

Puglia

Puglia lies in the South-east of Italy, a long strip of land in the Mediterranean, dividing the Adriatic and Ionian seas, right opposite Albania and Greece. The region has a very ancient history and heritage, starting from the Stone Age until the present day. Rich in archaeological findings, testimony of organised societies of each period, Before colonisation by Greece, the area was divided into two: the north was occupied by the Iapigi and Dauni, and was called Apulia, and the south, known as Calabria, by the Peucezi and Messapi. (The present Calabria was known as Italia). The Messapi, according to Herodotus, were descended from the Cretans who were shipwrecked after the collapse of the Minoan civilisation, and integrated with the local people.

It was colonised by the **Greeks**, and became part of the Magna Graeca, Taranto becoming an important Doric centre. The **Romans** conquered Apulia in 272 BC, and the region prospered because it had important routes for trade with the East, in particular the Via Appia from Rome to Brindisi . At this time, the population were shepherds and farmers, and the area was noted for horse-breeding. With the fall of the Roman Empire, this land was devastated by conquests of Goths, Longobards, Franks and Byzantines who controlled the area until they were defeated by the **Normans** in the 11th century. They established a kingdom in the South of Italy, its court in Palermo. Frederick II, the last Swabian emperor, was an enlightened ruler, who built many castles and cathedrals and divided Apulia into 3 administrative areas: Capitanata (north), Terra di Bari (centre) and Terra d'Otranto (south).

After the Normans, this kingdom was fought over by the powerful European families of Anjou and Aragon, who took little interest in the region, except to collect taxes. The **Aragonese** finally took control, and Ferante II, to finance the war against Charles VIII of France, granted the **Venetians** possession of Trani, Gallipoli, Brindisi and Otranto, whose exploitation crippled the region even further.

In the 16th century, the **Bourbons** became the rulers of Southern Italy, known as the kingdom of the two Sicilies. Their incompetence, greed and arrogance devastated the region, and any rebellion was ruthlessly crushed. Most of the land was in the hands of princes and barons, who rarely resided there, and in a show of power, established that large parts of their land had to be left uncultivated.

With the Italian Unification in 1861, the road to recovery has been slow; there have been various reforms, in which unfarmed land has been expropriated and distributed to the peasants. A new class of small farmers has emerged, making Puglia one of the most productive regions of agricultural produce, leaders in the production of olive oil, wine, table grapes, tomatoes, artichokes as well as many other fruit and vegetables grown all year round.

Food

The food of Puglia has changed little since the fall of the Roman Empire, the traditions and techniques of its cooking carrying the heritage of its Greek and Mediterranean culture. Little trace has been left of its various rulers but the ingredients gained through its conquests. These were absorbed to enrich and supplement the diet. Its cooking remains as simple and basic as it was 3000 years ago; through its strong heritage and family traditions, the tastes and flavours have survived, handed down from generation to generation, and have become an integral part of the whole community. In the taste, flavour and cooking technique, there is no class divide, though the wealthy ate more meat and finer fish more often, and a wider variety of fruit and vegetables.

Pugliese cuisine is based around its **main ingredients**, which are: olive oil, durum wheat, vegetables, fish and dairy. Meat such as lamb, horse, farmyard animals was eaten on special occasions.

Olive oil is the only fat used in cooking, and for preserving food. It is even used to make biscuits and sweet pastries. (Butter and lard has no place in the Puglian kitchen). Puglia is the biggest producer of olive oil in Italy, and on a visit to this region, you would see acres and acres of ancient olive plantations with their twisted tree trunks forming natural sculptures in the landscape.

Wheat and durum wheat are used to make bread and home made pasta, a large part of the diet. Puglia makes some of the best bread in Italy – the Roman historian Pliny praises the bread from the area of Altamura, whose bread made from durum wheat now has DOP status. Bread here is sacred : to waste or throw it away it was a sin. Stale bread is used in a large variety of ways, such as bread salad (Acqua Sala), and combined with pecorino cheese, garlic and parsley to make stuffings, dumplings (polpette) with or without meat, deep-fried or in a soup, or generously sprinkled onto seafood (Cozze Racanate – Gratinated Mussels), or onto vegetables.

There is a long tradition of home made fresh pasta in Puglia, a tradition inherited from its Greek ancestors. Dried pasta only began to appear in 1930-40 and was a luxury. For centuries, pasta was made at home with semolina, salt and warm water in a variety of shapes; cavatelli (pasta curls) for soup or combined with pulses, strozzapreti, minchiareddi, laganelle (short tagliatelle), and of course the orecchiette (ear-shaped), each shape of pasta had its traditional sauce. Some of these shapes can also be found in the Cretan cuisine.

Vegetables are paramount to the diet: blessed with ideal climate, plains and rolling hills, most of its land under cultivation, Puglia produces a large variety of fruit and vegetables all year round. However, it's the flavour of the produce which is so striking, thanks to the nature of its fertile and mineral-rich soil. In addition to being the source of some of the best wheat, each season produces an abundance of tasty vegetables: cime di rape, catalogna chicory, fennel, celery, artichokes as well as the brassicas are produced throughout the winter, and peas and broad beans in mid-late spring, moving on to courgette, peppers, aubergines, tomatoes and green beans in the summer as well as melons and a large variety of fruit. These are cooked in a number of ways including steaming, grilling, baking, roasting and stewing, in addition to pickling them to be eaten out of season. Wild vegetables, a reminder of poorer times, are now a delicacy, including, borage, wild chicory, wild cardoons and lampascioni (bulbs of tassel hyacinth), and capers.

With its long coastline, **fishing** traditions are as old as its culture. This activity was not only the preserve of the fisherman who did it for a living, but most coastal dwellers had knowledge of fishing, a practical pastime. Fish and shellfish are always cooked simply to highlight the freshness, either by grilling, or in traditional fish soups.

Dairy – Sheep and goats have played a big part in the life of people in inland areas. Less fertile areas, difficult to farm provided grazing pasture, and in more fertile areas, the large masserie (large estates with farmhouses) raised cattle and buffaloes which complemented their ecosystem. There are two groups of cheeses produced in Puglia: Fresh cheese to be eaten on the day of production, as part of the main meal, such as burrata, stacciatella, ricotta, mozzarella, canestrato and many variations. The more mature cheese are generally used for grating, vegetable fillings, or dessert, the most well-known are pecorino, caprino, provolone, cacio cavallo, cacio ricotta, and scamorza.

Meat – only the wealthy would eat meat regularly, but for special occasions a variety of meats are cooked: lamb is only eaten in the short spring season around Easter, otherwise pork and farmyard animals such as rabbit, chicken . There has also been a long tradition of eating horse meat (prescribed as a cure for anaemia) and hunting wild birds.

Grilling is the most popular way to cook prime meats such as spring lamb, goat, chicken and succulent pork. Some specialities including marro – involtini made with offal of baby lamb tied together with its intestines, can be found in other Mediterranean countries. The slow-cooked ragout of lamb, pork and beef, in wine and tomato, provides two courses, the sauce dressed the home-made pasta, and the meat was eaten as a second course. Another speciality is the bracciola – involtini of horsemeat or beef filled with celery, onion, parsley and pecorino – is slow-cooked with red wine and tomato

The people of Puglia are strongly attached to their traditions and the produce of their land; when Jamie Oliver tried to introduce a new approach to combining the ingredients of the region, to his disappointment, he was told, in no uncertain terms, that it was not the way it was done. To the Pugliesi, more than any other Italian, the flavours, tastes and regional dishes of their upbringing, will always be the best

