

Cantine Aperte In Salice Salentino

Mattie John Bamman (June 10, 2009)



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You know you're having a good Sunday when you find yourself high-tailing it in a rental car along a rutted-out-vineyard road in Puglia, Italy: the long rows of grape vines, the hot Mediterranean sun, and the cool wind from Africa whipping through your hair. It was Cantine Aperte, an annual event that takes place everywhere in Italy at the end of May, and the wineries of Puglia, many of which usually require reservations, were open to the public.

The slogan of the event is Vedi Cosa Bevi, See What You Drink, and I walked among the vines and the winemaking facilities at some of my favorite wineries in the world. That there were great parties to accompany the experience made it all the better. Live music, poetry, fathers and daughters dancing, grandmas deep frying calzone, cellar tours, and conversations with the winemakers



themselves revealed the centuries-old traditions of the deep Italian south. And, of course, there were the wines. A new tradition of Pugliese winemaking is redefining the concept of Italian wine on a global scale.

Puglia's wines are not the dry, tannic wines of northern Italy. They are not designed to pair well with tomato-based sauces. They are wines for those who like to drink wine by itself, and they can also pair well with food. Big fruit flavors balanced by an austere leatheriness characterize the reds. A soft mouthfeel makes them easily approachable—they are the kind of wines that I want to share with friends. You could call them new-world in style, but we're talking about a region of Italy that has been producing great quantities of wine for over 4,000 years. These wineries have been in the same families for many generations.

Since there were 50 wineries participating in Puglia's version of Cantine Aperte, I narrowed my focus to the area around the town of Salice Salentino. Part of the Lecce province of Puglia, better known as the "heel" of the Italian boot, the town is home to many of Puglia's best-known wineries, including Cantele, Taurino, and Leone De Castris. The first winery I visited was [Cantine De Falco](#) [2]. At ten in the morning, winemaker Gabriele De Falco, grandson of founder Salvatore De Falco, was pouring from his wide selection of wines. A large table of traditional snacks, including tarallini, mozzarella, olives, and olive oil-drenched bruschetta, was dwarfed by the facility's huge stainless steel wine tanks, which served as reminders that, if Puglia were its own country, it would be the seventh-largest wine producing country in the world.

A tasting pour in Puglia is not the same size as a tasting pour in the United States. Our first pour yielded a quarter of a full-size wine glass. My friends and I were happily surprised. When an American-sized pour of the next wine was used to rinse our glasses in preparation for the full pour, we were equally appalled. But the winemakers want to make sure we drink their wine the right way. It is an example of the culture of exceptional generosity found on the Salento Peninsula.

The wines made by Cantine De Falco are like most wines made in Puglia in that they focus on native grapes, such as Negroamaro, Primitivo, Malvasia Nera, Malvasia Bianca, Verdeca, and Nero di Troia—grapes that cannot be found anywhere else and that have tremendous capabilities. I loved the winery's 2006 "Bocca Della Verità" IGT Primitivo, which typified the Primitivo grape. Primitivo gained worldwide fame several years ago when scientists discovered that it shares the same DNA as California's Zinfandel. However, the "Bocca Della Verità" did not taste like a Zinfandel. Pugliese Primitivo wines do not have the wonderful spice of California Zinfandels. Instead, generally speaking, they are succulent and juicy, with dark fruit. They also feel, like most Pugliese reds, as soft as satin, mirroring the friendly composure of their producers. The one thing that Zinfandels and Primitivo have in common is a high alcohol content.

A little past eleven, we pressed on to downtown Salice Salentino. Salice Salentino is also the name of one of Puglia's 26 DOC wines, and it focuses on the most important grape in Puglia: Negroamaro. A powerful, sleek wine, it is made of at least 80% Negroamaro, the remaining 20% usually composed of Malvasia Nera. The wine has gained popularity in the United States

and can be found in most wine stores. Pugliese rosès, or rosati, are also made with Negroamaro, and they are unlike any other rosès in the world. Wildly popular when the intense Mediterranean summer hits, they exhibit a firm structure and cutting acidity thanks to the grape, which is so loaded with character that winemakers sometimes complete their maceration process in only 2-3 hours. Since these rosès are so unique, what better place to go than the winery that invented the Italian rosè?

[Leone De Castris](#) [3], founded in 1665, exhibits the duality of Puglia's new and old winemaking traditions. Its Five Roses rosato rose to fame after World War II when it was bottled in leftover beer bottles due to a shortage of new glass caused by the war and imported by American General Charles Poletti. Entering the old winery was like entering a old library. Rows and rows of heavily bound books that might have been filled with harvest notes from the 17th century stood in tall antique book cases. Everything was wood paneled. Beautifully carved trim wrapped around the doors and windows. We were taken into a room with a long, polished wood table, antique mirrors, a gold bust of Senatore De Castris, and dusty Five Roses beer bottles from 1943. But this step into the past quickly conceded to the future as we were led into the state-of-the-art wine-making facility.



I spoke with Salvatore Ria, of the winery's export division, about Puglia's little-recognized, little-utilized native white grape varieties. He gave me a sneak peak of the 2008 "Donna Lisa" 100% Malvasia Bianca, due for release in October. Malvasia Bianca is a wine that is hard to find even in Puglia, but it is full of potential, full-bodied and capable of an aroma of tropical fruit, especially pineapple. Leone De Castris's Malvasia Bianca is lightly oaked, ideal for pairing with food. The winery is the first high-profile winery that I've seen take on the grape, and this is its first attempt at it. It is the work of the new enologist, Marco Mascellani, working under the consult of Riccardo Cotarella, one of Italy's leading wine consultants. Salvatore thinks the wine will be a big success, and I wish him the best of luck.

For lunch, we went to Taurino Winery, the first Pugliese winery to import to the United States. The winery offered a traditional Pugliese lunch of orrechiette pasta and a selection of roasted meat and was swamped at noon. But maybe it wasn't the food as much as the 2001 "Patriglione," a blend of 90% Negroamaro and 10% Malvasia Nera. Displaying all of the characteristics of an Amarone, this sticky, smoky, juicy wine is one of my favorites produced in Puglia. Correspondingly, it runs 28 euro a bottle, a hefty price tag when compared with most of the region's wines. The wine has received a significant amount of positive press as of late, and hopefully it will soon be easier to find in U.S. wine stores.

After lunch, the party-like atmosphere of Cantine Aperte took hold at Taurino. A live band played traditional music, and a band member taught the audience traditional dance steps. This was my favorite part of the day—even better than the wines. Tambourines crashed as grandfathers danced with their four-year-old granddaughters and singles danced in the flirtatious dialogue that Italy is known for. I even got my lead feet to move me in circles; the band member and I danced around my girlfriend, a larger circle of dancers circling us.

I ended my day of exploration at [Cantele](#) [4], the little winery that could, which has been acknowledged by Robert Parker and Wine Spectator. I was impressed and surprised by their 2006 "Teresa Manara" Negroamaro in particular. The wine is perhaps the best example of a 100% Negroamaro wine, showing off the region's terroir. It has a smokiness from the sun's effects on the thick skin of the grapes. It has a juiciness from having the inside of the grapes practically cook during the growing season. If it's drinking this well in 2006, it will be ten times better five to seven years down the road. Puglia's environment is incredibly contradictory and creates a wonderful terroir. It is ideal for grape varieties that take a long time to ripen because it has at least 330 days of sunlight each year. If it were not for a cool cross-breeze from the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, this sunlight would heat the grapes so much that they would rot on the vine. The soil is made of red clay and a special kind of limestone known as Pietra Leccese, or Lecce Stone, and the top soil layers do not supply significant amounts of water. To achieve the DOC label, Italian wineries cannot use irrigation, so it is paramount that Leccese stone is easy to carve (as the local sculptors know) and underground rivers and caves have formed to supply the region with water, sometimes at 80 meters deep.

Cantele is a relatively new winery. It was founded in the late 1950s by Giovanni Battista Cantele. Today, his grandchildren are the winemakers, and all four were behind the bar pouring their wines. I spoke with Paolo Cantele about his excitement for the white grape, Fiano, which may or may not be native to Puglia. The grape is usually associated with Campania, but Paolo believes it can be made popular in Puglia.

Though I was done exploring the region's native grapes, I was not finished exploring the parties of Cantine Aperte, and several wineries stayed open until nine p.m. Cantine Aperte had not disappointed. These wineries are creating tremendous wines that cost as little as \$10-15 a bottle in the U.S. It's no surprise that wine lovers, wine store owners, and wine importers are finding them interesting. Puglia's new wine tradition seems to be the natural progression of young winemakers learning from their mentors, in most cases their fathers and grandfathers, and finding new methods for exhibiting the best of their native grapes.

Mattie John Bamman is a writer living Puglia. He is currently researching the area's "new tradition" of wine production, which you can follow on [his blog](#) [5].



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