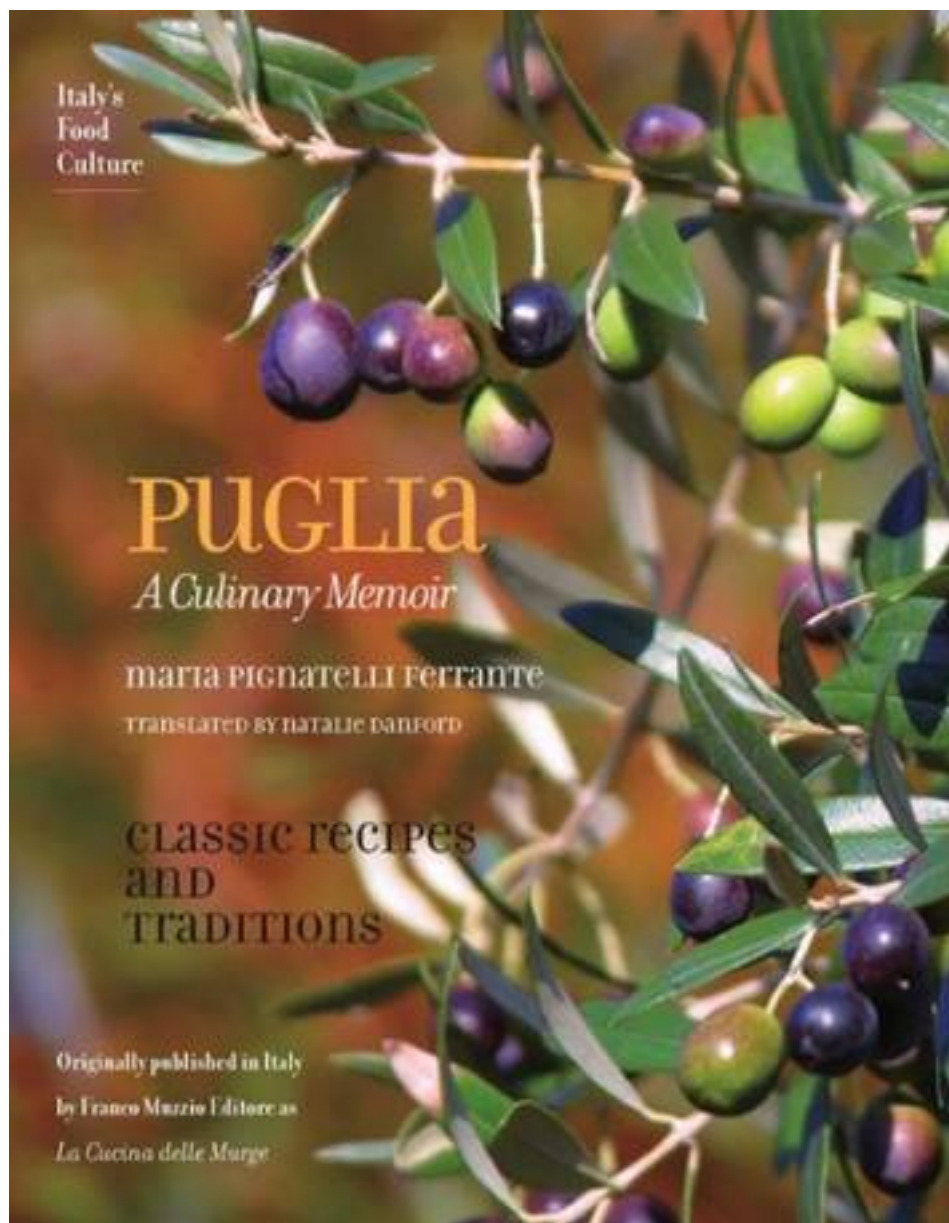




Two New Cookbooks Capture the Flavors of Puglia and Sicily

Michele Scicolone (August 13, 2010)



Two Italian cookbooks published in English translation capture the colors and flavors of Puglia and Sicily. They are part of a new culinary series from Oronzo Editions.

Cookbooks are a passion of mine -- I guess that's why I wrote 16 of them. I love reading the stories



and trying the recipes and I always learn something new. So when two Italian regional cookbooks published by [Oronzo Editions](#) [2] came in the mail, I couldn't wait to have a look.

The first book is [Puglia, A Culinary Memoir](#) [3] written by Maria Pignatelli Ferrante and originally published in Italian in 1995. Signora Ferrante focused on the household customs and traditions of the years following WWII, opening a window on life in Puglia when, as Signora Ferrante says, the man of the house did "the grocery and food shopping, as it was...considered unseemly for a woman to visit a butcher or market."

While the men were out shopping, or working in the fields, the women stayed home to take care of the household chores. Anyone who thinks doing the laundry today is a chore should read Ferrante's detailed description of laundry day. The clothes and linens were washed by hand and it took 3 women to iron a sheet with *lu scarfalietto*, a coal heated iron, and plenty of skill to avoid burning it and themselves. During the summer and fall, the women were kept busy preparing pickles, tomato paste, sauces, dried vegetables and legumes for the family to eat during the winter months.

Though this portrait of everyday life is intriguing, it's the recipes that make a cookbook useful. Here this book excels. As noted in the Foreword, the editors have adapted the recipes only so far as to reflect "ingredient amounts, times and temperatures of foods that were once cooked on the family hearth" to today's modern appliances and cooking techniques, so the recipes are appealing and easy to follow.

The chapter on "Primi Piatti" begins with an in-depth discussion of wheat and how it is milled, then a description of orecchiette. Ferrante does not sound hopeful about your success in following her instructions for making Puglia's iconic pasta, however, when she states "that if you were not born in Puglia and have never lived there, it will be difficult for you to get from the stage where the pasta dough is a simple roll" to the characteristic dimple-shaped pieces.

Not to worry, if your results are less than satisfactory, you can always send the man of the house out to buy some, and Signora Ferrante goes on to give 9 different recipes featuring orecchiette. The first, for those who doubt that Italians eat pasta and meatballs together, is Orecchiette with Meatballs. No bigger than a hazelnut, the tiny veal and pork meatballs simmer in a wine and tomato sauce spiked with pecorino. Later, there is a recipe for Reheated Orecchiette, sauced leftovers fried in olive oil so that they are crispy and brown and dusted with more pecorino. Beyond orecchiette, she includes recipes for Turkey Lasagna, Spaghetti with Leeks, Maccheroni Timbale, and so many others I can't wait to try.

Legumes are at the heart of the Pugliese cucina povera, and there are many recipes to choose from, such as a simple chickpea puree topped with fried bread croutons, bean soups, and pasta with beans. Early fall would be a good time of year to make some of the *tielle*, layered casseroles of vegetables or seafood, such as the Mother-in-Law's Casserole of potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants and peppers baked with mozzarella and topped with bread crumbs.

There are a few recipes I will probably never get around to, like those made with horsemeat, or *lampascioni*, wild hyacinth bulbs, but this book is an intriguing look into a by-gone time in Puglia filled with simple recipes that are as good today as they were back then.

Giuseppe Coria, the author of [Sicily, Culinary Crossroads](#) [4], is described as a "legendary gastronome, folklorist, vintner and the author of 10 cookbooks." In his preface, which is accompanied by a useful "gastronomic map" referencing places mentioned in the recipes, Coria promises that he has included only "exemplary" recipes that should be rescued from forgetfulness and oblivion.

He begins with an in-depth culinary history of Sicily, which readers will find helpful in understanding the unique nature of Sicilian cooking and why it differs from the rest of Italy. The chapters are arranged according to 4 of the 9 provinces of Sicily on the island's east coast. This makes sense if you keep in mind that the original title of the book was *La Cucina della Sicilia Orientale* (The Cooking of Eastern Sicily).



The book is packed with historical and cultural information, and there are extensive notes and sidebars explaining folkloric traditions, dialect names, plant varieties and growing methods, religious customs, and so much more. I learned that Biscotti Regina, my husband's favorite cookies, were known as Hen's Droppings because of their appearance, though some clerics got together and decided to call them Angels' Droppings instead; that you shouldn't eat cabbage before September 29 because someone will die; and that the prickly pear, which is a favorite fruit in the spring and summer, did not arrive in Sicily until after the discovery of America. Coria also lists and describes local wines and cheeses.

Some of the recipes are a bit vague. Quantities of ingredients are often not given and the reader is left to decide which variety to substitute for garfish, for example, or how much tomato sauce they will need for pasta ala Norma, made with 2 pounds of eggplant and 1 pound of spaghetti. But these problems are easily surmountable, especially for someone with a little cooking experience and knowledge of Italian cooking.

Recipes I look forward to trying include Ripiddu Nicavatu, Snow-Capped Risotto. For those that believe Italians do not mix seafood and cheese, this is a risotto made with squid and squid ink, and tomatoes, shaped into a cone and topped with a spoonful of ricotta and a dash of tomato sauce to resemble Mount Etna. Sand Lance Catania style, small fish baked with tomato, red wine, bread crumbs and caciocavallo, and Jaddina China, a large chicken or other bird deboned and stuffed with meat, rice and cheese are also on my list of recipes to try soon, as are the Stuffed Pork Ribs.

Both of the books have soft covers and are beautifully printed with gorgeous color photos throughout. These editions are part of the Cucine Regionali culinary series, which were originally published by Franco Muzzio Editore of Padua. Several more books are in the works, including ones on Reggio Emilia, Florence and Venice. I can't wait to add them all to my collection.

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