

A Taste of Trani

Discovering the Foodie Capital of Puglia

by Jon Fleming



Quintessenza Ristorante

AS YOU WALK AROUND TRANI'S STUNNING, SPARKLING HARBOR,

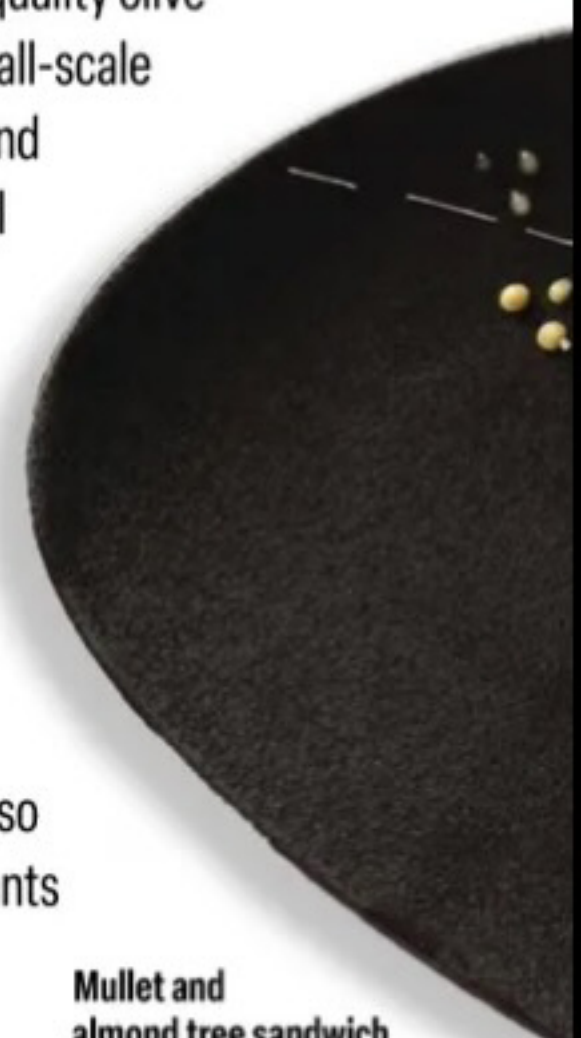
WITH THE WEATHERED FISHERMEN FIXING THEIR NETS IN THE SHADOW OF A MONUMENTAL ROMANESQUE CATHEDRAL, SOMETHING TELLS YOU THAT THIS TOWN IS GOING TO BE SPECIAL. BUT YOU MIGHT NOT EXPECT THIS UNHERALDED TOWN OF 50,000 PEOPLE TO HAVE DEVELOPED SUCH A SOPHISTICATED FOOD SCENE THAT'S OUT OF ALL PROPORTION TO ITS SIZE.



However, if you were to put together a list of ingredients for a foodie mecca, then Trani seems to have it all. It's in Puglia, Italy's deep south, about half an hour north of the cruise port of Bari. The presence of so many fishing boats in that harbor ensures that there's a ready supply of the freshest seafood from the Adriatic. Puglia's omnipresent olive groves produce large quantities of the highest quality olive oil. This little town can also boast six small-scale manufacturers of mozzarella cheese ... and the neighboring (but little-known) Castel del Monte region produces some really excellent, and affordable, wines.

To add to this, in the last decade Trani's restaurant scene has gone from strength to strength, as three of its restaurants have gained Michelin stars, and a "virtuous circle" has developed, pushing up standards across the board, so that even the most unassuming restaurants produce imaginative tasting menus.

Mullet and almond tree sandwich



TRANI'S TOP TRIO

Three top-class establishments vie for the title of Trani's premier restaurant. Specializing in seafood, Le Lampare al Fortino is situated in an ancient fortress guarding the entrance to Trani's harbor. It first gained a Michelin star in 2017, and offers opulent tasting menus starting at €100 (\$108).

Further along the coast, Casa Sgarra, run by three brothers, offers another fine dining experience, with a four-course tasting menu starting at €90 (\$97). It gained its Michelin Star in 2021, being rated as a "modern, elegant restaurant", and, as ever in Trani, the service is truly excellent.

Keeping up the theme of family businesses, a personal favorite is the superb Quintessenza, housed in a stylishly refurbished white-stone palazzo overlooking Trani's magnificent medieval castle. It gained its Michelin Star in 2016. Here, the four Di Gennaro brothers put an incredible level of detail into producing innovative takes on traditional Pugliese specialties, with a 6-course tasting menu starting at €105 (\$113). Domenico Di Gennaro, the gracious front-of-house, puts the restaurant's success down to its accent on "being 'accessible cool' — that's before people even started talking about this concept for restaurants." The aim is to be contemporary but not pretentious, never losing sight of the established Pugliese culinary traditions that inspired them in the first place.



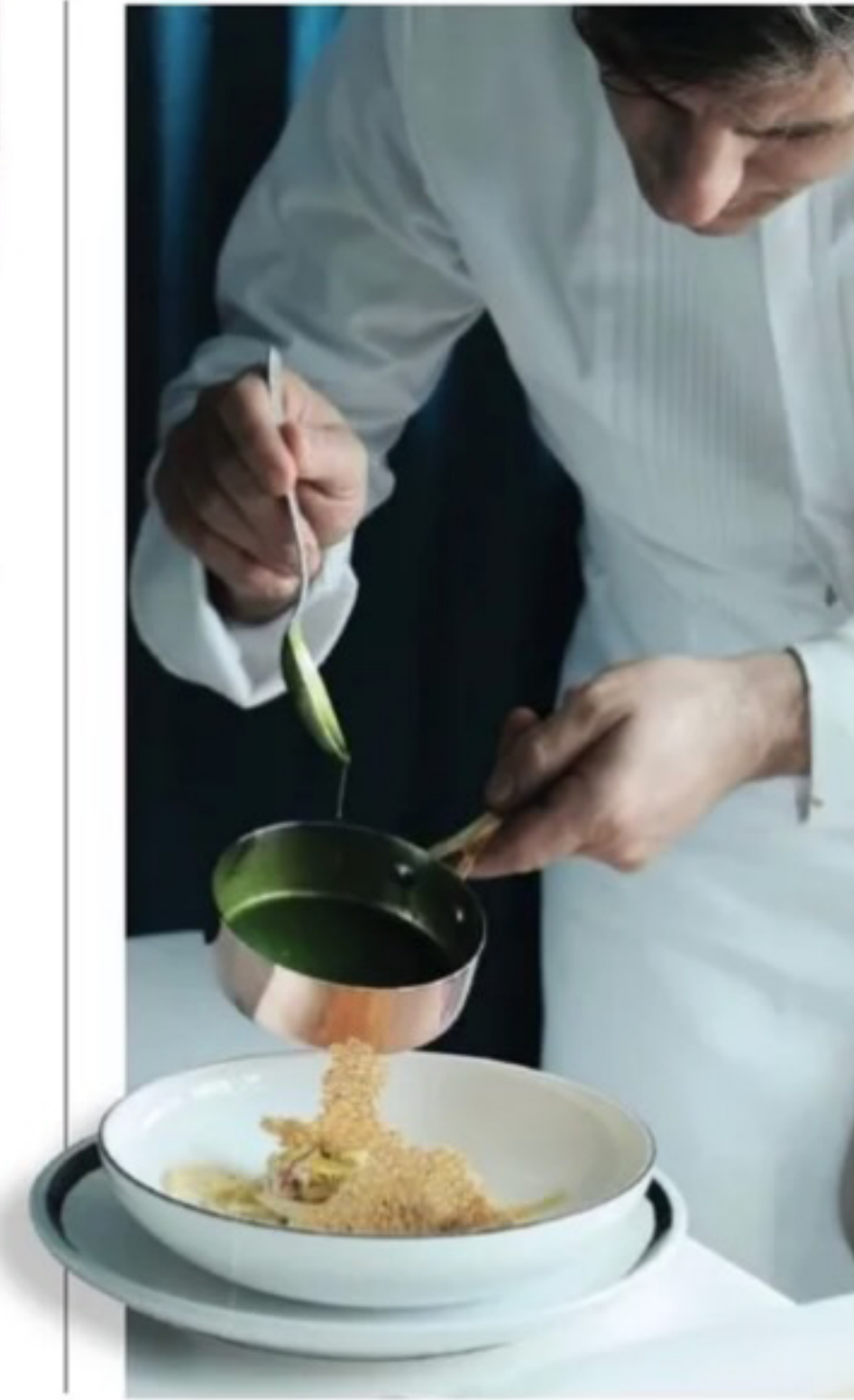
Roasted octopus with eggplant parmigiana mousse

MORE DELICIOUSNESS

Below Trani's big three, there's a second tier of restaurants that would get top billing in many other towns. Among many others, there's the excellent Osteria Frangipane, run by a brother and sister team; Corteinfiore, specializing in raw seafood; Gallo, overlooking the lively harbor; or the tucked-away Osteria Veronique. If you're staying for a few days, you have to be organized to fit all these different venues in! And, that's not including a large choice of pizzerias or more simple trattorias serving up Pugliese staples like riso, patate, e cozze (rice, potatoes, and mussels),

or orecchiette con cime de rape (rapini with ear-shaped pasta).

But while Trani's gorgeous setting — its charming medieval old town and sunny beaches — do attract plenty of tourists in the busy summer months, the great thing is the city isn't yet on the mainstream tourist routes of Southern Italy, which tend to concentrate on the distinctive trulli of inland Puglia, or the baroque splendors of Lecce further south. That means that prices here are much more reasonable than you'd find for comparable quality in Rome or Milan (or even Bari or Lecce for that matter).



LOCAL SUPPLIERS

As Vito di Corrado, the owner of Delizie Pugliese, a delicatessen sourcing superior local products, told me, "Trani's strength has always been the quality of its ingredients." As a sign of how seriously Trani takes its food, the sheer concentration of different food shops in this small town is quite incredible. By my unscientifically rough count, there are more than 10 produce shops, over 20 bakeries, a dozen butchers, tens of delicatessens,

and 12 fishmongers (not including the many fish stalls on the harbor).

When they do their shopping, the locals tend to reject supermarkets, and instead head to the individual independent specialists for each ingredient. As you enter the city, a sign proudly declares that Trani is a città slow — a "slow city," a place where something as important as food just cannot be rushed. Its restaurateurs all emphasize the importance of selecting the right ingredients, and keeping things local as much as possible.



IN THE LAST DECADE TRANI'S RESTAURANT SCENE HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, AS THREE OF ITS RESTAURANTS HAVE GAINED MICHELIN STARS.

Trani's historic sights alone would be enough to attract discerning tourists, but when you add in this remarkable food scene — one that contrives to be both upscale and down-to-earth, using simple ingredients in imaginative ways — it makes for a mouthwatering combination. ●

Left: Sergio Santameria/CC BY-SA 4.0, Le Lampare al Fortino Right top to bottom: Osteria Veronique, Casa Sgarra, Osteria Frangipane, Casa Sgarra, Foto / Dufault Photo - stock.adobe.com

