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## A pasta a day

### Biking trip through Puglia region leads to tasty rewards

**By Maureen Clancy**  
UNION-TRIBUNE FOOD WRITER

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I would be lying if I said I planned a trip to Italy's Puglia region because I wanted to see the famous trulli – conical stone dwellings that are found nowhere else on Earth and are considered a UNESCO World Heritage treasure.

I can't honestly say I was going for the ancient Greek ruins (the area was colonized by Greeks in the eighth century B.C.) or the medieval hill towns, either. Nor for the miles of beaches where the Adriatic hugs the heel of Italy's boot.

Truth be told, I was going for the pasta.

Puglia (pronounced pooh-lya) is second in the world only to Sicily in millions of tons of durum wheat cranked out each year. Virtually all the pasta made in Italy is made here, with factories and artisanal studios turning out everything from agnolotti to ziti, with lanterne (lanterns), trottoloni (spinning tops), troccoli (square spaghetti), spugnole (little sponges) and cornucopie (horns of plenty) in between.



La Jollan Linda Christensen encountered unusual traffic on a quiet road near Alberobello. Goats and sheep are the principle livestock in Puglia.

How could I go wrong, I reasoned, traveling in a land that takes pasta seriously enough to give one simple shape three names: penne, pennoni (big penne) and pennette (little penne)?

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So, with 17 food-loving friends, I set out to sample as many pasta dishes as I could in one week ... and to do it without gaining an ounce.

Working with Backroads, a Berkeley-based active travel company, we came up with a five-day bike trip that would cover about 40 miles a day through the heart of Puglia. Our accommodations ranged from restored farm houses in olive groves to basic bungalows shaped like trulli. Picnics were gathered from farmers markets; dinners were casually elegant affairs featuring local dishes, fresh seafood (Puglia has the longest coastline of any Italian region) and a carnival of carbs to fuel the next day's bike ride.



The pasta-and-pedaling adventure began at Il Melograno in Monopoli, where we were treated to a simple, spectacular dish of orecchiette with just-picked tomatoes, basil and shaved cacioricotta cheese.

## Day one

After being fitted for our bikes in the courtyard of Il Melograno in Monopoli, a captivating hotel with brilliant white buildings, hidden pathways and colorful gardens, we rolled out onto the road.

A couple hours of easy pedaling took us through a landscape of silvery olive trees and almond orchards to the tiny fishing community of San Vito, where our Backroads leaders, Lesley and BethAnne, had assembled a picnic at the edge of the Adriatic.

We lunched on bean salad with tuna, dried beef with arugula, caprese salad, shaved parmesan drizzled with honey, cheeses and freshly baked bread. The highlight, though, was a heavenly eggplant carpaccio drizzled with local olive oil, which I discovered in the Giselda cafe when I went searching for a restroom.

Our group had arrived at Melograno the night before and kicked off our adventure with a dinner of local specialties. The appetizer, fresh fava beans pureed with

## What to drink with your pasta

With the possible exception of Sicily, Puglia produces more wine than any other region in Italy. In the past, much of it was shipped to other parts of Italy to be blended with better-known wines. However, in recent years Pugliese wines with names like primitivo, verdeca and negroamaro have gained in popularity throughout the world.

A Mano wines is a young company run by an Italian woman and a California winemaker. Mark and Elvezia Shannon hosted a tasting of their wines for our biking group at Il Melograno. A Mano primitivo – a

wild greens, potatoes and olive oil, is a local favorite that shows up on almost every menu in the area.

We also got our first taste of handmade orecchiette, the tiny ear-shaped pasta that's a staple of Pugliese kitchens.

At Melograno, the ears were sauced simply with cauliflower rosettes sauteed with garlic and tomatoes, then topped with fresh basil, a local cheese similar to ricotta salata and a drizzle of dark green olive oil from the hotel's trees.

dark, reddish-purple wine with many of the bright, berry-like flavor characteristics of a California zinfandel – is a good match for boldly flavored foods, including Pugliese pasta dishes. It's available for about \$10 at Beverages & More and Jonathan's La Jolla.

– MAUREEN CLANCY

On this night we dined at Il Melograno's sister hotel, the waterfront La Peschiera. The menu included a delicious swordfish gratin on a bed of grilled peppers, and tuna baked in an aromatic herb crust. But I fell in love with the fragile pasta “olive leaves” that were sauced with sauteed shrimp, shredded zucchini, garlic, cherry tomatoes and a confetti of mint and basil.

## Day two

The local dogs eyed us curiously — why would anyone want to leave this place? — as we rolled through Melograno's gates in the morning, bound for the hamlet of Barsento, 30 miles away. Following roads framed by palms and low stone walls, we headed into the Val d'Itria, a valley dotted with ancient olive groves. Puglia is the largest olive oil producer in Italy, and local cooks use the green-gold liquid lavishly.

Lunch was in the magical town of Locorotondo. Circular in structure, with tiers of whitewashed buildings, the gleaming village is known for its white wines. They are light and low in alcohol with a delicate fruitiness that accompanies food well.

In the afternoon, we rode through the land of the trulli. An annual carnival was in progress in the town of Alberobello, so we walked our bikes through the crowd and stopped to enjoy people-watching and gelato.

Before dinner at our hotel – the Masseria Fortificata I Monti, a sprawling estate with 16th-century farm buildings – we sipped local wine and watched a demonstration of mozzarella-making by a master who took great pride in the X-rated shapes he could create with the fresh cheese.



They don't make farmhouses like this anymore. At I Monti outside of Alberobello, we dined on more than 20 kinds of antipasti and pasta shaped like olive leaves.

Dinner, served in a vast, vaulted stone room, started with an antipasti table featuring more than 20 items that tasted as good as they looked. Wedges of grilled radicchio topped with a tear drop of creamy burrata cheese followed. Olive-leaf pasta, made on the premises, appeared to be in a simple tomato sauce. However, we were pleasantly surprised each time we bit into a soft, creamy cube of sauteed eggplant.

### Day three

At breakfast, our guides promised a day to “crank it up a notch.” That translated into mostly flat roads through farmland, with more sheep than cars on our radar screen.

Dinner was “on our own.” Some members of the group opted for the Trullo d'Oro, an elegant restaurant set in five connected trulli. The rest of us headed for a casual pizzeria where we shared salads, thin-crust pizzas and pasta dishes in different sauces: lamb ragout; chick-pea sauce with onions, garlic and pepperoncini; spaghetti with capers, olives and anchovies; and orecchiette with broccoli rabe and red pepper flakes.

### Day four

I hate to skip over the picturesque valleys we encountered, or the hundreds of trulli spiffed up with pastel shutters, or our joy in arriving at the chic, five-star Masseria San Domenico where we would spend two nights. But the day's real highlight was dinner – a lavish but unfussy 10-course affair at Masseria Il Frantoio, a farm estate a short van ride from San Domenico.

Il Frantoio, owned by Armando and Rosalba Balestrazzi, is the kind of operation that makes aging baby-boomers want to rush right out and retire. The 150-acre estate is covered with ancient olive groves, fruit orchards, flowers and vegetable gardens. There's an old stone farm house with eight guest rooms and another, dating from the 1500s, that houses the restaurant and kitchen.

Armando oversees the inn and production of the jams, pickled vegetables, cheeses and dessert wines that are made at the estate. Rosalba presides over an all-woman kitchen that creates a set menu each night, using, for the most part, produce and meats raised on the farm.

Armando's supreme happiness with his life was obvious when he



Legend has it these mortar-free stone dwellings, called trulli, were designed to be quickly dismantled when tax authorities were in the area. When they left, locals rebuilt the houses.

greeted our group and gave us a sunset tour of the property.

At dinner, we were enchanted with Rosalba's cooking from the first bite of "fried bread pasta." The unique noodles are made from bread dough that's allowed to rise; they're then fried in extra virgin olive oil and sauced with fresh tomatoes and herbs. A little cake of zucchini, zucchini blossoms and green peppers impressed, too.

But it was Rosalba's rendition of the beloved fava bean puree, whipped with wild chicory greens and served with homemade bread, that rendered our boisterous group almost speechless. A marinated white eggplant ragout with pine nuts, and roasted lamb with potatoes were terrific, too. And a pasta shaped like Boston-style hot dog buns stole the show with its sauce of sauteed cauliflower, nutty bread crumbs and fried almonds.

## Day five

It wasn't easy to get the group rolling in the morning, as many were tempted to stay at the glorious Masseria San Domenico. The property, a series of white-washed buildings on grounds dotted with a swimming pool and waterfalls, dates to the 15th century, when it was a stronghold for the Knights of Malta.

But Ostuni, known as the "White City," beckoned, as did another gourmet picnic and a tour of the olive oil operation at Abbazia San Lorenzo.

The last dinner of the trip was served in San Domenico's vaulted, candle-lit dining room, which housed an olive press in the 1700s. Our last bites of Pugliese specialties tasted better than ever. Local seafood shone in three preparations – swordfish on a red pepper risotto, sea bass in a potato crust and prawns with black and green olives.

But it was the pasta dish – homemade orecchiette with turnip tops and cherry tomatoes from the hotel's gardens – that made me swear I would visit Puglia again soon.

## RECIPES FROM PUGLIA

### Foglie Di Ulivo With Shrimp, Zucchini and Cacioricotta Cheese

**4 servings**

**1 garlic clove, minced**

**5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil (divided use)**

**1/2 pound shrimp, peeled and deveined**

**1/4 cup warm brandy**

**1 cup halved cherry tomatoes**

**1 zucchini, shredded**

**1 pound olive leaf-shaped pasta or farfalle or orecchiette**

**1 cup grated cacioricotta cheese or ricotta salata cheese**

In a saute pan, saute garlic with 3 tablespoons olive oil. Add the shrimp and saute for a couple of minutes. Remove pan from flame, add warm brandy and light with a match. Return pan to heat, shaking gently until flame dies out. Add tomatoes and cook for a few minutes.

In a smaller pan, saute zucchini with 1 tablespoon olive oil over moderately high heat for 2 or 3 minutes. Add to shrimp.

Cook pasta in a big pot of salted water until it is al dente, according to package directions. Drain and add pasta to pan with shrimp mixture. Stir. Sprinkle pasta with cheese and drizzle with remaining tablespoon of olive oil before serving.

*(Adapted from La Peschiera, Monopoli, Italy.)*

## **Pasta With Cauliflower, Pine Nuts and Raisins**

**4 servings**

**2 heads cauliflower, broken into florettes**

**2 medium onions, chopped**

**1/4 to 1/3 cup olive oil, plus more for bread crumbs**

**6 small anchovy fillets**

**1/3 cup pine nuts**

**1/3 cup raisins, plumped in warm water for 10 minutes**

**Salt, to taste**

**Freshly ground black pepper**

**3/4 cup dry bread crumbs**

**1 pound spaghetti or preferred pasta shape**

In a saucepan, cook cauliflower in boiling salted water to cover until fork tender, about 10 minutes. Drain cauliflower, reserving cooking water for later use.

Heat olive oil in large saute pan over medium-high heat, and saute onion until soft and golden brown. Add the anchovies and mash them.

Add the pine nuts and raisins, and stir. Add the cauliflower, with enough of the reserved water to keep the sauce from being dry. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and remove from heat.

While sauce cooks, heat a saute pan, add bread crumbs and start to brown them. Do not leave them unattended; they burn very easily. As crumbs begin to brown, add a bit of olive oil and continue to stir. When they achieve desired color and toasty texture, remove from heat.

Meanwhile, cook pasta in boiling salted water, following package directions, until al dente. Drain. Gently toss with half of the cauliflower sauce. Place on plates, top with remaining sauce and toasted bread crumbs.

(From [www.italianfood.about.com](http://www.italianfood.about.com).)

## **Cavatelli With Broccolini**

**4 servings**

**1 pound cavatelli pasta (or fusilli or farfalle)**

**1 medium yellow onion**

**3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling**

**1 bunch of broccolini or broccoli raab, cut into 2-inch lengths (see note)**

**3 or 4 small, salted anchovies**

**1 tablespoon capers, drained**

**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

In a large pot, bring 5 quarts of water with salt to a boil. Slice the onion very thin. Heat 3 tablespoons olive oil in a large saute pan over medium-high heat. Add the onions, reduce heat slightly and let cook for 8 to 10 minutes, until onions develop a golden brown color.

When water comes to a boil, cook the pasta according to package directions. When there are 3 minutes cooking time remaining, add broccolini to boiling pasta water. At the same time, add the anchovies and capers to the caramelized onions with 2 tablespoons of water. Continue to cook until the anchovies begin to break up. When the pasta and broccolini are al dente, drain, reserving 1 cup of the pasta water.

Add the pasta to the onion-anchovy-caper mixture. Lightly toss together, drizzle with olive oil, and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper. If the sauce seems too dry, add some of the reserved pasta water.

Note: At Il Frantoio, this dish is also made with cauliflower.

*(Adapted from Il Frantoio, Ostuni, Italy.)*

## **Orecchiette With Fresh Tomato Sauce, Cacioricotta Cheese and Basil**

**4 servings**

**1 pound ripe red tomatoes**

**5 tablespoons cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil (divided use)**

**1 garlic clove, minced**

**Salt**

**1 pound fresh orecchiette (ear-shaped pasta) or farfalle**

**1 bunch basil, leaves stacked and sliced thin**

**1/2 cup grated cacioricotta cheese or ricotta salata cheese**

Bring a pot of water to a boil. Plunge the tomatoes in the boiling water for 30 seconds, then peel, de-seed and chop coarsely. Set tomatoes aside.

In a medium-size saute pan, heat 4 tablespoons of olive oil and saute the garlic. Add the chopped tomatoes and salt to taste, and cook for 10 minutes.

In the meantime, boil the pasta in salted water according to the package directions and drain. Add the pasta to the saute pan with the tomatoes and stir until the pasta is well covered with sauce.

Sprinkle the pasta with the shredded basil and a generous amount of cacioricotta cheese, and finish with a tablespoon of extra-virgin olive oil.

*(Adapted from La Peschiera, Monopoli, Italy.)*

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