

Region: Apulia / Puglia (Italian "poo-lia")

Country: Italy

Population: 4 million

Capital: Bari

Making up the heel of Italy's boot, Puglia's immense plains and rolling hills are one of Europe's great agricultural areas. The region is Italy's biggest olive oil producer (40% total output), and it produces most of the hard durum wheat used to make its pasta.

Historically, Puglia was a poor region that could not afford much meat so the local diet was made up of lots of fresh vegetables, beans, pasta and fish. Artichokes, fave beans, zucchini, eggplants, peppers, various greens and durum wheat are typical local produce. Puglian cuisine derives from "cucina povera" – local folks make use of whatever ingredients harvested from the land, locally reared, or caught in the sea. Today, Puglia is a "vegetarian nirvana" – the antipasti and a pasta dish are plenty, one won't miss the *secondo*, which is usually fish or meat.

In this region, pasta is made with local durum wheat flour, water and salt. Eggs, once considered a luxury, are not used in traditional Puglian pasta-making. The locals pride themselves on their *orecchiette*, little ear-shaped shells that are still produced by hand on a daily basis by many *signore*.

Puglian's rocky interior is ideal for sheep-farming so it's not surprising that the meat of choice is lamb. Famous sheep's milk cheeses produced here are pecorinos and ricottas. With a coastline longer than any region in mainland Italy, visitors will find fabulous seafood wherever they go.

Until recently, Puglia was southern Italy's best-kept secret – it was the most visited region in summer of 2014. With a cuisine inspired by the natural bounty of the land and sea, it is not difficult to see why!



(Image credit: Wikipedia)