightly heavy – definitely a food wine – but don't let that put you off. It's packed full of dark forest fruits and lovely tar notes. Its tannins have been nicely smoothed out and it has a long, lingering finish. Outstanding value for money.



GREAT WITH...

Friends (not the TV programme.) A rare Primitivo that doesn't need food.

GREAT WITH...

A lamb and red wine stew would work rather well. Or cheese, of course.

ITALIA! DISCOVERY OF THE MONTH

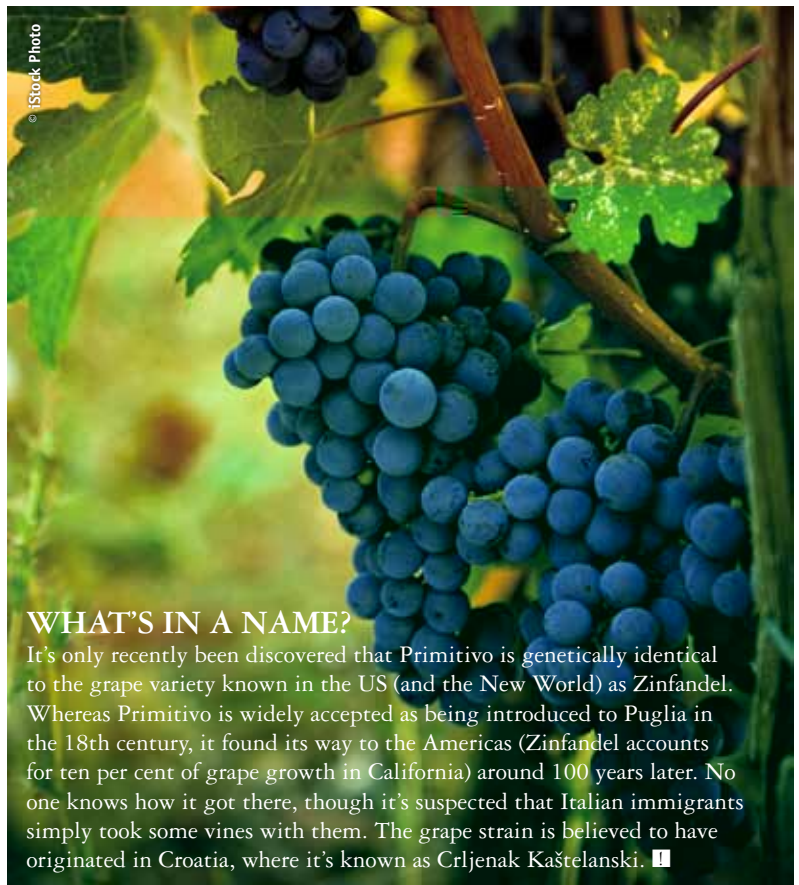
Primitivo Gioia del Colle 2006, Fatalone
 From **Les Caves de Pyrene** www.lescaves.co.uk
 Price **£13.49**

The Petrera family – Nicola Petrera in particular – planted just six hectares of Primitivo vines on the Spinomarino hill, around 40km inland from Bari, some 200 years ago. The same six hectares remain planted – no more – and viticultural practices here have hardly changed either. Nicola's descendent, Filippo, produces just 40,000 bottles of wine a year, split across four different labels.

This, his Primitivo del Colle, is a wonderful expression of the grape variety. Crying out to be drunk with roasted lamb or venison, it is a melt-in-the-mouth wine; smooth yet lively, robust yet sophisticated and packed full of delightful black cherry and plum fruit. The warmth of that Puglian sun shines through, making this a big, powerful and (potentially) intoxicating wine (it ranks at 15 per cent ABV). Its aftertaste is unusual in that it somehow manages to combine tobacco leaf with a distinctive 'leatheriness' I've not come across before. Make no mistake: drink this fine wine with food rather than on its own – even if it's with a cheeseboard and biscuits.



It is a melt-in-the-mouth wine; smooth yet lively, robust yet sophisticated



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

It's only recently been discovered that Primitivo is genetically identical to the grape variety known in the US (and the New World) as Zinfandel. Whereas Primitivo is widely accepted as being introduced to Puglia in the 18th century, it found its way to the Americas (Zinfandel accounts for ten per cent of grape growth in California) around 100 years later. No one knows how it got there, though it's suspected that Italian immigrants simply took some vines with them. The grape strain is believed to have originated in Croatia, where it's known as Crljenak Kaštelanski. ■