

The Ancient Allure of Puglia

By Taiye Selasi Sept. 21, 2015



The lighthouse of Capo d'Otranto, Italy's easternmost point, where the Ionian and Adriatic Seas meet. Bert Teunissen

The slow-paced villages that make up Salento boast a stunning landscape, deep-blue seas, centuries of history — and are blissfully isolated from the 21st century.

AT THE START of the Italian film director Edoardo Winspeare's "[Quiet Bliss](#)," a world-weary woman moves her family to live in an olive grove. Italy's enduring recession has brought the family to its knees and, forced to close their textile factory, they've come to work the land. Here — amid the cream of stone, the green of olive, the blue of sea — the women discover the ancient grace of agricultural Salento, long the humblest region within Puglia, the rough-hewn, rocky area in the country's south. If the premise seems pat, the film is exquisite: visually arresting, emotionally raw. Minutes into meeting its director, I understand why.

"I'm obsessed with this place," Winspeare tells me, his gray-blue eyes alight. We are sitting in the dining room of his palazzo in Depressa, a Salentine village 10 minutes from the seaside, where his family has lived for generations. The Winspeare home is the first of several I'll visit over the

next few days as I make my way through the tip of the stiletto heel of the Italian boot, a necklace of sparkling villages strung along the limestone peninsula dividing the Adriatic and Ionian seas.

Salento is having its day, exalted as one of Italy's last undiscovered gems. In reality, it has been so unendingly trafficked — by Romans, Normans, Germans and more — that to call Salento undiscovered demands a rather narrow view of history. Gemlike, yes: a dazzling display of nature's way with color. But the region is more precisely described as many gems, not one. There's a reason Italians call Puglia "le Puglie," in the plural. Just as there are many Puglias, of which Salento is one, there are also many Salentos: small hamlets spread over hundreds of miles. From the Baroque city of Lecce, known as the Florence of the South, to southernmost Santa Maria di Leuca, which is lapped by a Caribbean-like sea, to the inland Grottaglie, with its vineyards and ceramics, Salento is vast and various.

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"In the 18th century, my father's family were British Catholics — there's been a lot of mixing since then," Winspeare says, gesturing to their portraits as we pass them in a hall. This house is plainly a family home, impressively grand but lived in, filled with portraits, porcelain, plants — and people speaking French and English.

His 5-year-old daughter points to one of the portraits. "That's my great-grandfather," she tells me in Italian.

"No, darling," Winspeare says, and to me: "That's Davide Winspeare, our most famous relative. He wrote 'The History of Feudal Abuses,' in 1811, a treatise arguing for the abolishment of the title system — for which they offered him a title."

"Did he accept it?"

“Of course he did.” Winspeare laughs that particular laugh I’ve come to associate with Italy: at once joyful and cynical, weary and light, a wordless “nobody’s perfect.”

When I ask him what he considers himself — Italian? — he laughs again.

“To be Italian is one thing. To be Salentino is something else. I’m Salentino. Cosmopolitan Salentino.”

IN A SENSE, the term is redundant. I spent two years in Rome and never encountered the kind of cosmopolitanism that I observe, at all levels of society, in two days in Salento. Winspeare, the son of an Italian baron and Liechtensteiner princess, is exceptional in his lineage, but the norm is not so different; the history of Salento is one of hybridity.

In brief: Ancient Salento belonged to Magna Graecia, that part of southern Italy settled by the Greeks. Its original inhabitants were Messapii, an Indo-European people later called Salentini. The Messapii were not of Greek origin — historians tie them to Illyria, of “Twelfth Night” fame — but associated with the Hellenics to create a vibrant culture. When the Romans conquered Messapia, they admired the local art: the sculpture and painting. With the fall of the Roman Empire came successive waves of conquerors: Byzantines, Normans, Swabians, Angevins, Aragoneses, the Spanish, Ottoman Turks. When Italy was unified in the mid-to-late 19th century, the region was plunged into poverty. For decades, Salento witnessed a massive migration. But unlike the Sicilians and Neapolitans who settled permanently in America, many Salentini returned after World War II.

What makes Salento unique is the living presence of this history: from its denizens’ contrasting North African and Northern European phenotypes to the Greek dialect still spoken in its villages. In one such — Calimera — stands a Greek statue. Inscribed in the stone are the words “Zeni sù en ise ettù sti Kalimera,” meaning, “You are not a stranger here in Calimera.”

Summer in Salento

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Bert Teunissen

It is this easy blending of cultures, more than its hotels or restaurants, that has made Salento so attractive to its most recent arrivals: designers and filmmakers and artists and authors (not to mention the odd farmer). Andrea del Genio is a Neapolitan who inherited a working farm from his Puglian grandmother. “I thought, ‘I’ll just go there for 15 days every year,’” he says. “I’ve been here 15 years so far.” From under a massive fig tree, we gaze out at his land: Here, the grapes may be grown for wine, but they’re still the sweetest I’ve ever tasted. Lunch is friselle, a local dish made entirely with ingredients from the farm: wheat, tomatoes, olive oil. “Farm-to-table eating? Back-to-nature living? It’s all very chic right now,” he says. “But the Salentini have been living this way for centuries.” When I ask whether he thinks tourists will change Salento, he laughs. “More likely Salento will change them. Many come. But only some go home.”

The region is not picture-perfect; it doesn't attract perfectionists. Though its various towns are lovely, one needs a car to travel between them, the roads lined with scraggly farmland and industrial warehouses. One of its primary crops — olives — grows in harsh conditions; in place of the manicured hills of Tuscany, arid groves stretch across the peninsula. Donkeys roamed the unpaved street outside my B&B. And yet here, in Salento, I found things I've yet to see elsewhere in Italy: a rural simplicity, an unconditional warmth, true open-mindedness. I was reminded of Ghana and India, two countries I visit every year, and where, in certain farming towns, one finds the same worldly-wise sense of innocence. The fashion crowd, forever searching for the newest thing, may have fallen in love with Salento—but these arrivées are nothing new to the Salentines.

WINSPEARE FINDS ME a driver, Amerigo Russo, a chatty handyman who the director cast in "Quiet Bliss," and we head toward the village of Melpignano. In the piazza, old men sit in plastic chairs, chatting, shaded by an 18th-century church. Alongside sits Stefano Aluffi-Pentini's palazzo, hidden behind a low door.

"In the 16th century this was a market," says [Aluffi-Pentini](#), an art historian and expert in European palazzi who's from Rome, gesturing with one hand to the piazza while serving rosé with the other. The wine, Castel di Salve, is made by Francesco Winspeare, Edoardo's brother (and co-owner, with the director Taylor Hackford, of a wine bar in nearby Tricase). From the terrace, one can all but touch the arcades. "Merchants from the kingdom of Naples signed their contracts there."

Coming from Rome, I know what it is to live with history. But here, he says, history lives with him. "Salento is a place that still belongs to the daily life of its inhabitants. Many cities in Italy are better preserved, but overrun with tourists. I prefer Salento to Capri. Here the sea is not the focus. Did Edoardo tell you the story? He knows an old woman who's never seen the sea. This land was attacked by pirates; the sea was dangerous. Life here happens inland."

Indeed, of all the towns I visit, only Otranto has a classic beach: a veritable

Miami compared to tiny Depressa and Melpignano. Here, at their beach club, I find the brother-and-sister duo of Carlo and Rita Capasa, two thirds of the threesome behind [Costume National](#). Russo has driven me here from the rockier coast of Tricase Porto, where I stopped to chat with the graphic artist Anna Guarini. Villa Guarini, like the Winspeares' palazzo, is as relaxed as it is regal: Guarini's adult children, dog Léon and swimsuit-clad boyfriend pass through. Guarini herself — impeccably elegant — grew up in this house, spent decades in Paris and recently moved to Rome.

“My mother always spoke of Villa Guarini,” Russo tells me as we're parking. Once inside, he greets Guarini deferentially, mentioning that his mother once worked for her parents. She in turn greets him warmly, asking, “Who is your mother?” He tells her. “But of course!” she cries. “You're Lucia's son. How is your aunt Cesarina?”

It isn't every lady that remembers the names of her household staff's relations — but, as Guarini explains, the Salentino aristocracy is peculiar. “Historically, the landowners had very intimate relationships with the workers. As a girl, I went to public school with all the other children.” Though she lives in Rome, Guarini spends months at a time in Tricase Porto. The upside of the sea's downplayed role is that summer is not the season: One can live here all year long, and some adventurous people do.

That, of course, is not to say that the sea is not spectacular. I'm enthralled by it, a swath of azure, as we climb the coast to Otranto en route to the Capasas for dinner. Dressed all in white, a long white braid down her back, Signora Capasa, the matriarch of the family, is impossibly chic. She is relaxing by the water with Carlo and Rita when we arrive (their middle brother, the designer Ennio, has returned to Milan). “People often ask how a family from Salento creates such minimal clothes,” Carlo says. “They imagine southern Italy as baroque, as over the top. But it can also be quite simple. Our parents were always minimal.”

The Capasa siblings grew up in Lecce, that cream-walled dream of a city, and spent their vacations in Otranto, where their parents were born. Though neither their mother nor father spoke French nor English, they

both traveled often, fascinated by the fashions coming out of Paris and London. For their children, an international clothing line renowned for its minimal aesthetic is classically Salentine. “We grew up in Lecce,” Carlo continues. “It’s baroque, but minimalist baroque. All one color, all one stone. International, minimal. These are our roots.”

IT IS THIS MIXTURE — of minimalism and multiculturalism — that enchants Olga of Greece. Seven years ago the Greek princess, raised in Paris and New York, and her Italian husband, Prince Aimone of Savoy-Aosta, bought a crumbling palazzo in Giuggianello. “His being Italian, my being Greek, Salento is the perfect place to be both,” she says, dispatching their three children to the pool: one of the only finished sections of the compound. I’ve come to visit their three-wing palazzo, which is undergoing a slow and deliberate renovation; we sip coffee in a parlor cluttered with toys and lined with original editions of the Enciclopedia Treccani (I’m thrilled to find Davide Winspeare’s name among the brittle pages). The windows and doors have yet to arrive but the frescoes are ready for viewing: a gorgeous display of pastel pinks and peeling sea-foam greens. Having studied architecture at Columbia, Olga adores Salento’s villas.

After we finish our coffee, she takes me to the roof. Seen from here, it could be Greece or even Morocco: the desert-like landscape, the low white houses, the olive groves, a single goat. Like Salento itself, the view is utterly captivating — quiet, unchanged by time, unspoiled by perfection.

“You can look all you want, but you don’t find houses like this anywhere else. There are beautiful houses in Greece, but not in this style. Take our facade. It’s simple, minimal, protected.”

Much like life in Salento itself.