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Your guide to what's
exciting in Italian wine

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- A scenic view of a Tuscan vineyard. In the foreground, there are rows of grapevines with green and yellowing leaves. In the middle ground, a stone house with a tiled roof is nestled among tall cypress trees and other vegetation. The background shows rolling hills covered in dense green trees under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.
- **Fantastic Italian wine buys**
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A return to the old ways

Primitivo is practically synonymous with Puglia and the south of Italy. Yet it is taking a plucky band of pioneers to re-establish it in its truest form, as a bush vine. Monty Waldin reports



The 'natural inner freshness' of grapes from bush-vine Primitivo attracted winemakers like Lisa Gilbee to Puglia

THE SMALL TOWN of Manduria lies a 40-minute drive southeast of the southern Italian port of Taranto, along a gently rising, arrow-straight road. This is the Salento peninsula, the broiling heel of Italy's boot.

My father came here in 1944, having landed at Taranto with Allied troops. With his radio receiver he'd crawl in Salento's dusty, iron-rich red soil, using the local olive groves and vineyards as cover. Back then, Manduria's vineyards were overflowing with Primitivo, Puglia's signature red wine grape. Since the vines grew as low free-standing bush or *alberello*, Primitivo provided the perfect cover. To this day, Primitivo bush vines dating from the 1930s and 1940s remain in this arid part of Italy's heel. But over the last 20 years most have been ripped out.

Spotting an opportunity

Australian winemaker Lisa Gilbee and her Italian partner Gaetano Morella created their Morella winery in 2000 to try to save some of what old-vine Primitivo remained. Lisa had worked in Italy as a flying winemaker, and settled in Puglia 'partly because no one else was making single-vineyard Primitivo. Most Australian red wines are based on French grapes, which taste flabby without heavy acid adjustment in the winery,' she says. 'Primitivo's natural inner freshness means no adjustments are needed. And you don't have to be a millionaire to buy Primitivo vines, live near the beach and make wine here.'

The couple now have 17 hectares of vines, 11ha of which are bush-vine Primitivo from the 1940s. Top quality wines usually come from sloping ground, rather than from the flattish terrain of Salento. Yet, Gilbee says, 'Primitivo subtly reflects minute changes in the terroir. You can taste profound differences between vines grown only metres apart. And bush vines allow each bunch its own unique microclimate of light, heat, shade, wind and rain. The bush has a three-dimensional shape which you just don't get with one-dimensional vines trimmed along wires in straight lines like hedges.'

Despite her eulogy, Gilbee says that 'at least 80% of Puglia's old, bush-vine Primitivo has been lost since we started.' This was largely due to the European Union paying growers to rip out vines to reduce Europe's wine lake. 'Bush vines are naturally low yielding and have to be worked mainly by hand rather than by tractor,' says Gilbee. 'I understand why growers selling Primitivo by the kilo cheaply to co-ops ripped out their vines. They waited until interest rates were high then banked the subsidy money for their retirement.'

Gilbee particularly laments one recently ripped-out Mandurian Primitivo vineyard called La Pigna. 'It produced tiny yields of incredibly deeply coloured grapes. It's hard to remain optimistic

'Most of the Primitivo bush vines planted in the 1930s and '40s have been pulled out in the last 20 years'

when so many really old vineyards are gone. Mostly only vineyards of around 40 years remain,' she says.

Regional character

Primitivo from Manduria is distinct as far as Puglian Primitivo goes because Manduria's position in the middle of the Salento peninsula means it gets cooling sea winds from both the Adriatic sea to the east and the closer Ionian sea to the west. Nearby Sava is one of the best areas for Primitivo in the Manduria zone.

Massimiliano Pichierri's grandfather started making Primitivo in Sava in the 1950s. 'Sava is only 12km from the Ionian Sea,' says Pichierri. 'Sea winds give Primitivo here a savoury quality. But the flavour profile also depends on how deep the topsoil is over the spongy limestone below. The limestone holds the water the vines need to survive. Primitivo vines on 4m of topsoil produce higher yields and lighter wines than vines like ours in Sava, where the topsoil is shallow at less than 1m. We get smaller, more mineral-tasting grapes as a result.'

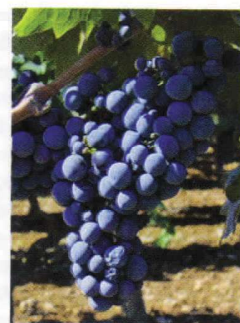
The Cantele family also works with old bush-vine Primitivo from Sava for its top Fanòl bottling. Umberto Cantele says, 'Sava and Manduria on the warmer, western Ionian side of Salento are where the best bush vines are. It is harder to find bush-vine Primitivo on the eastern Adriatic side as vines there are usually trained to posts and wires to get higher yields. Salento's unspoilt beaches are making Puglia a tourist destination. Visitors want a food-friendly style of Primitivo, and this is what we try to give them.'

Outside influences

Cantele was the first Puglian winery to host 'flying winemakers' in the early 1990s. But the first foreign winemaker to take up residence in Puglia was Mark Shannon. He arrived in 1997 from California, knowing that Puglian Primitivo was the same as his beloved Californian Zinfandel (see box), and realising that there was a terrific opportunity to >

The origins of Primitivo

The suspicion that Primitivo originated in what is modern-day Croatia was proved correct by DNA profilers from UC Davis at the University of California. In the early 1990s they found that a Croatian grape called variously Tribidrag and Crljenak was the same as Primitivo, and all were the same as California's Zinfandel. Crljenak would have travelled to Italy across the Adriatic Sea, although exactly when this happened may never be known. In the early 1800s the vine went via Austria to America, where it was grown on the East Coast, initially as a table grape. It was then taken to California during the mid-19th-century gold rush, where thirsty miners and others made it into wine, by which time it had become known as Zinfandel.





'You don't have to be a millionaire to buy Primitivo vines, live near the beach and make wine' Lisa Gilbee, Morella, above

style wines for modern palates from 'bush vines so old and beautiful they gave me goose bumps'.

Shannon and his partner Elvezia Sbalchiero own no vineyards but work with growers in what Shannon calls the 'triangle of Primitivo', south-east of Taranto in Sava, Manduria and Torricella.

Shannon has a Masters degree in the sensory perception of grape and wine flavours. 'Primitivo ripens quickly so in just a few days it can go from being underripe to perfectly ripe, and then to raisined and overripe,' he says. 'Saving these old vines means working closely with growers, to get grapes that give you the best shot at making clean wines that express the terroir.'

Primitivo pioneer

Primitivo may not have survived in Puglia without the contribution of the Petrera family. Pasquale Petrera says, 'In the early 19th century, my great-great-great-grandfather, Nicola Petrera, rescued a red grape which ripened *prima*, meaning before all others. It became known as Primitivo, meaning "first selection".'

The Petrera winery, Fatalone, is located in Gioia del Colle, just north of the Salento peninsula, where cooling sea breezes are less prevalent than on Salento itself. Pasquale Petrera converted his bush-vine Primitivo to overhead pergolas or strung them horizontally along wires. 'The vines have more leaves to shade the grapes and produce a less overpowering style of Primitivo. Wines with lower levels of alcohol are what modern drinkers want,' he asserts.

A taste of bush-vine Primitivo

Morella, Old Vines, Salento Rosso

2011 19.5/20 pts (98/100 pts)

£34.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

85 year-old vines. This was a low-yield year and produced super-concentrated grapes. Fermented as whole grapes rather than crushed berries to accentuate the fine flavours of black fruit and liquorice. The grapes were gently hand plunged, the wine was run off into barrel by gravity, and bottled by hand. Incredible depth, elegance and moreishness of fruit, with classy tannins running right the way through to leave one's palate invigorated and 'refreshed'. A monument to old-vine Primitivo. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alcohol** 14.5%



A Mano, Imprint of Mark Shannon, Appassito, Puglia Rosso 2012

19 (96)

£12.99 **Widely available via UK agent, Liberty Wines**

40-70 year-old vines.

An inventive red made from Primitivo grapes picked ripe but not overripe which are then left to dry off the vine after picking. They shrivel

slightly and gain in concentration. Wonderful balance of savoury tannins and sweet-tasting, fresh crushed raspberry fruit, with an intentionally light spritz. Reminds me of the best Zinfandels that old-timer growers in northern California would make in the 1970s for home consumption. Unputdownable.

Drink 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.8%

Cantele, Fanò Primitivo, Puglia

Rosso 2010 18 (93)

N/A UK **www.cantelevini.com**

40 year-old vines. A wine which pushes

Primitivo's moreish dark fruits and brighter red cherry flavours to the fore thanks to a cool and quickish fermentation. Ageing in new and second-fill French and American oak barrels has added an appealing sheen of vanilla. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



Fatalone, Primitivo Riserva,

Gioia del Colle 2006 18 (93)

£16.68-£18.50 **Exel Wines,**

Les Caves de Pyrène

16 year-old vines

propagated from Primitivo owned by the Petrera family since the early 19th century.

Aged in a cool underground cellar for two years in oak vats. 2006 was a blisteringly hot year, producing ripe, almost raisiny fruit with sweet-savoury tannins giving this appealing mouthfeel. Opens up to reveal soft tobacco textures and crisper red cherry flavours. A winter warmer. **Drink** 2015-2021 **Alc** 15%



Savese, Il Sava, Primitivo di Manduria Dolce

Naturale 2007 18.5 (95)

£26 **Bat & Bottle**

50-60 year old vines. The

grapes are picked late when slightly shrivelled on the vine for concentration. Aged for two years in large oak vats and sealed in locally handmade

terracotta amphorae. Rich, smooth and slightly sweet with individual, savoury Christmas cake flavours and generous, rich mouthfeel. A Primitivo like grandad used to make. 2015-2018 **Alc** 16%

For details of UK stockists, see p88

Wine writer and biodynamic consultant Monty Waldin has made wine in Italy, France and the Americas, and is a DWVA co-Regional Chair for Italy

It is debatable whether Pasquale's approach in modifying his bush vines encompasses what Mark Shannon calls his own 'modified idealism' regarding Primitivo's very survival. 'These are not grapes to be pushed, manipulated or mishandled. Primitivo is the most sun-loving grape I have seen. Modern training systems are always inferior to the native *alberello*. There will be opportunities to plant *alberello* Primitivo again, if you lead by example. The grapes tell you when they are ripe, meaning with just 5% of raisined berries per bunch. Pick then and you will have a great wine.'

My father probably had no time to drink wine from bush-vine Primitivo when he came to Puglia. But I hope he did at least manage to eat some perfectly ripe bush-vine Primitivo grapes. **D**