

# Discovering a Region Through Its Food

Allison Levine goes on a well-heeled gastronomic mission to **Puglia**



**Olive oil Fresh From the press.**

Italy is an amazing land of diverse regions, each known for its local cheeses, wines, breads, pastas and oils. A recent journey to Puglia, the “heel” of the Italian boot, was an opportunity to explore one of the largest, most fertile and densely populated—and relatively unknown regions—in all of Italy.

With the longest coastline in Italy, thanks to both the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Puglia is responsible for more than 50% of Italy’s olive oil production, as well as food specialties such as olives, vegetables (artichokes, eggplant, broccoli rabe), pastas (orecchiette), cheeses (burrata, scamorza, mozzarella di bufala, caciocavallo) and, of course, wine.

Puglia has six provinces, one of which is northerly Foggia (the spur of the heel). The city of Foggia is centered in the heart of the Tavoliere plain, situated between the Adriatic and the Dauni Mountains. Known originally as the granary of Italy, the Tavoliere produces olive oil, wine, wheat, fruits and vegetable preserves—a bounty that deserves to be discovered.

## Olive Oil: Green Gold

Olives grow best in mild zones, and the Mediterranean has 98% of the world’s olive trees—well over a billion at last count. Extra virgin olive oil is one of the most important products of the Tavolieri. The region’s oils are entitled to a DOP (Denominazione di Origine

Protetta), a status equivalent to DOC for wines.

Virgin olive oil is obtained by crushing the olives in grinding stones or steel presses, and separating the dry pomace from the water and oil by pressure or centrifugation. Low acid is desirable. Extra virgin olive oil is permitted a maximum acidity of 1%, whereas virgin olive oil is permitted 2% and ordinary virgin olive oil 3%. (Oils with higher acidity need to be rendered using industrial processes and are relatively tasteless.) Try oils from these Puglia DOPs:



**Villa Torre Quarto in Cerignola.**

**DOP Dauno Alto Tavoliere** Oil from this mountain-protected region is sweet, strong and fruity with well-balanced bitter and spicy notes. Distinctive olive aroma with herbaceous and floral tones. Ideal for oil dip, salad and bruschetta, or—either cooked or uncooked—for strongly-flavored dishes, soups, grilled meats or fish.

**DOP Dauno Gargano** This region consists of rocky terraces and salty winds from the Adriatic coast. The green to light yellow oil has a delicate fruity fragrance, a sweet flavor and a characteristic almond aftertaste. Ideal for fish, shellfish and cooked or raw vegetables.

**DOP Dauno Basso Tavoliere** The strong winds that warm and dry the soil result in oil that's herbaceous, fruity and sweet, with hints of bitterness and spiciness and a signature aftertaste of artichoke. Thick and firm, this oil is ideal for pasta, strongly-flavored soups, legumes, cooked vegetables and roasted meats.

**DOP Dauno Sub-Appennino** The olive trees in this DOP are protected by surrounding woods. The green to yellow oil is sweet, fruity and clean with a nose of ripe tomatoes and olives. The light-flavored oil is ideal for pasta, vegetables and pastries, as well as for frying.

### Olives: Fruit of the Land

Another specialty of Foggia is olives from the Bella di Cerignola DOP. The largest table olive, the Bella di Cerignola is drupe-shaped (like a plum) and can be either green or black. The calcareous and clay soils of the flat plain receive heavy sun, enabling the olive to grow to its famous large size. Hand-harvested after October 15, the olives are treated with alkali to remove bitterness, then immediately washed with water and stored in flasks, glass vases or terracotta jars, with a little salt.

### Wine: Essence of the Vine



**Don Marcello Rosso 2005 by Torre Quarto.**

Puglia is one of the largest producers of Italian wine, with 25 DOCs and six IGT zones. DOCs of the Foggia province include Rosso di Cerignola, Cacc'e Mmitte di Lucera, Orta Nova and San Severo. Try these producers:

**Alberto Longo** is located in Lucera. With great love for his land and wine,

Alberto planted 35 hectares to indigenous varieties such as Montepulciano, Bombino



**Newly harvested olives head into the destemmer.**

Bianco, Nero di Troia, as well as international standards such as Merlot and Chardonnay. The modern, state-of-the-art cellar is built on an ancient farmhouse. *Imported by Tamalpais Wine Agency (415-456-0425).*

**Torre Quarto**, located in Cerignola, was originally built in 1847 by the French dukes of Rochefoucauld and taken over in the 1930s by the Cirillo Farrusi family, the first producers of Puglia wines sold outside Italy. *Imported by Montecastelli Selections (212-414-4989).* ■■

Interested in purchasing Italian food products from Puglia and other regions of Italy for your restaurant? Check out these specialty importers:

**Guidi Marcello** [www.guidimarcello.com](http://www.guidimarcello.com)  
**Italian Harvest** [www.italianharvest.com](http://www.italianharvest.com)  
**Italfoods** [www.italfoodsinc.com](http://www.italfoodsinc.com)  
**Olio&Olive** [www.olioandolive.com](http://www.olioandolive.com)