



Fighting a dream climate

Sunny Puglia has little trouble producing easy-drinking wines, but producers feel it's time they were taken more seriously. Simon Woolf is excited by the native varieties and modern winemaking in Italy's heel

'IN PORTUGAL THEY add alcohol to make their sweet wines,' remarks Vinicola Savese's Massimiliano Pichierri. 'Here we just add sun.' And there's no better summary of Puglia's essence. Southern Italy's long, thin, largely flat heel bakes in a hot, dry Mediterranean climate, with its dual coastlines (Adriatic and Ionian) affording the only respite.

There is variance from the north down to the heel of the boot, south of Lecce – but only from hot to hotter. Historically, the region's ability to produce ripe, high-alcohol wines was its trump card, but in more recent years global warming and drought are seriously challenging that view. In particular, 2017 was one of the driest years in living memory, with heat-stressed vines reducing yields by a significant 40%-50% for many producers.

Still, perhaps it wouldn't hurt Puglia to slim down a little – total production in 2016 touched nine million hectolitres, or about the same as the whole of Germany. Although the 21st century has seen a significant quality

upgrade, Puglia still produces vast amounts of the world's bulk wine, along with other grape-related products such as concentrated must and food colouring.

The importance of bulk wine is very clear for visitors to Puglia's more popular wineries. *Sfuso* pumps, dispensing everyday table wine in refillable plastic containers, are a feature across producers of all sizes and levels. Local customers don't even glance at the displays of bottled wine or framed international awards – they're headed straight for the pumps, empty two-litre plastic bottles in hand.

The north

Although Puglia's rise to fame on the international wine market has mostly been down to generously endowed Primitivo and easygoing, spicy Negroamaro, this isn't the whole story. The cooler, higher-altitude northern region around Castel del Monte harbours a gem that is slowly regaining ground after decades of neglect.



Photographs: Simon Woolf (3)

Nero di Troia, also known as Uva di Troia, is a tannic, high-acid variety indigenous to northern Puglia. It was generally written off as a blending partner due to those tannins, but as indigenous varieties have come back into fashion over the past 20 years or so, wineries have increasingly learned how to master it.

And thank goodness, because Nero di Troia is a camel in the desert, maturing late and producing well-balanced, fresh wines that rarely exceed 13.5% abv. It's capable of producing high quality, even classicism, with firm structure, considerable longevity and pretty aromas ranging from sour cherry to blackcurrant and balsamic vinegar.

Major producers such as Torrevento and Rivera helped to repopularise Nero di Troia in the 1990s. Their classic, claret-like expressions of the variety, epitomised in Rivera's *Il Falcone* or Torrevento's *Ottagono*, are a good benchmark. That said, younger, smaller estates are now achieving greater varietal expression via organic agriculture, lower yields and less



Far left: Nero di Troia grapes in the vineyards at Michele Biancardi

Left: 65,000 bottles of Metiusco are hand-stamped every year at Vinicola Palamà

Below: Massimiliano Pichierri takes a sample from a *capasone*

intervention in the cellar. Organically certified Antica Enotria makes a cassis-laden, structured example that takes no prisoners when young, but matures wonderfully. The winery's Luigi di Tuccio laments that 'some producers try to change Nero di Troia's identity to suit the market. It is tannic and high in acidity – it shouldn't have the roundness of Primitivo.'

Michele Biancardi uses 750-litre Tuscan amphorae and a proportion of dried grapes to make an elegant, silken rendition; while Cantine Carpentiere lets its higher-altitude vines (up to 500m) ripen until mid-October, achieving stunning results.

Central regions

Puglia's central Gioia del Colle and Adelfia areas harbour two ancient white varieties, Maruggio and Verdeca. Both are making a comeback thanks to producers including Angiuli Donato and L'Archetipo. Maruggio (also known locally as Maresca) has an assertive herbal character, and the distinction of ripening with less than 12% of potential alcohol. Angiuli and L'Archetipo both make delicious sparkling wines from the variety.

Gioia del Colle isn't primarily famous for Maruggio, but rather as one of two top Primitivo sites (the second being Manduria). Primitivo from Gioia del Colle typically achieves more freshness and structure than its southerly neighbours – a very significant advantage when alcohols of 16% or 17% are by no means unusual.

Top producers include Angiuli, Chiaromonte, Fatalone, Pietraventosa and Polvanera. Fatalone works biodynamically, with an impressive carbon-neutral winery. Fans of Fatalone's Primitivo can decide if they share Pasquale Petrerà's belief in music >

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therapy (a Rudolf Steiner concept), but whatever tunes or pieces the *botti* are listening to must be having a positive effect, judging by the quality of the wines. Fatalone was the first to bottle a 100% Primitivo under the Gioia del Colle DOC, back in 1987.

Southeast

Heading down into Italy's heel, Manduria holds the most famous Primitivo DOC, also boasting one of only four DOCGs in the region: Primitivo di Manduria Dolce Naturale, a high-alcohol, late-harvested nectar that can be quite divine. Gianfranco Fino, Giuseppe Attanasio and Vinicola Savese are three of the area's most established names. Savese, described as 'the last of the old guard' by Ole Udsen, a Danish expert on the region, still matures some wines in *capasoni* – small Puglianese amphorae holding about 250 litres each. The results are excellent, with freshness, fruit definition and balance that belie the prodigious degrees of alcohol.

There is something almost perverse about an early-ripening, high-alcohol variety like Primitivo becoming so ubiquitous in a hot, dry region. The variety didn't originate in Puglia, most likely crossing the Adriatic from Dalmatia some 250 years ago, yet it is now written into the area's DNA. Low yields and dry farming can help to maintain freshness, balance and complexity in wines that can easily become overblown – thus older bush-trained vineyards with deep roots are becoming highly desirable.

Sadly there are precious few remaining – EU grubbing-up programmes and thoughtless DOC legislation provided no incentive for growers to cherish them. Australian winemaker Lisa Gilbee relocated to the area with her Italian partner in 2000, creating her Morella estate almost on impulse. 'We found these amazing old alberello-trained vines and



Above: Gianfranco Fino inspects his vines

'In the past 10 years we've lost about 80% of the old alberello-trained vineyards around here'

Lisa Gilbee (below)

knew we had to get the wine into a bottle,' she says. Although there are now rumours of an impending DOC for bush-trained Primitivo, she fears it's come too late: 'In the past 10 years we've lost about 80% of the old alberello-trained vineyards around here.'

Far south

Southerly Salento, around the city of Lecce, is Negroamaro's preferred territory. Although the name of the grape is translated literally as 'black bitter', most mainstream producers churn out soft, easygoing examples that can be rather flabby. Over-oaking is a common problem, but Cupertino – one of Salento's oldest and largest cooperatives – sets a shining example with its Copertino Riserva aged only in cement vats, which is quite delicious.

Puglia doesn't excel with white wine – most of the region is too hot to achieve sufficient freshness without resorting to some trickery in the winery. Grape varieties Fiano, Falanghina and Greco are popular, although none is native to the region.

Cantina Coppola, based just outside Gallipoli, is pioneering a 'blanc de noirs' style made from Negroamaro. The results can seem simplistic in youth, but achieve real interest given a few years in bottle.

Alongside Maruggio and Verdeca, other native white varieties are experiencing a revival. Minutolo (sometimes confusingly known as Fiano Minutolo, although there is >



actually no genetic relationship with Fiano) is an aromatic variety championed by an increasing number of wineries in the north.

Puglia has its work cut out if it wants to convince the world that it can deliver more than truckloads of easygoing fruitbombs, yet there are exciting undercurrents bubbling in every corner. Renewed interest in dry-farming and ancient varieties is already creating new quality levels and styles, and there's a welcome trend spurning barriques in favour of more neutral *botti*, concrete or terracotta.

Earlier harvesting, or refocusing on later ripening varieties is surely key. 'Just add sun' might once have been the rallying call, but 'not too much' ought to be the refrain. **D**

Right: Negroamaro grapes are grown in southern Salento

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A taste of modern Puglia: Woolf's 10 wines to try



Angiuli Donato, Maccone Spumante Metodo Ancestrale Brut NV 92

£19.60 **Tannico**
100% Maruggio. Basically a *col fondo*, with a natural second fermentation in the bottle. Concentrated apricot fruit, with hints of melon and fresh herbs. Thrillingly complex, toasty and lively.

Drink 2018-2021 **Alcohol** 12.5%

Morella, Mezzogiorno Bianco 2016 91
£19.75 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

Fiano picked early and fermented spontaneously in a cement egg. Ripe honeydew melon with a hint of almond. Bone-dry on the finish – not something to take for granted with this variety.

Drink 2018-2021 **Alc** 12.5%

Cantine Carpentiere, Pietra dei Lupa Nero di Troia, Castel del Monte 2014 95
£16 (2011) **Worth Bros**

This boasts a very pretty, floral nose with subtle red berry fruit and ripe but crunchy tannins. Late-harvested, resulting in a softer, more accessible style. Aged in 750-litre barrels. Quite charming. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

Morella, La Signora 2014 95
£42-£43 **AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd**

If you doubted that Primitivo could be elegant and almost feminine, try this. Flavours of black cherry and cranberry

fruit are infused with fresh tobacco and eucalyptus, with a long silken finish. Manduria DOC but declassified to IGP, as Australian winemaker Lisa Gilbee feels 'no empathy with the DOC'. **Drink** 2018-2029 **Alc** 14.5%

Fatalone, Primitivo, Gioia del Colle 2015 93

£13.60-£15.49 (2013) **Buon Vino, Exel, Fine Wine to Me, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Green, Philip Pruden**
This subtle fig, sour cherry and dried herb-infused Primitivo, with hints of cacao and tar, shows that greatness can be achieved with no oak at all. Balanced and fresh, even at this high level of alcohol. An organically produced wine. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 15%

Michele Biancardi, Anima di Nero 2014 93

£14.49 **Winescape**
20% of the Nero di Troia grapes used in this wine were dried on the vine (*passimento*), softening the variety's prodigious tannins to a velvety, supple texture. Earthy, baked plum aromas and very pure fruit. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13%

Antica Enotria, Rosso, Puglia 2015 92
£9.50-£10.99 **Exel, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Green**

Green pepper, balsamic aromas and herbaceous fruit lift this unoaked blend of Nero di Troia, Montepulciano and Sangiovese. Bone-dry with an appealing

nuttiness on the finish. Organically produced. **Drink** 2018-2029 **Alc** 13%



Rivera, Puer Apuliae, Castel del Monte 2012 92
£37.48 **Mondial**

Rivera's reputation with Nero di Troia was built on the blend Il Falcone, but this barrique-aged 100% Nero di Troia is a tighter and more focused wine, showing peppery blackcurrant fruit and dense structure. Built for the long haul, but it's just about approachable now. **Drink** 2019-2031 **Alc** 14%

Valentina Passalacqua, Terra Sasso 2015 90

£15.95 (2014) **Eton Vintners**
From a young biodynamic winery in the northeasterly Gargano foothills, this unoaked Negroamaro-Primitivo blend has plush plum and raspberry fruit and an invitingly ripe, if Porty nose. The winery itself is also well worth a visit if you're touring around the region. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 13.5%

Palamà, Metiusco, Salento Rosso 2016 89
£16.11 **Tannico**

'In this hot climate, you need wine you can actually drink, not just taste,' says Michele Palamà, and he has achieved that to perfection here. Soft, spicy fruit with a saline freshness and touches of bramble. **Drink** 2018-2021 **Alc** 14%