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ITALIAN LESSONS

(bean there, done that)

TRAVELING STOMACH GAIL MONAGHAN TRAVELS TO PUGLIA AS A TEACHER AND ENDS UP A STUDENT AT THE FEET OF TWO ITALIAN MASTERS. ➤



Michelin-starred Leonardo Marco delves into his roots to create refined, updated Pugliese dishes. Photo by Stefano Scatà/Grand Tour/Corbis. Opposite: Puglia is a leading producer of olive oil. Photo by de Leval/photocuisine/Corbis.



Leonardo Marco's artichoke flan, re-created in New York by Gail Monaghan, is pureed artichoke hearts topped with burrata and julienned deep-fried artichokes. A tomato coulis brightens the whole. Photo by Carina Salvi.

Last spring, I was part of a six day culinary trip to Puglia, the heel of Italy's boot, organized by London-based Brown & Hudson. We ate spectacular meals all through the region, attended wine tastings and mozzarella makings, and visited a local farm. In addition, we managed to squeeze in walking tours of Lecce, Alberobello, Ostuni, and Martina Franca as well as horseback and bicycle rides for those with energy to spare. And then there were five cooking classes. I taught three Italian classes for the home cooks that included such basics as bruschetta, spicy pasta with shrimp, and almond cake in the kitchens of two hotels, **Il Convento di Santa Maria di Costantinopoli** and **Masseria Torre Coccaro**. But the highlight of the trip turned out to be the classes taught by the Michelin-starred chefs **Teresa Buongiorno** (*Osteria Gia Sotto L'Arco* in Carovigno) and **Leonardo Marco** (*Il Poeta Contadino* in Alberobello), who were generous enough to share their magic. And I was suddenly turned into a student who paid rapt attention as they taught things that would also work perfectly for restaurants.

Akin to spinning straw into gold, the Pugliese—their cuisine dictated by poverty for centuries—consistently turn the most basic and inexpensive ingredients into marvelous, intensely flavorful meals. A good lesson for our times. Buongiorno's version of *fave e cicoria* was the simplest repast of the entire week and yet by far my

favorite. In past eras, the impoverished *contadini* (peasants) ate this—the most famous as well as the most common of Puglia's traditional meatless meals—six days a week. Only at noon on Sundays did they allow themselves the luxury of chicken or rabbit and less frequently that of lamb or pork. Cows were needed for dairy products, and they—along with horses—were only eaten when very old and useless for anything else.

A *fave e cicoria* dinner has as its centerpiece a large platter of dried fava bean puree surrounded by wild chicory—if unavailable, perfectly replaceable by a sauté of bitter greens, spinach, or broccoli raab with garlic. A salad of thinly sliced red onions simply dressed with olive oil and red wine vinegar and a quick sauté of green frying peppers and cherry tomatoes are served alongside. These accompaniments provide a tasty and vibrant contrast to the mild creamy puree and the garlicky, almost overcooked greens and complete a colorful and delicious vegetarian meal even the most stubborn carnivore will devour. Customarily, small bowls of salted almonds, a large basket of seasonal raw vegetables, a cruet of good olive oil—often with the addition of salt and oregano—toasted country bread, and wine are set out on the table before the meal begins. Apulian almonds are famous, and Buongiorno ended the meal with the best almond cookies I have ever tasted—nothing but almonds, sugar, lemon, flour, and eggs—but they were divine.

In accordance with the "waste not, want not" *cucina povera* mentality of their poverty-stricken past, the Pugliese discard nothing. Leftover bread—considered by many to be the best in Italy—is dried in the sun and made into bread crumbs to toss into pasta, fold into cake batters, incorporate into meatballs, and stuff into vegetables. Buongiorno made delicious *polpette*, explaining that Puglia is the only region in Italy where meatballs are prepared as a new dish with fresh ingredients rather than using leftovers. She used her hands to mix 50 percent ground veal seasoned with parsley, garlic, salt, and pepper; 25 percent Parmesan or pecorino or a combination of the two; and 25 percent bread crumbs and water made into a paste; plus raw eggs for moisture and binding. Buongiorno shaped spoonfuls of this mixture into small balls and then dipped each one first in red wine, then into bread crumbs before deep-frying and serving them immediately with a flavorful tomato *ragù*.

Puglia now has the largest olive oil output in all of Italy, and in direct contrast to its impoverished past, the economy is growing rapidly. In their restaurant kitchens, both Buongiorno and Marco have the luxury to experiment and create imaginative new dishes that veer away from the traditional while never losing sight of the region's culinary antecedents.

We cooked several unusual and delicious dishes with Marco at *Il Poeta Contadino*. May is artichoke season in Puglia; Marco made individual artichoke flans for our first course by combining pureed artichoke hearts with whole eggs, egg yolks, and Par-

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Left: Author/cooking teacher Gail Monaghan at work at her stove. Photo by Carina Salvi. Right: The iconic conical rooftops of Puglia are called *trulli*.

mesan before baking in a bain-marie. A bit of extravagance was provided by the small globe of *burrata* atop each unmolded flan. Marco then stewed deep-fried julienned artichoke over the top and drizzled the plates with anchovy oil and a fabulous bright orange tomato coulis made simply by liquifying a huge, very ripe tomato, two-thirds cup of olive oil, two basil leaves, and salt and pepper in a blender. Fabulous. Marco mentioned the versatility of the coulis, seasoned differently depending on its use.

The artichoke flan, a mini meal in itself, was followed by a pasta dish (*carvatelli* in this case, a regional favorite), incorporating tiny cauliflower florets, parsley, and mixed seafood and then served spooned over traditional dried fava bean puree. Again, delicious.

The final course before dessert was six-ounce butterflied pork fillets, filled with smoked *scamorza* cheese, tomato, and oregano, then closed and wrapped in strips of lard to keep them shut during cooking. Marco sautéed the fillets in olive oil infused with rosemary, thyme, and bay leaves and then finished them off in the oven. While the chops were resting, he made a light sauce by cooking a bit of flour with the pan juices before deglazing with red wine.

The food was also sublime at Alistair and Athena McAlpine's Il Convento, where we stayed for the first three nights. Athena's mantra is "always fresh and always in season," and the young chefs, Pierluigi Panico and Emanuela Minonne, complied with a vengeance. Panico's homemade (by his mother) *orecchiette* sauced with a sauté of fresh favas, pancetta, and onions was inspired. His inclusion of a couple of tablespoons of grappa added a soupçon of mystery and elevated the dish. Another of their many specialties was a super quick and easy tiramisù. Somewhat lighter than the standard, and for me even tastier, it's assembled in minutes. First, line a gratin dish with lady fingers dipped in café latte. Then beat together three eggs and a pound of mascarpone with dark rum to taste. Spread this mixture over the lady fingers, and sprinkle instant espresso and lots of dark chocolate shavings over the top. Beyond easy and much better than the sum of its simple parts, it's even better when refrigerated for at least two hours before serving.

This trip reminded me of the importance of travel in trying to grasp the essence of a cuisine. Much of the food we tasted was regional, so site specific that even a simple pastry could be completely different one village away. I wound up learning not just from the Italian chefs but also from Puglia itself—its stark minimal landscape reflected in the dishes themselves, descendants of the *cucina povera* of leaner times. ■