



Grown in

From fava, artichokes, eggplant and broccoli rabe to some of the best seafood and olive oil in the country, the heel of the boot is Italy's breadbasket. You don't want to miss a taste of this region.

By Jane Black

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCO DI LAURO
FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY PENNY DE LOS SANTOS



In this long and narrow region of Italy, in the span of a single day you can be in the rolling hills of the Valle d'Itria, gazing at fields of vegetables studded with some of the oldest knotted and gnarled olive trees in the world, and then at the Adriatic, enjoying seafood and beaches.

“What do you do with these?” I asked, pointing to a bunch of what looked like the prettiest wild asparagus I had ever seen. The stems were a vivid cherry color and the delicate purple stalks were laced with feathery green leaves.

“Ah, *cicoria rossa*,” the market vendor answered—red chicory. He was a stout man with a buzz of silver hair and lively blue eyes, and he seemed pleased that this bunch of Americans were genuinely interested in the local cuisine. Here in the hill town of Martina Franca in Puglia, he explained, the locals boil chicory and serve it with young fava beans. But in his village, they chop it, boil it and toss it with pasta. “They would never do that here,” he said, wagging a thick finger at us.

His village was six miles away.

And so it is in Puglia, the heel of Italy’s boot, where the food and the culinary traditions put to shame Americans’ notion of what counts as local. While we pat ourselves on the back for even knowing what’s in season, Puglians almost exclusively use ingredients grown no more than a few miles from home, whether it’s the hard durum wheat for their pasta or tomatoes, eggplant, figs or olives. They prepare things the same way their mothers and grandmothers did, which may be quite different from the way someone else’s *nonna* did. And you only find the valley’s signature dish, orecchiette with broccoli rabe, six months a year, when *local* broccoli rabe is in season.

But everything seems to grow here: grapes for wine, artichokes and almonds, cherries and tomatoes, and cabbage and broccoli, which in the fall sprout in stony fields beneath the olive trees. The region’s hundreds of miles of coast bring locals sardines, snapper, mussels and anchovies.

Like many Americans, my first experience in Italy was in Tuscany. I studied at the University of Florence, found the requisite Italian boyfriend, and dined on *bistecca alla fiorentina* and Chianti. Then, 10 years ago, I made my first trip to Puglia, and I’d wanted to go back ever since. There was something wild—something *real*—that was missing in Italy’s other stopped-in-time, touristy destinations. Unmortared stone walls march unevenly across the fields, like drunken soldiers lackadaisically guarding their *trulli*, the mystical round houses topped with conical stone roofs. The locals seem genuinely happy to meet and help you; once, hopelessly lost while driving, I asked a professorial man for directions. Rather than try to explain, he hopped on his bike and led me to the gates of the city.

Puglia has since been “discovered” by chefs and tourists. But I was pleased, when I finally returned this year with a friend, to find it as unspoiled as I remembered. The

olive trees, set in walled orchards, had hulking, gnarled trunks and halos of silver shimmering leaves. There was a breakfast of frittata with zucchini and mint, rustic bread and homemade fig preserves served in the dappled shade of a grape arbor. A lunch of grilled sardines, roasted potatoes and bitter greens overlooking the sea. Life went on as it always has: In front of the houses, people set out wooden boards in the sun to dry herbs, figs and tomatoes. And it wasn’t unusual to see an elderly man or woman scrambling down a hillside to gather wild chicory.

The fantasy-fulfilling food bursting from this lush setting had me itching to get into the kitchen, so I asked chef and instructor Domenico Maggi to give me Pugliese cooking lessons at his family’s home.

In his outdoor kitchen, Mino, as everyone calls him, showed me how he makes pasta dough by mixing locally milled whole-grain flour with a handful of semolina and water. After rolling out small pieces of the dough into long snakes with his hands, he snips off pieces and forms orecchiette (“little ear” shapes) over his thumb. The whole-grain pasta stands up to the strong flavors of the anchovies, garlic and the bitter broccoli rabe that are its classic pairing. It’s also what his mother used. “White flour was special; it was the kind of thing you gave to the doctor or the priest as a gift,” he remembers. “I’ve always liked whole grains. But I have become more and more convinced over time that they are part of the real Mediterranean diet.”

The Alberobello skyline is dotted with the conical roofs of the traditional Puglian *trulli*.

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FAVA BEAN PUREE WITH CHICORY

ACTIVE: 20 MIN TOTAL: 1HR 25 MIN

This dish exemplifies the simplicity of the region’s cuisine. Wild or cultivated chicory is often served raw or cooked, as it is here, with a simple puree of fava beans seasoned solely with olive oil and salt. If you have a special olive oil in your pantry, this is the time to pull it out.

- 8 ounces skinless dried fava beans (about 1½ cups; see Tip, page 104)
- 1 small red potato, peeled and sliced
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for serving
- ½ teaspoon salt plus 2 teaspoons, divided
- 2 pounds chicory or curly endive (from 2 bunches), trimmed

1. Place beans and potato in a medium saucepan; add water to cover by ½ inch. Bring to a boil over high heat, skimming off any foam that rises to the surface. Reduce heat to maintain a gentle simmer, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is a thick, soupy consistency, about 1 hour.

2. Transfer the bean mixture to a blender. Add 1 tablespoon oil and ½ teaspoon salt; puree until smooth. Transfer to a platter (or bowl).

3. Put a large pot of water on to boil.

4. Wash chicory (or endive) in a large bowl of water to remove any grit. Stir the remaining 2 teaspoons salt into the boiling water, then add the greens and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, 6 to 8 minutes. Drain in a colander, pressing to remove excess water.

5. Serve the greens with the fava bean puree, drizzled with a little olive oil, if desired.

SERVES 6: ABOUT ⅓ CUP GREENS & ½ CUP PUREE EACH
Calories 203, Fat 3g (sat 1g), Cholesterol 0mg, Carbs 33g, Total sugars 3g (added 0g), Protein 13g, Fiber 16g, Sodium 407mg, Potassium 1105mg.



STUFFED FRESH SARDINES

ACTIVE: 50 MIN TOTAL: 50 MIN

When you dine in one of the towns peppered along Puglia's nearly 500 miles of coastline, expect to see fish served in simple preparations, like these fried stuffed sardines.

- 1/4 cup part-skim ricotta cheese
- 1/4 cup finely shredded Pecorino Romano cheese
- 1/4 cup fresh breadcrumbs
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley
- 3 large eggs, divided
- Zest of 1 lemon, plus lemon wedges for serving
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, divided
- 1/2 teaspoon ground pepper, divided
- 12 medium fresh sardines, gutted, head and tail left on
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups panko breadcrumbs
- 1 1/2 cups extra-virgin olive oil

1. Combine ricotta, Romano, fresh breadcrumbs, parsley, 1 egg, lemon zest and 1/4 tea-

spoon each salt and pepper in a medium bowl.

2. Rinse sardines and pat dry. Season the insides with the remaining 1/4 teaspoon each salt and pepper. Stuff each sardine with about 2 teaspoons of the cheese mixture.

3. Place flour in one shallow dish, the remaining 2 eggs (lightly beaten) in a second shallow dish and panko in a third dish. Dip the sardines in the flour, then the egg, then the panko.

4. Heat oil in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering but not smoking. Fry the sardines, in batches, until golden brown, 2 to 4 minutes per side, reducing the heat as needed. Serve immediately, with lemon wedges.

SERVES 6: 2 STUFFED SARDINES EACH
Calories 420, Fat 26g (sat 5g), Cholesterol 170mg, Carbs 19g, Total sugars 1g (added 0g), Protein 26g, Fiber 1g, Sodium 423mg, Potassium 366mg.



BONUS RECIPE FOR PUGLIAN-STYLE PAELLA at eatingwell.com/webextra

Mino grew up in the rolling hills of the southwestern part of the region during the 1950s and '60s, a time when many Puglians were still fleeing the region's poverty for America. The family didn't get electricity until he was 7, and even after that, his mother continued to cook everything in a wood-fired oven. The family's meals were simple. They ate fava beans and chicory, baked eggplant and zucchini, and everything was cooked with plenty of extra-virgin olive oil. At every meal, there was a bowl of raw vegetables on the table to provide vitamins and to aid digestion. The tradition continues today, both at home and in

restaurants, where an elegant bowl of whatever is seasonal—shaved radishes or fennel or sweet carrots—is served with the antipasti or, just as often, over ice before dessert.

A few days after my Puglian cooking lessons, my friend and I took the winding road from Martina Franca along the Adriatic coast to Monopoli, a fishing port with a gracious and hidden historical center. We waited with friends for nearly an hour for a table at Osteria Pericci, where there is no menu because the kitchen only serves whatever looks best that day. For us, that included grilled shrimp, mackerel marinated in vinegar and mint, cold salads of tender octopus and squid,

pasta with mussels, whole roasted sea bass and, of course, a plate of fresh vegetables.

"How was everything?" the *signora* asked us as we finished our meal with a much-needed bay leaf *digestivo*.

We answered in a chorus: *Buonissimo! Amazing! Fantastico!*

"Just as it has always been," added one of our friends, who has been eating at Osteria Pericci for 20 years.

"Good," the *signora* said. "Just as it should be."

JANE BLACK is a food writer who lives in New York.

The Mediterranean diet has long been considered a healthy one and a recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* adds even more evidence. Puglians eat a truly Mediterranean diet. Legumes, such as fava beans and chickpeas, and vegetables are the stars. Olive oil is a staple. Seafood is served right along the coast (Mola di Bari, shown here), and meat is a rare treat.



BAKED VEGETABLE SOUP

ACTIVE: 40 MIN **TOTAL:** 1 HR 40 MIN

Originally prepared in the wood-burning hearths of Puglian homes, this peasant-style soup is simple to make in a modern oven. Like the region it's from, the dish is brimming with artichokes, mushrooms and other fresh vegetables.

- 5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, halved and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1½ teaspoons salt, divided
- 2 medium zucchinis, halved and sliced ½ inch thick
- 2 medium leeks, white and light green parts only, thinly sliced (see Tip, page 104)
- 4 medium stalks celery, thinly sliced
- 10 ounces cremini (baby bella) mushrooms, quartered
- 4 cups frozen artichoke hearts (two 9-ounce boxes), thawed, or 10 fresh artichoke hearts, quartered
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley, plus more for garnish
- 1 15-ounce can no-salt-added diced tomatoes, with their juice
- 1 2-inch piece Parmesan cheese rind, plus finely shredded Parmesan for garnish
- 6 cups water
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Pour oil into a large ovenproof pot (about 6-quart) and arrange potato slices in an even layer over the oil. Sprinkle with ¾ teaspoon salt. Layer in zucchini, leeks, celery, mushrooms, artichoke hearts and ¼ cup parsley; sprinkle with the remaining ¾ teaspoon salt. Pour tomatoes over the vegetables and nestle Parmesan rind into them. Add water (the vegetables will not be completely submerged), cover and bring to a boil over high heat.
3. Once boiling, transfer the pot to the oven and bake, covered, until the vegetables are tender, but still firm, 1 to 1¼ hours. Season with pepper and serve garnished with parsley and Parmesan, if desired.

SERVES 8: ABOUT 1¾ CUPS EACH
Calories 203, **Fat** 10g (sat 1g), **Cholesterol** 1mg, **Carbs** 25g, **Total sugars** 6g (added 0g), **Protein** 5g, **Fiber** 6g, **Sodium** 529mg, **Potassium** 815mg.



TRAVEL GUIDE // Puglia

WHERE TO STAY

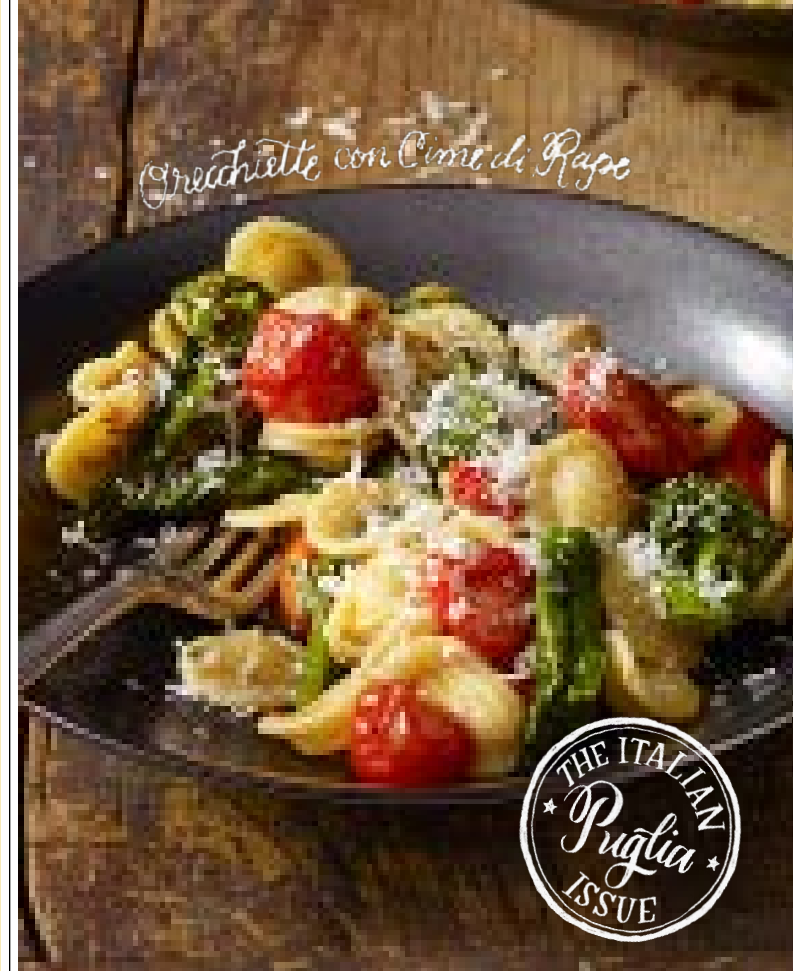
Over the last decade, Italians and ex-pats have renovated hundreds of *trulli*, the classic conical-roofed houses of Puglia. In summer, they are the perfect place to stay because the thick limestone walls keep the interiors cool. **Rustic Puglia** (rusticpuglia.com) is a renovated two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen, pool and a vegetable garden for guests to cook from. Rates start at \$1,670 a week. For larger groups, **Gelso Bianco** (villapulia.com/gelso-bianco) sleeps up to 8 people in a series of *trulli* set around a pool with views of the Valle d'Itria. The property also has its own teaching kitchen for cooking lessons. Rates begin at \$3,000 a week. Off-season, one of the old farmhouses—or *masserie*—is a warmer choice. **Masseria Fumarola** (masseriefumarola.it), outside of Martina Franca, offers rooms for \$110 and up per night.

WHERE TO EAT

Inside Martina Franca's Ducal Palace, **Trattoria La Tana** offers a taste of Puglia's celebrated vegetables, legumes and cured meats. Its antipasti courses are generous; order one per two people so that you have room for some of the house-made orecchiette (Via Pietro Mascagni 2, Martina Franca, ristorantelatana.it). For more sophisticated fare, try **uCurdunn** in Locorotondo. Each antipasto plate offers two expressions of a seasonal vegetable, such as an eggplant parmesan and eggplant stuffed with prosciutto and cheese (Via Dura 17, Locorotondo, ristoranteucurdunn.it). For seafood, head to Monopoli. At **Osteria Perricci**, there's a set menu, including antipasti, pasta, grilled and fried seafood, and fresh fruit (Via Orazio Comes 1, Monopoli).

WHAT TO DO

Americans Catherine and Brian Faris are enthusiastic experts about all things culinary in Puglia. Their **Pascarosa** culinary tour is a full day and includes snacks, multi-course lunch, wine and an afternoon *aperitivo* for \$150 per person. An abbreviated four-hour tour, with lunch, is \$100 per person (pascarosa.com). Travel company **Southern Visions** offers bike tours that include culinary classes and visits with cheesemakers, winemakers and olive growers (southernvisionstravel.com).



ORECCHIETTE WITH BROCCOLI RABE

ACTIVE: 30 MIN **TOTAL:** 30 MIN

In this iconic pasta dish of Puglia, anchovies are mashed into olive oil to add amazing depth to the garlicky sauce. Assertive broccoli rabe has the featured role, though, so even anchovy avoiders needn't be afraid.

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| 2 teaspoons salt | ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper |
| 12 ounces orecchiette pasta (about 3½ cups) | 8 anchovy fillets, chopped |
| 2 pounds broccoli rabe (about 2 bunches) | 1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved |
| ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil | Freshly grated Parmesan cheese (optional) |
| 3 cloves garlic, chopped | |

1. Bring 2 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot. Stir in salt, add pasta and cook according to package instructions until just tender. Drain, reserving ½ cup of the water.
2. Meanwhile, thoroughly wash broccoli rabe and trim off tough ends. Chop into 2-inch lengths. Leave some of the water clinging to the leaves and stems; this will help create a sauce.
3. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat until it starts to shimmer. Add garlic, crushed red pepper and anchovies, mashing the fillets until they dissolve. Add the broccoli rabe (you may have to do this in batches, stirring each batch a little until it wilts enough to add more). Cook, stirring, until almost tender, 6 to 10 minutes. Add tomatoes and toss until they begin to soften, about 2 minutes. Add the pasta and toss to coat. If it's too dry, add a little of the reserved pasta water. Serve immediately, garnished with Parmesan if desired.

SERVES 6: 1½ CUPS EACH
Calories 359, **Fat** 12g (sat 2g), **Cholesterol** 5mg, **Carbs** 50g, **Total sugars** 3g (added 0g), **Protein** 15g, **Fiber** 7g, **Sodium** 388mg, **Potassium** 484mg.

(continued on page 89)



MASCARPONE-STUFFED FIGS

ACTIVE: 10 MIN **TOTAL:** 10 MIN

Fresh figs are a voluptuous treat. Here, a creamy, honey-scented mascarpone filling adds to the luxury and yet still lets the fruit be the star. Serve to top off a special meal.

- 12 fresh figs
- ¼ cup mascarpone cheese
- 3 teaspoons honey, divided
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons chopped almonds, toasted
- 1 teaspoon fresh mint, chopped
- ½ teaspoon orange zest

1. Trim about ½ inch off the top of each fig. If needed, cut a thin slice off the bottom so they stand up straight. Cut an X into the tops about ¾ inch deep. Gently open each fig from the top without breaking it open all the way.

2. Combine mascarpone, 2 teaspoons honey and vanilla in a small bowl. Spoon about 1 teaspoon of the mixture into each fig. Drizzle with the remaining 1 teaspoon honey and sprinkle with almonds, mint and orange zest.

SERVES 4: 3 FIGS EACH

Calories 219, **Fat** 15g (sat 7g), **Cholesterol** 35mg, **Carbs** 22g, **Total sugars** 18g (added 4g), **Protein** 3g, **Fiber** 3g, **Sodium** 16mg, **Potassium** 225mg.

STUFFED EGGPLANT

ACTIVE: 35 MIN **TOTAL:** 1 HR

Heat-loving eggplant thrives in Puglia's hot summer and fall months. Serve these stuffed eggplants as a light dinner along with a big salad. (Photograph: page 3.)

- 2 small eggplants (12 ounces each)
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil plus ¼ cup, divided
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper, divided
- ½ cup finely grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- 1¼ cups fresh breadcrumbs
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten

- ⅓ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon capers, rinsed
- 1¼ cups no-salt-added tomato sauce, divided
- 4 large basil leaves

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.

2. Halve eggplants lengthwise. Trim a little off the undersides so they lie flat. Cut around the inside edge with a paring knife to separate the flesh from the skin. Scoop out the flesh and roughly chop. Set the shells aside.

3. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the chopped eggplant and cook, stirring frequently, until starting to soften, 2 to 3 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until soft, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, season with salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper and set aside to cool.

4. Heat the remaining ¼ cup oil in a large skillet over medium heat until shimmering but not smoking. Season the eggplant shells with the remaining ¼ teaspoon pepper and 2 tablespoons Parmesan. Cook in the hot oil (in batches, if necessary), turning once, until golden brown and soft, 5 to 8 minutes. (Use caution: they will bubble and spit a little when you turn them over.) Drain on paper towels.

5. Dunk breadcrumbs in a bowl of water and squeeze them out. Transfer to the bowl with the eggplant filling. Add ¼ cup Parmesan, egg, parsley and capers. Use a spoon or your hands to thoroughly mix. Fill the eggplant shells with the stuffing and use a spoon to smooth the tops.

6. Spoon 1 cup tomato sauce into an oven-proof dish big enough to fit the eggplant in one layer. Transfer the stuffed eggplant to the dish. Spoon 1 tablespoon of the remaining sauce over each and top with a basil leaf. Sprinkle with the remaining 2 tablespoons Parmesan.

7. Bake until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the filling registers 160°F, about 25 minutes.

SERVES 4: ½ EGGPLANT EACH

Calories 329, **Fat** 21g (sat 5g), **Cholesterol** 55mg, **Carbs** 27g, **Total sugars** 10g (added 1g), **Protein** 10g, **Fiber** 7g, **Sodium** 443mg, **Potassium** 737mg.