

ITALY

SURPRISING

Salento

IN PUGLIA'S
SOUTHERN
PENINSULA, THE
WINES OF SALICE
SALENTINO DOC
AND SALENTO
IGT ARE BEING
REVITALIZED

by Laura Donadoni

When one thinks of southern Italy, they often envision endless miles of coastline, olive groves as far as the eye can see, and clusters of beautiful Baroque architecture. Salento—the southern, peninsular part of the region of Puglia (the heel of the Italian boot) that encompasses cities like Lecce, Brindisi, and Taranto—offers these attributes while also serving as a haven for exquisite regional foods and wines.

The area's lush and fertile soil allows for the production of some of the finest Italian wines, including those from the region's most distinguished appellation, Salice Salentino DOC. Salento has a storied history of winemaking that dates back to roughly the sixth century B.C., when it's estimated that Negroamaro grapes were first introduced in the region (the variety, which translates to "black and bitter," was originally called *niuru maru* in the local dialect). Much of the influence in the Salento region can be traced back to the Greeks, including the distinctive architecture and regional dialect, which even today help to retain a taste of ancient Greece in Italy.

Surrounded by both the Adriatic and Ionian seas, Salento has a warm and dry climate that shortens the length of time grapes need to reach full maturation. Primitivo grapes, for example, need even less time to mature, as they ripen and reach their desired sweetness more quickly than other varieties. In turn, the wine is better enjoyed with less aging.

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Much of the Salento region's wine culture is still being adapted and revitalized even today, as producers had often previously aimed for higher quantity rather than quality. While roughly 25 wines in the overall Puglia region have met DOC standards, only about 2 percent of the wine produced in Salento earns this status. Today, however, wineries are attempting to redevelop traditional methods of production in a way that helps the wines of Salento garner a more prestigious reputation.

Salice Salentino DOC

This full-bodied expression is the best-known DOC wine in the Salento peninsula. While it's most commonly found in the form of red wine, it can also be produced as a rosé, white, dessert, or sparkling wine, though these are rare to find. Some wineries also produce a Riserva version aged for a minimum of 24 months.

Interest in Italy's southern-region wines, including those from the Salice Salentino DOC, increased in the 1980s and 1990s—coinciding with a rise in winemakers' attention to detail and consistency in following their respective viticultural methods.

Consorzio di Tutela of Salice Salentino, the local wine producers' association, is currently focused on promoting this new wave of Salento winemaking. "Salento's producers worked hard in the last ten to 15 years to improve their production techniques," explains Consorzio President Damiano Reale. "Many of them chose indigenous varieties over the international ones, lowered the yields per hectare, and focused on quality over quantity. Today we can witness the results: Salento wines are more refined, elegant, and ready to gain the spotlight on the international wine scene."

Salice Salentino DOC Rosso (red) wine almost exclusively comprises Negroamaro grapes, with a minimum of 80 percent required. However, DOC regulations allow for a 20 percent addition of Malvasia Nera grapes, which enhance aromatics while lessening the tannic qualities of a given wine.

The Rosato versions of Salice Salentino wines require a minimal presence of 75 percent Negroamaro, whereas the monovarietal Salice Salentino Negroamaro and Negroamaro Rosato wines require minimums of 90 and 85 percent Negroamaro, respectively. Salice Salentino Bianco (white) wines, meanwhile, require 70 percent Chardonnay for the Bianco wines and 85 percent of the respective dominant grape for each of the monovarietal Chardonnay, Fiano, and Pinot Bianco wines.

Rosé Is Synonymous with Salento

Salento is also the motherland of non-DOC Rosato, which is sold under the Salento IGT. Best known for being the first Rosato bottled in Italy and exported to the United States after World War II, Rosato from Salento is typically a rosé made from about 90 percent Negroamaro grapes and 10 percent Malvasia Nera grapes. The Leone de Castris Winery was the first to bottle and export Rosato to the U.S. and is known around the world for its Five Roses Rosato label.

Salento's Rosato wines tend to have a smooth finish, bright acidity, and a touch of minerality; as a result, they provide a refreshing way to beat the heat of southern Italy during the summer months. Salento is also one of the few regions in Italy to produce rosé on a significant level, so much so that Italian rosés are typically associated with the area. ■■

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Damiano Reale serves as the President of Consorzio di Tutela of Salice Salentino.

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Meet Laura Donadoni

Laura Donadoni is an Italian wine journalist and blogger based in San Diego, California. She is the founder of *The Italian Wine Girl* blog and La Com Wine Agency, a licensed importing company and a strategic PR and communications firm focused on the wine industry.

A Certified Sommelier with the North American Sommelier Association and the World Sommelier Association, a Certified Wine Educator, and WSET Level Three Advanced Sommelier, Donadoni is one of just a few Vinitaly International Italian Wine Ambassadors in the world. In addition, she's an Italian and Spanish Wine Specialist, a member of the Los Angeles Wine Writers Association, and the Director of the Wine Education Program at the Pacific National Food and Beverage Museum in Los Angeles.