Enjoying Bari Cuisine

STREET FOOD, FAITH AND HISTORY IN THE HEEL OF ITALY'S BOOT

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



RICKSHAW TOUR
Through the Old Town Alleys

PANIFICIO FIORE
Focaccia from a Wood-Fired Oven

BASILICA OF ST. NICOLAS
A Ceiling Decorated in Gold

STREET KITCHEN
Sgagliozze and Fresh Orecchiette

THE HEEL OF ITALY'S BOOT

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From Roman roads to wood-fired focaccia – a rickshaw tour through the flavours of Puglia's capital

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Bari

Puglia rooted in the heel of Italy's boot, is a region less known to tourists than other famous places in the country. Puglia or Apulia, the southernmost peninsula has remained untouched by visitors, with its beautiful coastlines, countryside and vast number of historical monuments from ancient times to the medieval period.

Puglia's kept secrets do not just lie behind layers and layers of history. It is also rich in agricultural products harvested from enormous parklands in green hills. Much of Italy's olive oil (there are over 60,000 olive trees) and large amounts of fruit, vegetables and wheat, are produced in this region. It is one of the most culinary locations in Europe with a considerable range of cuisines.

II



Bari by rickshaw

When my plane was flying over Puglia before landing at Bari's airport, it was easily visible to the naked eye that most areas were flat. The region, which is geographically surrounded by water (the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Ionian Sea to the west,) has been blessed with very mild weather. Its picturesque landscapes are drawn in a very long stretch of coastlines with sandy beaches, rocky bays and steep cliffs. Its forests and marshlands are an ideal habitat for wildlife.

My first glimpse of Puglia driving away from the airport was admittedly unappealing as we pass unkempt industrial units around the airport. But, soon, I was staggered when I passed through the vineyards and olive fields heading towards the old city of Bari.

Bari, the capital of Puglia, had been a stopping point and a gateway into the heart of Europe over centuries. It is full of stories about ancient Greek settlers, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Turks and Spanish, each of which has left their marks in a land amalgamated by eastern and western cultural habits. The old fortified walls protecting the city still stand around the cobbled narrow streets surfaced with stone pavements.

III



The best way to explore the old town is to take a rickshaw tour through the winding alleys. You see a microcosm of the city in one ride. You pass limestone buildings, crowds in the square, children playing in public courtyards and women selling food from the windows of their homes or at street stalls.in The narrow paths venture under high arches and historic buildings and churches gaze over you.

We started our journey along the trendy Corso Cavour in front of VOI Hotel Oriente, a historic building built in 1928 representing the architectural style and opulence of Europe in the early 20th century and which is located near the famous Petruzzelli Theatre. We passed Teatro Marcher and arrived in the Piazza del Ferrarese, a busy square buzzing with old and young people, sitting around on benches, chatting and laughing. In the corner, opposite an old chapel, the remains of an old Roman road which used to connect Rome to the south has been preserved in an open air museum.

IV

Only a short ride away, we visited Piazza Mercantile, an old market place where the pilgrims used to gather to pay taxes, before heading towards the Basilica of St. Nicolas. The Palazzo del Sedile, built around 1543, with its curved architecture overlooking the Piazza, was Bari's Council of Nobles. The Pillar of Justice with a lion sculpture in the corner of the square is a grim reminder of how debtors were tied to the column naked for several days, thus shaming them in public shamed in public. The square is the main hub of the city allowing everyday entertainment and nightlife.

As our guide pedaled his bicycle rickshaw through narrow alleys where no car could pass, he explained to me the culinary habits of Italians in this region, such as eating focaccia bread, a variety of pastas including orecchiette, a small ear shaped flat pasta and a variety of cheeses.



V

Our culinary tour started when we stopped by Panificio Fiore in Strada Palazzo di Citta, a bakery which used to be an ancient church. Behind the counter, there were several different types of breads and biscuits. I saw the old Roman columns decorated with figures of St. Nicolas and other religious icons. The bakery produces focaccia, which is often served a served with olive oil, covered in black olives and with tomato toppings. I just had to try it all as soon as the focaccia emerged from the wood fired oven

We continued our journey passing terraced houses, mansions and small shops in the grey and yellowish stone buildings, the age of which showed because time had worn the stone We went through the highly curved arches of Corte Del Catapano a reminder of when bari was besieged by the Normans, and entered a large courtyard at the back of the Basilica of St Nicolas. The finely designed white facade of the church was striking. The guide explained how the relics of St Nicolas were stolen by a group of sailors from Myra in Turkey and moved to Italy in 1087. The sailors are likely to have been Christians who feared that there would not be any access to the saint's tomb for pilgrimage after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the expansion of Muslim rule. Bulls carried the relics from the harbour to the mainland, but refused to move forward when they reached the present day place of the Basilica. People believed this to be a sign and that here should be the location of a church. At the entrance is engraved the sculptures of two oxen in memory of that event. The statue of St. Nicolas outside the church was a gift from the Russian people, presented by the current leader of Russia, VladimirPutin, to the city of Bari. St. Nicolas who lived in the 4th century became a saint because of his humble life and the many miracles that have been attributed to him.

VI



the ceiling in the church of St Nicolas

Both Catholic and Orthodox Christians believe in St. Nicolas as their patron saint and protector, not only in Bari but also in many other countries. Russians, who have a special devotion to St. Nicolas, visit Bari in large numbers throughout the year.

As I entered, I saw a Catholic church mostly in a simple decor without luxurious artifacts and paintings, yet designed with high columns and curves, and with a beautiful ceiling decorated in gold which was in contrast to the floors and walls. Downstairs in the crypt – which is open to visitors – is where the relics were to be seen.

VII



a street kitchen

We continued our culinary trips over to another square in the centre of Old Bari where a woman was preparing food in the street. She was frying slices of fresh Polenta in rectangular shapes (Sgagliozze), as we arrived. The crispy pieces cost only €1 for six of them. I witnessed how she prepared orecchitte from freshly made pasta.

Dough made from Semolina flour, salt and water, was rolled out on a wooden board to create orechitte. There were hundreds all previously prepared in a metal grill in her stall ready to be cooked. She put them in boiling water and added some vegetables, tomatoes, garlic and olive oil to cook a tasty and inexpensive food. Street food is very common in Bari and is popular with passers-by who wish to have a quick meal after a long, hard day.

VIII



preparing pasta for the street kitchen

Pasta is one of the main food items for Italians and has been over centuries. With the spread of Italian cuisine across the world it would be hard to find anywhere where pasta is unknown. When I was researching Italian cuisine, I came across notes from a book by Oretta Zanini De Vita, author of the Encyclopedia of Pasta. She wrote in her book that Muslims brought dried pasta made with durum wheat after conquering Sicily in the beginning of the 9th Century, and – through their influence – spread it across other regions of Italy.

She has also disclaimed legends that Marco Polo introduced noodles into Italy after returning from his trip in China. The origin of pasta and who first cultivated durum wheat, processed it into dough and created pasta is lost in the mists of time but probably goes back over 10,000 years.

My short visit to Bari was only a glimpse of Puglia, discovering its captivating culture, tradition and enjoying the local food. Now I need to explore the other parts of Puglia and the differeing cuisines each area seems to have.

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