



Gourmet guide to BRINDISI

Offering the best of the sea and the field, this often overlooked southern city excels in its fish and vegetables, and the exotic spices reveal its proud and colourful past, as **Fleur Kinson** discovers.



Fresh produce is the key to Brindisi's delicious dishes.

Blessed with the Adriatic's most accommodating natural harbour, Brindisi has long seen the comings and goings of the world's ships – from ancient Greek triremes to sleek modern yachts belonging to Arab millionaires. In between, a million steamers and ferries have linked this south-eastern tip of Italy to the rest of the world. A map from 1872 shows dotted lines radiating out from the port to Costantinopoli, Indie and Giappone – no wonder then, that the food in this lively Italian city shows more than a hint of the exotic. The world's spices and culinary ideas have passed through so often that they've inevitably become part of the local tradition. The Brindisini don't bat an eyelid when their restaurant antipasti include a scoop of curried prawn risotto and a clutch of anchovies marinated with star anise and juniper.

The same intricate harbour that brings the wider world to Brindisi has, of course, also bestowed it with superlative fish and seafood. Innumerable fishing boats of every size jostle among the mighty battleships, stout white ferries and snazzy yachts that romantically glide in and out of Brindisi's calm and sheltered waters. They land their glistening catch on the pale harbourside cobblestones, and the silver bounty is quickly whisked away to local *pescherie* and *ristoranti*. Excellent fish is obviously a big feature on restaurant menus in Brindisi. Domestic cooks, meanwhile, churn out gallons of tasty *ciambotto* (fish soup) and mounds of *tiella* – a traditional dish of rice, potatoes and mussels whose similarity to



A selection of antipasti showcase the specialties of the area.

paella (even in its name) is a legacy of the Spanish contact with this venerable port city.

But just as much as the sharp, fresh taste of the sea, the rustic taste of the land is a central characteristic of Brindisi's cuisine. For all its bustle and prosperity, Brindisi is still a very small city – with only 90,000 inhabitants – and it quickly melts at the edges into lushly fertile countryside, full of growing foodstuff lapping up the sunshine. Some of Puglia's most appealing rural landscapes surround Brindisi, and the area sprouts a high proportion of Puglia's estimated 50 million olive trees. *Collina di Brindisi* oil enjoys DOP status, and is wonderfully fruity with a hint of spice and just enough bitterness.

The supreme climate and rich soil around the city creates ideal growing conditions for more than just olives. You can't fail to be wowed by the



The harbour is a real attraction for boat enthusiasts.



A trip to the city isn't complete without a wine tasting.



Brindisi by night is a lively place!

Photography © Fleur Kinson

brightly coloured bounty of giant, glossy fruit and vegetables piled outside Brindisi's food shops. They inspire a particular creativity in antipasti and desserts – the former cramming in all sorts of vegetables, the latter piling in every kind of fruit. The Puglian table excels in antipasti – most meals begin with a staggering array of delicious, vegetable-rich starter dishes. You might meet with ten or more separate little items before moving on to the pasta course, and then the meat course. Typical starters in Brindisi include courgette pieces filled with nutmeg cream, aubergines stuffed with garlic, peppers baked in pastry threads, mussels with onion and tomato, pumpkin mousse, orange slices in *vin cotto*, huge marinated olives, and of course the wonderful *favé* – a smooth purée of broad beans, which looks like the Puglian equivalent of houmous.

Dessert, meanwhile, is an explosion of fruit, and likely to be presented antipasti-style with lots of different delicacies on offer. Expect slicks of puréed *frutti di bosco* pooling beneath custard-filled cones, and dainty pastries loaded with orchard fruits. And there is always a mountainous bowl of fresh fruit to hand. You never come away from a Brindisi table suspecting that you haven't eaten healthily. The five-a-day mantra seems laughably unambitious down here! With so much fruit and vegetables on the table, local meals can be a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach – full of vivid greens, reds, oranges and purples.

You probably wouldn't guess it from looking at an average Brindisi meal, but the Puglian expertise with fruit and vegetables actually comes from the region's history of poverty. These are 'poor' foodstuffs compared to meat, which are available to even the most impoverished people. The Pugliese fashioned wonderful dishes out of their 'humble' ingredients, and even though the region is now the most prosperous in southern Italy, there is still no temptation to abandon recipes born of penury for an orgy of meat.

Non-veggie starters are built around fish or seafood, and of course, there is always a basket of *taralli* or *tarallini* on the Brindisi table – tiny, ring-shaped savoury biscuits cooked with oil and butter, and sometimes flavoured with fennel. Or *pucchette*, which look like chocolate chip cookies, but are actually fried savoury biscuits studded with olives. Puglian bread is very good, and the region produce some of Italy's most highly rated pasta. Orecchiette is the signature pasta shape here, and is traditionally dressed with soft green turnip-tops, or a simple tomato or seafood sauce.

So superbly stocked from the sea and surrounding cropfields, the Brindisi diet isn't particularly strong on meat. It's extremely rare to find chicken on a restaurant menu here, although you may find beef and often horsemeat. Reflecting the region's former poverty, several offal dishes have become a tradition, such as the strong-flavoured *turcinieddi* – bundles of lamb's liver, heart and lung, roasted and skewered. ➔



The wonderful array of desserts on offer will make your mouth water.

➔ If that sounds off-putting, try the similar but offal-free *bombette* – skewered bundles of roasted beef and ham wrapped tightly around each other in wafer-thin slices.

One feature of the Brindisi table that shows no legacy of the former poverty is the wine. Viticulture has been practised here for more than 3,000 years, and the produce has always been good (legend has it that King Herod sought Brindisi wines for his cellar). Over the last decade, Brindisi's countless local winemakers have enthusiastically embraced new agricultural and production technologies, bumping up the standard of local wines from good to excellent. In 2007, Brindisi winemaker Due Palme even won Best Winery in Italy at the prestigious annual Vinitaly event in Verona. Seek out its fantastically rich, fruity reds from local grapes Negroamaro, Malvasia Nero or Primitivo. And when you raise your glasses before drinking, remember that the Italian word for a toast is *un brindisi!*

But you might choose to take dinner without wine on the table at all – without a table, in fact! Like many of the exotic countries with which it has enjoyed contact, Brindisi has a robust tradition of street food. Numerous takeaway vendors sell high-quality variations on a pizza theme for very little cost. Join the queue and try a succulent *fritta* – a folded fried pizza (called a *panzerotto* elsewhere in Puglia). It is a type of pitta-bread pocket full of red-hot molten mozzarella and intensely flavoursome tomatoes. Or try a focaccia – an oblong, deep-pan pizza slice on light, fluffy bread. This is fast-food, Brindisi style. You could also grab a *rustico* – a traditional Brindisi pastry, filled with cheese, tomatoes, spinach and so on. Savour one while strolling along in Brindisi's evening *passaggiata* – famously one of the liveliest and most populated in all of southern Italy.

Urban strolling is even more enjoyable in Brindisi now than ever. The palm-lined central boulevard, Corso Garibaldi, has been pedestrianized – so you won't have to dodge any traffic. Nor will you stumble over napping foreign backpackers. Brindisi's Greece-bound ferries used to depart from the centre of the city, meaning there were always tired interrailers killing time between connections. Now the ports have been moved, and the centre has been reclaimed by the local people.

However you choose to eat in Brindisi, whether seated in one of the city's many superb restaurants, or munching street food on the hoof, do try to end your meal in the traditional Brindisi way. That is, with a *caffè ghiaccio con latte di mandorle* – a cup of espresso poured into a tumbler of crushed ice and almond milk. The almond milk not only sweetens the drink, but is a legacy of Brindisi's contact with the Arabic world. As is common with this 3,000-year-old city, the final taste left in your mouth is one of delightful, subtle exotica. ➔

10 PLACES TO EAT in Brindisi

Trattoria Pantagruale

Via Salita di Ripalta, 1-3

☎ +39 0831 560605

🌻 Meal for two about €60

Recommended by the Slow Food Society and listed in the prestigious Osteria d'Italia guide, this relaxed and comfortable restaurant serves excellent local dishes at very reasonable prices. Owner Armando Bienda has been running the restaurant for over 20 years, and during that time has developed some unmissable specialities. The menu offers a fairly extensive choice of traditional seafood and meat dishes, and choose the house antipasti for a showcase of the exotic foreign influences that streak through the cuisine of this venerable port-city. The wine selection is huge, with hundreds of bottles glittering in various nooks around the room.



Ristorante L'Araba Fenice

Corso Roma, 31

☎ +39 0831 590009 www.fenicebrindisi.it

🌻 Meal for two about €70

This grand yet relaxed restaurant has to be classed as one of Brindisi's very best. You can't fail to be impressed as soon as you step through the door. The high-vaulted ceiling of meticulous Puglian stonework makes the place feel like a small cathedral. The atmosphere is refined but very welcoming, and the décor is muted yet tasteful in warm earth tones. The lavish, seafood-leaning food is an absolute delight to the eye and mouth. Particular creative detail is given to the antipasti and dolci, and you should definitely try the 'taster menu' of both, which allow you to sample a selection of regional delicacies. Whatever you are looking for in the food and atmosphere, expect a feast of colour and freshness here.



Rouge et Noir/ Rosso e Nero

Via Santi, 15, next to Teatro Verdi

☎ +39 0831 521939

🌻 Snacks and drinks for two about €12

This classic Italian café has rightfully been declared Puglia's best bar for three years running by the Slow Food Society. Charming, old-fashioned artisan Romolo Specchia runs the place, and his food and drink standards are sky-high. His handmade ice cream is likely to be the best you have ever tasted in your life too. He whips it by hand rather than using a machine, and only produces flavours from ingredients that are in season. There is actually no display cabinet, and you must choose from a tiny menu, which changes regularly. Every drink and each small snack is perfection. You can either sit indoors or outside, and in either case you will get to savour the absolute excellence of everything on offer.



Ristorante Penny

Via San Francesco, 5

☎ +39 0831 563013

www.enotecaristorantepenny.it

🌻 Meal for two about €65

One of the very best places to eat in central Brindisi, with stunning food and beautiful surroundings, Ristorante Penny is a classy and relaxing place. It has been owned and run by the stylish, friendly Mario Schina for almost 30 years, and you are spoilt for choice from the moment you set eyes on the building. Firstly, where will you sit? Inside, beneath the spectacular, wide-vaulted ceiling picked out in bold stripes? Or outside on the leafy, comfortable terrace? Both are so inviting. Next comes the menu – long and interesting, with a myriad of classic and creative dishes. But it doesn't contain all they have to offer. A good option is to ask the waiter what unlisted dish the chef is experimenting with that night.



La Corniche

Lungomare Regina Margherita, 33-36

☎ +39 0831 590892

www.lacorniche.it

🌻 Meal for two about €45

This is a beautiful venue in a lovely location. Set right in the heart of the youthful bustle on Brindisi's seafront, this large and elegant place looks like an exclusive eatery, but is in fact a very welcoming pizzeria/restaurant. Inside, the décor is chic and uplifting, with warm colours and abundant lighting. Outside, a leafy courtyard links a series of white-balustraded terraces where white tables glisten beneath stylish white canvas umbrellas. There are three floors, making it a very large restaurant, which means the atmosphere is ideal for an intimate dinner, a pizza with friends, or just evening drinks, depending on which floor you visit. The food is great, the prices reasonable and the surroundings delightful.



Pizzeria Romanelli

Via S Lucia, corner of Via Pozzo Traiano

☎ +39 0831 590496

www.pizzeriaromanelli.it

🌻 Fritte and drinks for two about €4

A Brindisi institution for the past 60 years, this small, tiled pizzeria is the place to come if you want to sample one of the city's traditional *fritte*. Called *panzerotti* elsewhere in Puglia, *fritte* are folded, fried pizzas, which are ideal for a fast food treat or for munching on the move. A type of pitta bread pocket filled with melting mozzarella and succulent, flavoursome tomatoes, the quality of Romanelli's *fritte* is superb – and to top it all they're just €1 each! You won't find good *fritte* much cheaper anywhere else. While you're waiting in the queue, enjoy the many photographs of old Brindisi which line Romanelli's walls, and be sure to check out the framed poem written in the bizarre-looking local dialect.

“The menu doesn't contain everything. Ask the waiter what unlisted dish the chef is experimenting with that night.”

RISTORANTE PENNY



Il Botteghino

Corso Roma, 35-37

☎ +39 0831 529962

🌻 Focaccia and drinks for two about €4

This tiny pizzeria is a favourite with the Brindisi locals, and it can be found heaving with people on Saturday and Sunday nights. Essentially a takeaway, there are a handful of tables, which you can get to if you're lucky. Il Botteghino is a great place to sample the region's focaccia – Brindisi's deep-pan pizza-slices made with centimetre-thick focaccia-style bread. Despite being just €1 per slice, the quality is excellent, with rich tomato sauce and good toppings. The bread is crisp on the outside but light and fluffy on the inside. But if you didn't want to try the focaccia, more familiar pizza shapes are also available, of course. Whichever meal you decide to choose, you will be in for a unique experience as you join the lively crowd at the tables, or take your snack out into the throng of the *passaggiata*.



Tenuta Moreno

Contrada Moreno S S 7, Mesagne

☎ +39 0831 721457 / 721487

🌻 Meal for two about €70

If you have your own mode of transport and are able to travel a few miles out of Brindisi, why not treat yourself to an evening at this sumptuous hotel and restaurant with its infinite land, pools and facilities. It is essentially a sprawling stately home set amid several acres of olive groves. Dining options vary – you could opt to sit at a table on an exquisite candlelit patio, or go inside and experience one of the several high-vaulted rooms. Surprisingly for such a chic and refined venue, the food tends towards *la cucina della nonna* – comforting, high-calorie and indulgent. The house *favé* is particularly good. To add that extra special touch to your visit, why not go on a Saturday when a wedding party is likely to be in glittering progress around you. The atmosphere will be very lively.



La Cantina ti L'artista

Via de' Terribile, 11

☎ +39 0831 529036

🌻 Meal for two about €35

This informal, well-attended eatery attracts a lively young crowd. The walls are plastered in photographs of happy customers having a great time – especially on Thursday evenings when they put on live music, which attracts a series of good local bands. It is a cosy, cheerful place with a warm atmosphere, even if you come earlier in the evening before it fills up with 20 year olds. The food is strongly traditional, with pasta, sausages, steaks, horsemeat, swordfish, a mixed grill, and so on making an appearance on the menu. You can try the local offal speciality *turcinieddi* here, or for a less intimidating option, the similar *bombette*. As well as a fun atmosphere, the extremely reasonable prices attract a range of people and the good-quality house wine is a real bargain.

SHOP TILL YOU DROP *in Brindisi*

➔ Brindisi is a compact city that is easy to navigate and a real pleasure to stroll around shopping for food. The recent pedestrianisation of the long, palm-tree-lined Corso Garibaldi that slices through the centre of town creates a sense of urban space and freedom, and you can always head for the pretty harbourside when you need to rest those aching feet and cool off in the sea air.

MARKET PRODUCE

Brindisi's daily food market is a vivid spectacle of bright fruit and vegetables, piled high on little stalls in the tiny Piazza Mercato (near Piazza Vittoria). It runs every day (except Sunday) until 2pm, but note that traders start packing away from about 1pm. A series of doorways surround the central market stalls, beyond which lie cool fish shops piled high with glistening seafood, and the fresh silvery catch of the day. The market is the obvious place to start your day's food shopping in Brindisi, and the produce couldn't be fresher or healthier.

BREAD AND CHEESE

For bread there can be nowhere better to visit than the **Panificio Toraldo Oranza** (Via Passante, 33). It claims the title of the only remaining traditional wood-fired bakery in Brindisi, the old-fashioned technique they use to make dense bread with a thick, crunchy crust, which they then sell to local restaurants as well as the general public. If you are feeling bold, ask if you can nip downstairs to admire the spectacle of the baking, and get ready to watch golden rolls being spooled in and out of the oven on a broad-ended oar.

For cheese, you shouldn't miss the treasure trove of **La Casa del Parmigiano** at Piazza Vittoria. It's been going for nearly 50 years, and is packed with Italian cheeses of every kind. There are other high-quality foodstuffs on offer here too, but it will be the tidy mountains of *formaggio* that linger in your memory.

MEAT, DELI GOODS AND PASTA

The butcher's shop **Macelleria Massimo Fischetto** is highly recommended (Via Fornari, 23). Massimo has a good selection and can order in any meat requested. He also prepares local specialities like *turcinieddi* and *bombette*, and supplies them to local restaurants such as La Cantina ti L'artista.

Brindisi abounds in excellent little foodshops where you can pick up salami,

“Surprisingly for such a chic venue, the food is comforting and indulgent.”

TENUTA MORENO

Braci e Abbracci

Via Pozzo Traiano, 9-11

☎ +39 0831 521035

🌻 Meal for two about €40

If you should tire of Brindisi's fish-biased cuisine and crave a plate of red meat, you can satisfy your carnivorous longings at this lively little place which specializes in a range of grilled meats. It can be found just off the buzzing Corso Garibaldi, and the dark, vaulted interior warmed by red tablecloths feels just right for a meat-fest. There's always the sound of sizzling in the background and the mouth-watering smell of grilled meat is an aroma that fills the air. If succulent meat doesn't attract you enough, Braci e Abbracci also offers a wide selection of pizzas and pasta dishes, which will appeal to all. The restaurant draws a young, amiable crowd, and the atmosphere is always friendly and inviting. As with many restaurants in this region, prices are very reasonable.





Locals flock to buy their cheese at **La Casa del Parmigiano**.



Pay a visit to the wood-fired ovens of **Panificio Toraldo Oranza**.

cheese, pasta, wine and general groceries. Visit **La Gastronomia del Duomo** (Via Duomo, 29), or the well-stocked **Enoteca Fedele** (Via Porta Lecce, 6). Two very jolly young women, Lisa and Grazia, own and run **La Graziosa** (Via Mazzini, 15) – a charming, narrow shop with high-vaulted ceiling. They sell good food and deli items and they even make hot lunches to take away. **Il Salu... Mino** (Via Carmine, 96) is especially good for seafood antipasti. And for high-quality organic foodstuffs, wheat-free pastas and the like, visit **La Piccola Bottega di Naturalia** (Via Giordano Bruno, 34).

SWEET TREATS

Wonderful sweets, chocolates and sugary gifts can be bought at the bright paradise of the **Enoteca Delizie** (Via F Consiglio, 6). Upstairs is a lavish sweetshop where you can buy by the kilo or snap up stylish confectionary tins, boxes and giftpacks. Downstairs is filled with all sorts of wine, spirits and liqueurs – some in novelty bottles.

And if you fancy a sweet cool-down after a hard day's shopping, there's really only one place to come. Brindisi's very best ice cream (and it must even be some of the best in all Italy) is sold at the bar which variously calls itself **Rouge et Noir** or **Rosso e Nero** (Via Santi, 15). Handmade in small quantities, owner Romolo Specchia's ice cream is smooth and flavoursome, and leaves no sugary residue in your mouth after you've eaten it.

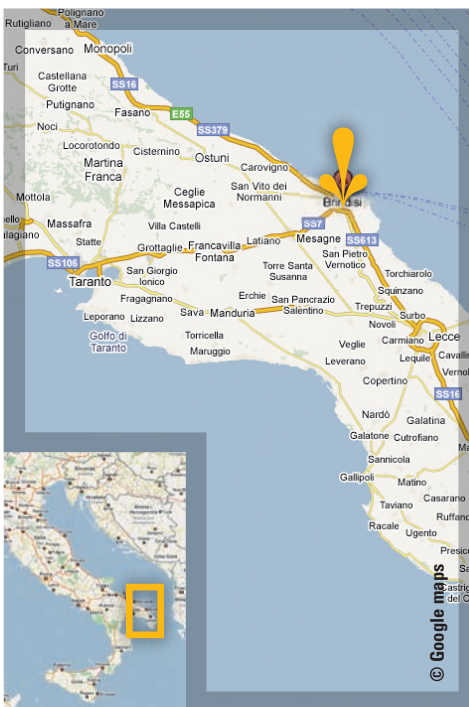
WINE

Brindisi has no shortage of fine *enoteche*, but it is especially enjoyable to go straight to an actual winemaker to sample and purchase your *vino*, as you will get much more of a feel of the history behind your choice of wine. While in Brindisi make sure you visit the charming **Botrugno Cantina** (Via Ammiraglio Cagni, 2), to savour the delicious things they've done with the Malvasia grape.

If you have your own transport, journey a few miles out of town to **Due Palme** (Cellino San Marco). Winner of Best Winemaker in Italy 2007, Due Palme is a local producer with sampling rooms and a superb choice of bottles for sale. **T**



Fish is a true speciality of the region.



GET THERE, STAY THERE

Previously a simple terminal building set on an old military airfield, Brindisi's tiny airport had a face-lift last year. The re-vamp reflects the growing visitor interest in this city, and foreign interest in Puglia in general. Ryanair flies to Brindisi from Stansted (www.ryanair.com), and the city centre is just a ten-minute taxi ride from the terminal. If you are already in Italy, Brindisi is a key southern stop on mainline train routes. You could also be true to the spirit of the place and arrive by boat, of course!

For a bit of period charm, book a room at the stately **Grande Albergo Internazionale** on Brindisi's harbourside promenade. The hotel was originally built in the 19th century to accommodate merchants and aristocrats travelling onto exotic locales – especially for the British stopping over in Brindisi en route to India during the days of the Raj. The Internazionale's 67 rooms are spacious and traditionally decorated, and its breakfast buffet is fantastic. **Grande Albergo Internazionale**, 23 Viale Regina Margherita ☎ +39 0831 523473 www.albergointernazionale.it