

Decanter

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287
wines tasted
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Montrachet

Our expert guide to the most sublime of whites

20 Puglia reds

The best Primitivos from this southern Italian region

New this month

A *Decanter* insiders' guide to what we've been drinking



The robust Primitivo grape thrives in the distinctive red soils of Italy's Puglia region



Top 20 Puglian Primitivo

As hearty-red season approaches, it's the perfect time to start exploring the untamed side of Italy's hot south – and the peppery appeal of its firm-favourite Primitivo variety

STORY ALESSANDRA PIUBELLO

A region of remarkable contrasts, Puglia stretches between two seas, the Adriatic and the Ionian, giving it almost 800km of coastline. Forming the heel of Italy's boot, in the deep south, it has a typically Mediterranean climate, and a long winemaking tradition thought to date back to the Phoenicians.

Its red earth is rocky in places, and its windswept, sun-drenched landscapes are a patchwork of vineyards and drystone walls. Groundwater flows through karst aquifers in its stratified landform.

Puglia's predominant grape is Primitivo, which is grown practically all over the south of the region. The variety has found its ideal habitat in two areas in particular: the red-soiled lowlands in the province of Taranto, which produces mostly Primitivo di Manduria DOC (and, to a far lesser extent, sweetish Primitivo di Manduria Dolce Naturale DOCG); and the Murgia plateau near Bari, with Primitivo Gioia del Colle DOC.

Primitivo's fascinating history is thought to have originated in the Balkans, on the other side of the Adriatic, before Slavic refugees introduced it to the Gioia del Colle area. There, in the 17th century, an abbot with agronomy expertise carried out a clonal selection. Primitivo ripens early (the name derives from the Latin *primativus*, for

'precocious'), meaning it can be harvested before the autumn rainfall. Meanwhile, its late bud break makes it impervious to spring frosts. These crucial characteristics helped it spread, probably from Gioia del Colle to Manduria first, before reaching the broader Taranto area and Salento.

BIG ON DRINKABILITY

The Gioia del Colle Primitivo area features altitudes of 250m-400m, constant winds and temperature variations of up to 11°C during the ripening period. The vines' roots plunge into the limestone just beneath the thin layer of red soil, with naturally low yields per hectare.

Here, Primitivo expresses a particular style: elegant, fresh, savoury and cellarworthy. While this appellation is small, quality is improving fast. Fortunately, local growers have avoided relying too heavily on oak ageing or overripening. Instead, the current trend seeks to strike a balance between ripeness and freshness, with an accent on drinkability.

Manduria is the Primitivo city par excellence. Primitivo vines are traditionally bush-trained (gobelet), and century-old plants can be found on these lowlands, reaching barely 150m. Clay-limestone soil, proximity to the coast, and a windswept Mediterranean climate: the area's ►

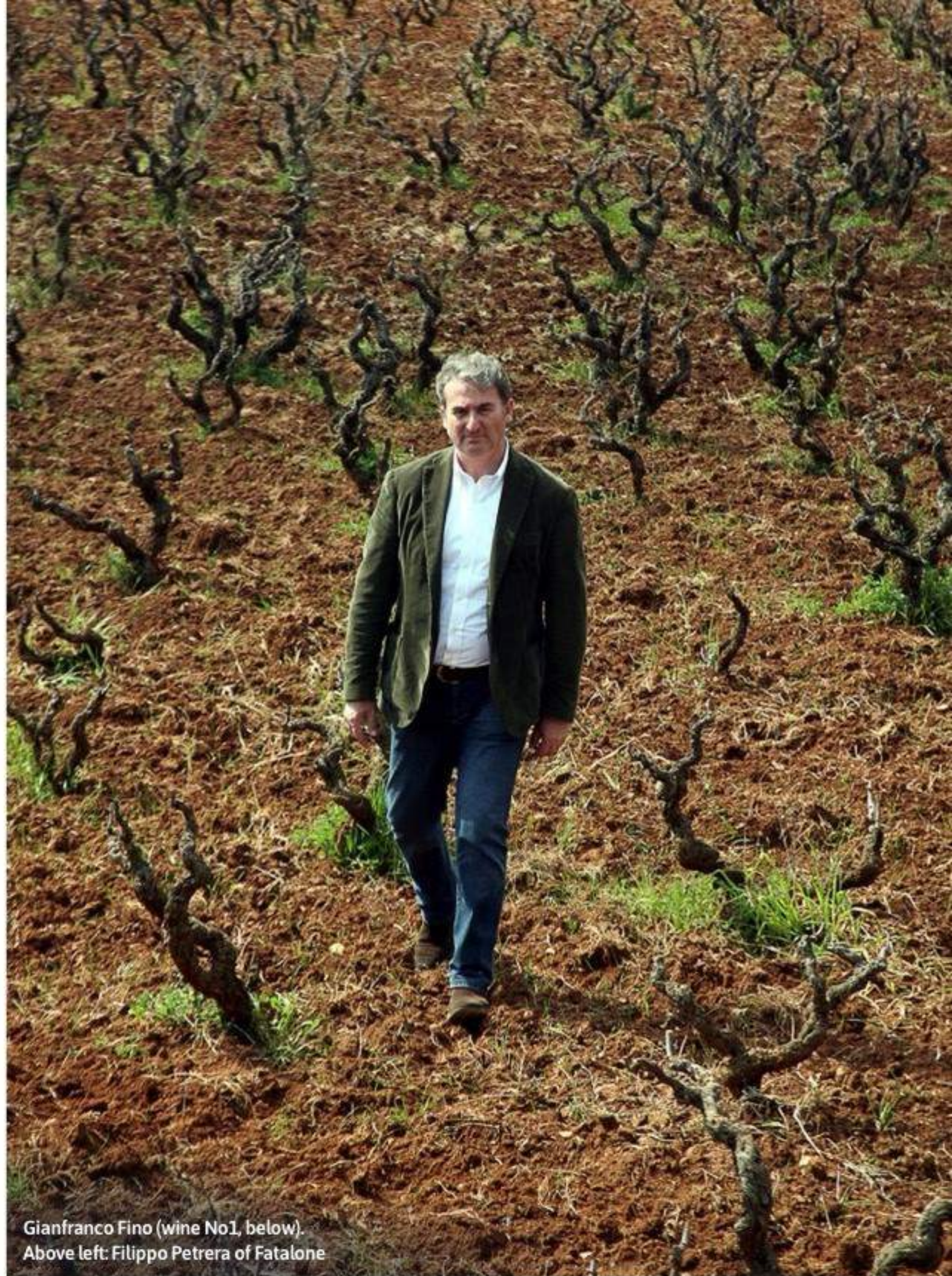
'Puglian Primitivo really delivers in the glass, exuding the special atmosphere of this welcoming region'



characteristics produce wines that are generally fruit-forward and full-bodied, delightfully velvety and mellow, with robust alcohol content making them potent yet balanced. These wines can be enjoyed young, or laid down for years. Pope Benedict XIII famously produced Primitivo di Manduria. Today, Italian and international celebrities (such as American actor Ronn Moss) have bought their own vineyards.

Covering some 4,500ha, this DOC is leading a constantly growing market, with 70% of its output exported. Production, and sales, increased even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Part of Primitivo di Manduria's appeal is undoubtedly its value for money, with prices in major retailers ranging from £7.99 to £39 in exceptional cases.

Puglian Primitivo really delivers in the glass, exuding the special atmosphere of this welcoming Italian region, abundant in natural beauty.



Gianfranco Fino (wine No1, below).
Above left: Filippo Petrera of Fatalone

Power and poise: Piubello's 20 top Primitivo reds to try



①

① **Gianfranco Fino, Es, Salento 2019** 97
£35 (ib)-£55 Cru, Lay & Wheeler, Millésima,
Starling Wines

Fino has spearheaded the renaissance of authentic Primitivo for nearly two decades. Italian critics agree that Es is the ultimate genre-defining Primitivo. To experience this wine is a privilege – not due to its status or rarity, but for its power to convey sheer emotion. **Drink** 2021-2033 **Alcohol** 16.5%

②

② **Fatalone, Riserva, Gioia del Colle**
2018 94

£17-£23.95 Exel, Forest Wines, Hay Wines,
Keeling Andrew & Co, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble
Green, Prezzemolo & Vitale, StarmoreBoss, Tannico,
The Good Wine Shop, Theatre of Wine
The fifth generation of the Petrera family
made history; in 1987 it was the first to
bottle under the Gioia del Colle DOC, and

③

was among the first wineries in Puglia to
go organic. This wine is emblematic of its
variety and terroir. Astoundingly beautiful.
Drink 2021-2031 **Alc** 15%

③ **Pietraventosa, Riserva, Gioia del
Colle 2016** 94

N/A UK pietraventosa.it
Stone and wind are the two core elements
of Marianna Annio's winery. This Riserva
encapsulates the vibrant, sunny spirit of
both terroir and owner, its radiance enticing
you to take sip after sip as you attempt to
capture its soul. **Drink** 2021-2031 **Alc** 15%

④

④ **Plantamura, Etichetta Nera,
Contrada San Pietro, Gioia del Colle**
2019 94

£17.15 Ethical Edibles
A small, family-run, organic winery led by

Mariangela Plantamura. Three labels are made from its 10ha, all of which are Gioia del Colle DOC. This structured yet vibrant black label is aged in steel only: juicy, fresh and savoury, with silky tannins. Delightfully quaffable. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 14.5%

⑤ **Polvanera, 16 Vigneto San Benedetto, Gioia del Colle 2018** 94

£30 (2015) WoodWinters

Oenologist Filippo Cassano founded his organic winery 18 years ago and has been instrumental in furthering the appellation's reputation. This cuvée is from 70-year-old vines and is aged in stainless steel. It displays a sumptuous mouthfeel, striking a dynamic balance between savouriness and fruit. **Drink** 2021-2030 **Alc** 16%

⑥ **Tenute Chiaromonte, Muro Sant'Angelo, Gioia del Colle 2018** 94

£25 Dolce Vita Wines

Vines almost a century old give Nicola Chiaromonte a wine of poignant purity; its savoury verve and nervy texture are laced with balsamic notes. Substance and delicacy blend dynamically in its layered structure, through to the long, faceted finish. **Drink** 2021-2030 **Alc** 15.5%

⑦ **Tre Pini, Piscina delle Monache, Gioia del Colle 2019** 94

N/A UK cantinetrepini.com

Rocco Plantamura's organic winery is in the Alta Murgia national park. A warm, fruity embrace of blackberries, mulberries and violet notes coalesce on the nose and palate. The result is a harmonious torrent that carries the sense of terroir intact, with a stunning finish. **Drink** 2021-2030 **Alc** 16%

⑧ **Tenuta Viglione, Sellato, Gioia del Colle 2019** 93

£19.90 The Winery UK, Varmont

Third-generation winemaker Giovanni Zullo has worked to protect old vines dating from 1948, while conducting experiments with the University of Bari. Sellato (30% aged in large barrels for 12 months), with its crunchy fruit and sapid tension, is dynamic and seductively inviting. Organic. **Drink** 2021-2028 **Alc** 14%

⑨ **Terre dei Vaaz, Ipnotico, Gioia del Colle 2019** 93

N/A UK terredeivaaz.it

This ambitious project began five years ago, when four business partners decided to

elevate Primitivo's profile on the international wine scene. Ipnotico bears its own profound identity (70-year-old bush-trained vines play their part), which is expressed in its smooth palate and long, luxuriant finish. **Drink** 2021-2028 **Alc** 15%

⑩ **Antico Palmento, Acini Spargoli Riserva, Primitivo di Manduria 2016** 92

N/A UK anticopalmentogarofano.com

This family firm, led by Bruno Garofano, covers just 4ha that include 65-year-old bush-trained vines. The approach here is traditionalist and this wine is lush and intense. It envelops the palate and is reminiscent of a sincere, firm handshake. Vigorous in the mouth, with good length. **Drink** 2021-2030 **Alc** 16.6%

⑪ **Donna Coletta 1886, Colpo di Zappa, Gioia del Colle 2019** 92

POA Eurowines

Historic Salento winemaker De Castris also owns vineyards in the Gioia del Colle appellation further north. This has densely packed aromas of black and red cherries, wild roses, storm-drenched foliage and a hint of smoke. Soft, warm and voluptuous, with a fresh balsamic streak in its lingering finish. **Drink** 2021-2027 **Alc** 14%

⑫ **Cantine San Marzano, Sessantanni, Primitivo di Manduria 2017** 90

£16.67 (ib)-£28.95 Cru, Delivery Wine Co, Drink Finder, Starling Wines, Tannico, Waud Wines, Wineye

A cooperative winery founded in the 1960s, with vineyards that straddle the San Marzano and Sava areas (the latter being particularly well suited). This cuvée is produced from vines that are at least 60 years old. Bursting with plum scents, rounded flavours and smooth tannins. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

⑬ **Carvinea, Sierma, Salento 2018** 90

£39 Magna Puglia

In 2022, Beppe di Maria will be celebrating 20 years working on his 10ha, organically certified vineyard at Masseria Pezza d'Arena. Sierma shows sweet spice (from 12 months in barriques) with traces of Morello cherry. Racy in the mouth with impressive, sapid tension. **Drink** 2021-2028 **Alc** 15%

⑭ **Felline, Dunico, Primitivo di Manduria 2017** 90

£29.50 Carson Wines

Gregory Perrucci is an ambassador for



Primitivo di Manduria. He set up his winery 25 years ago, and opened the Accademia dei Racemi three years later, which brings together leading Puglian winemakers. Dunico opens with jammy aromas that lead to a soft and velvety, enveloping palate. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 16%

⑮ **Schola Sarmenti, Diciotto, Salento 2019** 90

£65 Inverarity Morton

Luigi Carlo Marra has been saving Puglian vines for more than two decades, gradually buying up neglected plots. Diciotto is as imposing as one would expect a Primitivo from 80-year-old plants to be. A chorus of spices and majestic potency make this one to remember. **Drink** 2021-2032 **Alc** 18%

⑯ **Tenute Eméra, Oro di Eméra, Primitivo di Manduria 2018** 90

£30 Available via UK agent TYG Wines

Claudio Quarta is a former biologist-geneticist. He planted his 55ha using a ▶

ITALY: PUGLIA



From left: Mauro di Maggio and Francesco Cavallo of Cantine San Marzano (wine No12, p77)

micro-zoning process, drawing out a multitude of soil characteristics. His Oro di Eméra comes from limestone vineyards near the coast. It displays power and structure, alongside a fresh, delicately saline note. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 15%**

17 Tormaresca, Torcicoda, Salento 2018 90

£19.35-£21.99 All About Wine, Corking Wines, Drink Finder, Fareham Wine Cellar, L'Art du Vin, Strictly Wine, The Surrey Wine Cellar, Vinvm The Tormaresca brand, owned by Antinori, is based at the 16th-century Masseria Maime estate. For this wine, grapes are harvested when slightly overripe, creating nuanced aromas of chocolate and plum jam. On the palate it is intense, warm and enveloping, like a comforting, velvety caress. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 15%**

18 Varvaglione 1921, Papale Linea Oro, Primitivo di Manduria 2019 90

£24 Drink Finder, Exel, GP Brands, Highbury Vintners, Lekker Wines, Tannico, The Fine Wine Co, The Great Wine Co, York Wines

The Varvaglione family (now in the fourth generation) founded its estate a century ago. Over the years, the historic winery has collaborated on research projects with Udine, Bologna and Rome universities. Its Papale Linea Oro has jammy, spicy aromas on the nose and a rich, voluptuous palate with good length. **Drink 2021-2028 Alc 14.5%**

19 Vespa, Raccontami, Primitivo di Manduria 2019 90

£35 Alivini

The high-profile Italian journalist and TV presenter Bruno Vespa turned his hand to winemaking seven years ago. Produced from 40-year-old vines, some of them bush-trained, the Raccontami ('Tell me') spends 12 months in French barriques. Mellow, lingering and velvety on the palate, with a superbly smooth tannic texture. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 15%**

20 Paolo Leo, Passo del Cardinale, Primitivo di Manduria 2020 88

£12.49 (2019) North South Wines

The Leo family has been making wine for five generations, and bottling it themselves since 1989. With about 40 labels, grapes are grown in their own vineyards or sourced from others. This technically well-made Primitivo from 40-year-old bush vines, on sandy soils in the province of Taranto, is partially aged in barriques for about three months, and has a modern, international style. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 14%**

Alessandra Piubello is a widely published author, journalist and editor from Verona. She reports on many aspects of Italian culture, principally wine and food, and is co-editor of the *I Vini di Veronelli Guida Oro* wine guide

