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Puglia is the clicking song of summer cicadas, the pungent smell of red earth and dry hay, the flickering shadows of wispy olive branches and the incandescent light that reflects off whitewashed villages. The proverbial heel of the Italian boot, Puglia enjoys a unique and profoundly authentic personality that sets it apart from all the other beautiful regions of Italy. Puglia's true identity lies in its strong link to farming, farmers and a country-living aesthetic.

The wines of Puglia patently communicate the region's personality. Those sun-soaked flavors—the bold blackberry and bitter cherry found in the reds, the summer peach and honey revealed in the whites—evoke an undeniable sense of place. The Puglia identity is uncomplicated, but strong. It is simple, but truthful. Its wines offer some of the best values to be found in Italy.



This report contains 146 wines from Puglia. The highest scores of 93 points went to various Primitivo and Negroamaro wines made by Gianfranco Fino (which tend to retail in the \$80-plus range) and one from Tenute Rubino (which sells for \$35). However, the bulk of my report consists of wines in the 87- to 90-point range that retail for around \$15 to \$35.

You will find full reviews from these producers in this report. I have made every effort to pair the wines I tasted with local food flavors. My goal is to whet your appetite for Puglia...

### **Vintage Reports**

Optimism surrounds the quality of the 2019 vintage, although volume was considerably reduced. Yields were down by 20% in 2019 compared to 2018 (with 7.6 million hectoliters of wine produced in Puglia in 2019 compared to 9.5 million the year before). Due to that drop in production, higher fruit and wine prices will ultimately be passed onto the consumer at your local retailer. However, these pricing upticks are comparatively small in a powerhouse wine region like Puglia that makes value the center of its marketing appeal. You are likely to find lower overall prices in the 2018 vintage but better wines in 2019.

The 2019 growing season saw a wet spring with showers at the end of June lasting through much of July. A marked shift to dry sunshine and warm breezes followed swiftly, stopping the risk of fungal-based diseases. Downy and powdery mildew can be common and reoccurring problems in Puglia, especially when periods of heat and humidity overlap. Grape veraison kicked off later in 2019, and the entire growing season was delayed to happy results. A longer-than-average growing season ensured healthy grapes with pronounced flavors and aromas. Small, compact clusters and crunchy grape skins characterize the 2019 vintage. Achieving balance between sugar and acidity was not an issue.

The 2019 harvest kicked off at the end of August with early-ripening Chardonnay and Fiano coming off the vines first. Primitivo and Negroamaro were harvested at the beginning of September, with both varieties showing contained alcohol readings with more-pronounced structure and freshness. The Valle d'Itria and Salento areas saw harvest 10 days later than average. Native grapes Malvasia Nera, Susumaniello and Nero di Troia were harvested two weeks later than normal. Dry and warm weather continued throughout the harvest with the last grapes coming off the vines by the beginning of October.



Alessandro Candido reminds us that Puglia is a magical strip of land sandwiched between the Ionian and Adriatic Seas. The climate is mild thanks to sea breezes that come from all sides, and the summers are scorching hot. A mere 500 millimeters of rain falls on average each year.

The 2019 harvest in Puglia will be remembered as one of the best, especially in terms of the region's native grapes.

The 2018 vintage was an entirely different story, and vintners were faced with bigger challenges in the vineyard. The vegetative cycle started on track. Budding, flowering and fruit set all came on schedule. The period from February to April saw frequent rain showers, with violent downpours and even some areas of hail. Below-average temperatures from spring to mid-summer resulted in sluggish fruit ripening that ultimately delayed the harvest. Those delays were especially evident in the Valle d'Itria, and in the northern part of the Tavoliere area. Slow and difficult ripening also characterized the Salento. The first grapes to be harvested in August (for the production of sparkling wines, mostly) were Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Bianco.

Next came indigenous varieties Verdeca, Fiano, Bianco d'Alessano and Bombino. The harvest concluded with red grapes Nero di Troia, Susumaniello, Aglianico and Bombino Nero.

Downy and powdery mildew provoked by abundant rains posed a real problem. Some varieties, such as Primitivo and Negroamaro, showed difficulty reaching optimal ripeness because of these adverse and soggy conditions.

Some vintners skipped over the 2018 vintage entirely. For example, Conti Zecca did not make its Primitivo called Rodinò in 2018. That estate also decided not to make its dessert wine in that soggy vintage. Rosa del Golfo dropped its Negroamaro Portulano in 2018. That wine is only made in the best vintages, and evidently 2018 did not qualify in the eyes of this producer.

Filomena Saponari of Vignaflora says 2018 was not as bad as some make it out to be. She has farmed organically since 2010 with vines that are 430 meters above sea level. "Thanks to our organic regime, we were successful in protecting the grapes," she says. "It was a difficult year with rain during the spring and hail in August, but we are satisfied with both the quality and the quantity of fruit achieved in 2018."

These wines were tasted in my office in Rome, Italy, in 2019. I had a few unpublished reviews from the year before and have added those to this report. To stay current with Puglia's latest releases, my next article on this beautiful region will be published later this year, likely in summer 2020.

