

THE TRAVEL ISSUE: 54 GREAT RECIPES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

FOOD & WINE

SEPTEMBER 2014

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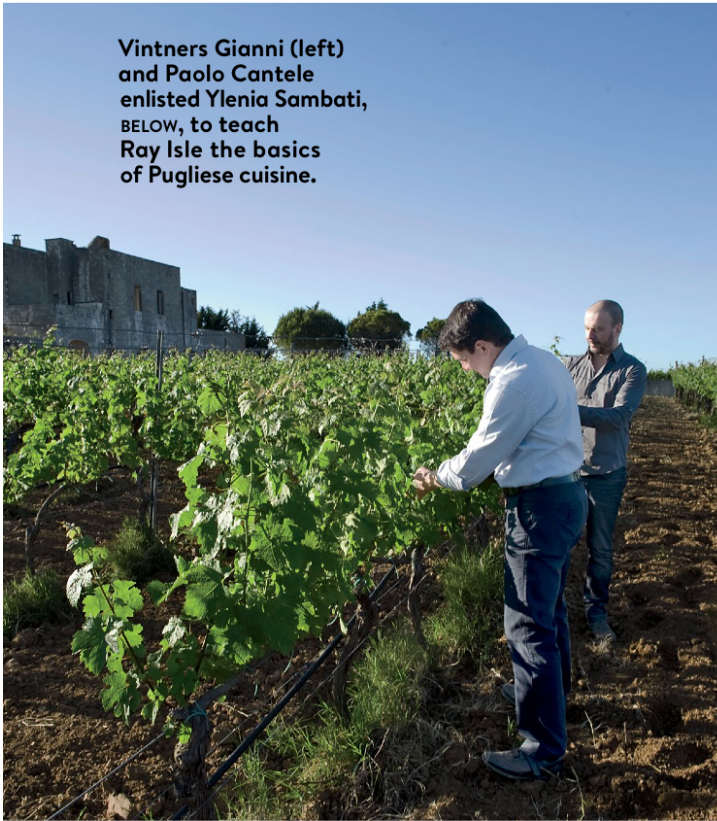
BIG LATIN
FLAVORS
FROM A NEW
STAR CHEF

Chef-in-Residence
David Chang creates
a simple tomato soup
with all the bold
flavors of a Greek salad



TAP THE SCREEN TO
NAVIGATE THE ISSUE

Vintners Gianni (left) and Paolo Cantele enlisted Ylenia Sambati, BELOW, to teach Ray Isle the basics of Pugliese cuisine.



Does Italian Food Really Pair Best with Italian Wine?

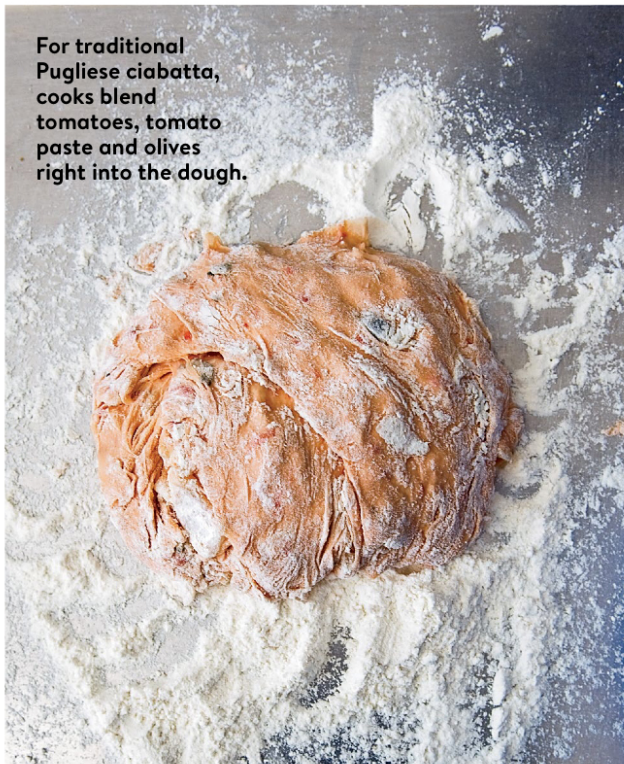
F&W'S **RAY ISLE** FINDS OUT AT A NEW COOKING SCHOOL IN PUGLIA, WHERE HE COMPARES THE BEST LOCAL BOTTLINGS TO A FEW NEW WORLD RINGERS PULLED DISCREETLY FROM HIS SUITCASE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANDREA WYNER**



NOT LONG AGO, I decided to carry a bottle of Australian Pinot Noir 6,087 miles to see how it would pair with a meal in southern Italy. The point of this exercise was to test the classic wine-pairing proposition that “what grows together goes together”—the idea that the wines and food of a region are uniquely compatible. It’s a phrase sommeliers bandy about, and I admit to bandying it about, too. But, I had started to wonder, why? Is there really any reason why Verdeca—a dry, crisp, minerally white from Puglia—should go especially well with the sweet, purple-hued local shrimp? Or, more to the point, why it should go better with those *gamberi* than any other dry, crisp, minerally white from anywhere else in the world would?

Since I am not one to let little things like distance, time or money stand in the way of scientific inquiry, I decided that the best way to answer these questions was to head to Puglia, in the far south of Italy, where the owners of the Cantele winery had



Sambati was born in Puglia, but she studied and worked in France for several years before moving back home, and has kept a cosmopolitan styliness that is somewhat at odds with the *cucina povera* she teaches. In other words, though she arrived wearing Prada sunglasses, she was going to teach me how to cook like a Pugliese grandmother.

Our first dish was *orecchiette con cime di rape*. Sambati dropped a sheaf of bushy green stalks on the countertop. “Pasta with turnip tops,” she said. To my eye, the greens looked a lot like broccoli rabe, but I wasn’t going to argue. We peeled the stringy stalks (“That makes them more digestible,” she explained), chopped them and tossed them into boiling water; we boiled the pasta in that water, too. I poured myself a glass of Cantele’s 2012 Verdecia, which seemed like just the thing for turnip tops, insofar as I knew what a turnip top tasted like (only later I learned that “turnip tops” in Puglia are broccoli rabe).

The tomatoes that I chopped and mixed into the dough for *pizzi Leccese*, a substantial ciabatta local to the city of Lecce, had a juicy, late-summer

intensity, though it was only June. So did the glass of Cantele Primitivo I was drinking. It seemed unthinkable they weren’t meant to go together—except they didn’t “grow” together for long. Tomatoes only arrived in Puglia 500 years ago or so (most likely via Spain), while the Primitivo arrived even more recently, in the mid-1700s (most likely by way of Croatia, where, because the Croatians are inordinately fond of consonants, it’s known as Crljenak). Could tomatoes and wine really “grow” together in just a few centuries? The tomatoes did arrive in Puglia before the wine...

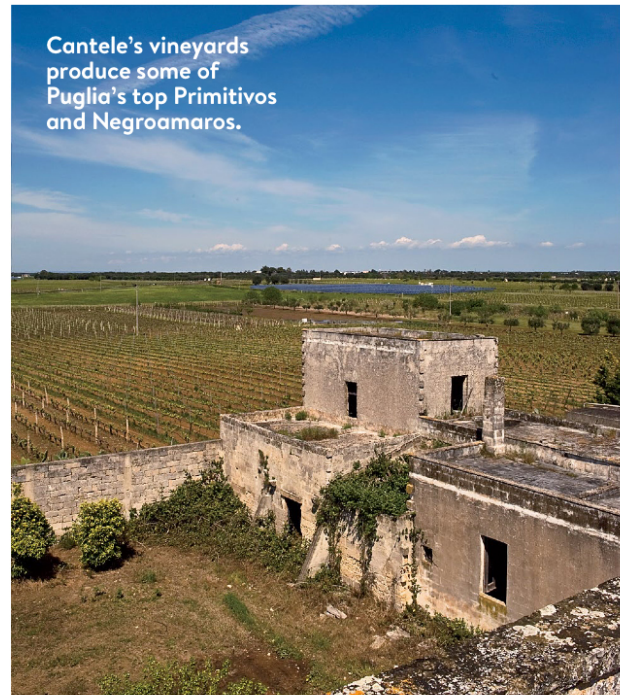
The look Sambati gave me as I explained all this seemed to say, “You think way too much.” I took the knife she handed me and started trimming artichokes. We’d stew them in white wine, with crushed peperoncini and garlic; for the moment, we dropped them into a pot with water and flour to keep them from turning brown. This was a dish to go with white wine, no question (even with the involtini we’d serve them with at lunch). At a restaurant in New York City, that is. In Puglia, what would most people drink with it? “Oh, red

just opened a cooking school called iSensi. I'd learn how to make Pugliese cuisine, and I'd put the question of what wines best went with it to the test by comparing the local wines with a few ringers from my suitcase—two whites from Sonoma, a Napa Cab and that Aussie Pinot Noir.

Cantele is located near the tiny town of Guagnano, in Salento, the southernmost part of Puglia. It's the tip of the heel of the Italian boot, a spit of land some 27 miles wide, surrounded by water: the Ionian Sea to one side, the Adriatic to the other. Light bathes everything, and the flat landscape has a bleached look; the dirt is ruddy or chalky, yet surprisingly fertile. Many things grow here, including olives, peppers, fava beans, chicory, eggplants and, of course, grapes.

Cantele focuses on native Puglian reds, particularly Negroamaro and Primitivo—simple, direct and flavorful wines. The Mediterranean sun gives the wines abundant fruit, with notes that recall blackberries or black plums. Negroamaro, which basically means “black black” (*negro* being Italian for “black,” and *mavro* being Greek for “black”), tends to be the firmer and more tannic of the two. Primitivo, which is the same grape as Zinfandel, tends to be plumper and more overtly fruity. Crucially, they both retain acidity even in hot weather; that, together with Puglia's constant sea breezes moderating temperatures at night, helps keep the local wines from becoming little more than boozy jars of jam.

For decades, most Pugliese wine was sold in bulk to northern Italy. “I remember my grandfather working all day to send wine out of Puglia—these huge trucks taking wine up to make vermouth,” says Giuseppe Cupertino, sommelier for Due Camini at the Borgo Egnazia resort, one of the region's top restaurants. “They'd come to my hometown in November, truck after truck after truck—even late at night. I'd see their lights driving away.” Augusto Cantele was one of the first local winemakers to try to change that situation, and he worked for decades to raise people's awareness



5 PUGLIAN WINES TO TRY

Puglia's whites (like the Verdeca below) tend to be dry, crisp and minerally; its best reds are intensely fruity but balanced.

2012 Li Veli Askos Verdeca (\$18)

2012 Tormaresca Neprica (\$11)

2010 Cantele Salice Salentino Riserva (\$13)

2011 Vino Dei Fratelli Primitivo (\$15)

2008 Agricola Vallone Vigna Flaminio Brindisi (\$20)

of Puglia's extraordinary potential. Now his sons, Paolo and Gianni, are running the Cantele winery with the same ambition.

That lack of awareness can often extend to the food of Puglia as well as the wine. “People come here and expect truffles and butter,” my teacher at iSensi, Ylenia Sambati, told me. “But I tell them, ‘If you have fava beans, why do you need a steak?’ Our diet is 80 percent vegetables, and maybe meat or fish twice a week at most. And you never feel like you are going to explode after a Pugliese meal. It's a cuisine of energy.”



With *orecchiette con cime di rape*, Paolo taste-tests Verdeca against Sonoma Colombard.



ORECCHIETTE WITH BROCCOLI RABE

wine,” Paolo Cantele said instantly when I asked him later. “Of course.”

The truth is, in regions like Puglia, where wine has been one of the local staples for centuries, almost no one cares about wine pairing. When you live in a place that produces an ocean of affordable red wine, you drink whatever’s on hand. But, if you do happen to haul an Australian Pinot halfway around the world, you really ought to open the bottle to find out how it pairs with the food—and to see if the local wines pair better.

A bright and citrusy 2012 Y Rousseau Colombard from Sonoma that I’d brought went perfectly well with the *orecchiette con cime di rape*. If I’d been in a restaurant in New York, I would’ve applauded the sommelier. An Albariño from Spain’s Galician coast or a good Loire Sauvignon Blanc would undoubtedly have tasted fine as well. But the Cantele Verdeca just felt more right. I could get all wine-geeky and say it played better with the bitterness of the greens, but I think I’d rather stick to being human and say that I just liked it more, at that moment, in that place. So, too, with the

Australian Pinot, a wine from a wildly talented young Yarra Valley producer named Mac Forbes. It went quite well with the involtini, thinly sliced beef wrapped around cheese, herbs and parsley (Sambati’s were tidy little rolls while mine looked like I’d tossed them against a wall). But the Negroamaro we opened—juicier and darker, though with similarly fine tannins—just felt more appropriate. Again, in that moment, in that place, I liked it more.

In the US, we can drink everything, from anywhere. In supermarkets, bottles from Germany bump up against bottles from New Zealand, and so on around the globe. We’re overwhelmed with choice. By contrast, there on the terrace at Cantele, everything I had cooked and everything we were drinking (with the exception of my transcontinental additions) had come from just down the road. Maybe believing in an affinity between the wine and food of a region is just romantic foolishness. On the other hand, elusive as those connections may be, I’d rather think they’re the whole point.