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Lemon Love

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Tastes *of* Italia

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AUGUST 2010

Fruits of Summer

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Peppercorn Grilled
New York Steak,
Pasta With Eggplant,
Watermelon With
Prosecco Sorbet
And More

Plus
Almond
Cream Tart
The Easiest,
Best Dessert
Ever!

See Page 27



Inside Italy's Food Science College



AUGUST 2010

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TRADITIONS

The Dreams *of* Positano

LEMON BLOSSOMS PERFUME THE AIR ALONG ITALY'S SPECTACULARLY SCENIC AMALFI COAST. CULTIVATED HERE FOR CENTURIES, THE LEMON FLAVORS RISOTTO, MARMALADE, CAKES AND LIQUEURS.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

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he Tyrrhenian sea shimmers and whitewashed villas built with *copula* roofs cling to vertical cliffs. This is Positano on the Amalfi Coast where the houses are painted in a kaleidoscope of pastel colors from rose pink to butter yellow. It's a 'dream place,' just as John Steinbeck described when he first visited in 1953. Although times have changed since Steinbeck's visit, one thing has remained the same – the locals still dream about creating the perfect lemons and transforming them into sublime culinary confections.

Celeste Desiderio, or Mamma Celeste as everyone calls her, is an expert in cooking with lemons. And at 85 years old, she has been picking lemons since she was a child. "Spring produces the best lemons," she says knowingly in Italian as she picks another one from the tree and places it in her straw basket. Reserved, yet charismatic, she is the matriarch behind *B&B Casa Celeste*, as well as the beach front restaurant *da Ferdinando* at il Fornillo. Each morning she walks down 425 stairs to meet her sons Guido and Marco, and grandsons Nando, Ferdinando and Francesco at the restaurant. She keeps a garden, swims daily and climbs 425 stairs up each night after a hard day's work. It is a family affair at *da Ferdinando* and Mamma heads up the kitchen. Stand-

ing just under five feet with twinkling eyes that match the color of the sea she tells a story of family, cooking and Positano lemons.

"Lemons are a part of us, in our diet and cooking," she explains. "We use lemon for everything, it's always a good flavor and healthy, too. From *Suppli' al Limone* (rice and lemon croquettes) to using lemon with meat, fish, chicken, and even as a treatment for your skin they are good. Family and food are most important," emphasizes Mamma Celeste, as she recites the lemon recipes she will be making today, *Marmellata di Limone*, *Scorzette* ~ candied lemon peels,

stirs the simmering lemons in her copper pot, saying, "it's the trick to getting it just the right texture." This type of hand-made pot is called a *pentola in rame* and is perfect for slow cooking.

Living on this divine coast will illuminate more about Italy's past than any schoolbook, classroom or guidebook. Locals such as Mamma Celeste, who generously share their stories of war, invasions, pirates, family recipes, cooking, folklore and lemons, make the best teachers.

A little of what is known about lemons: lemons made their way to Italy's southern coast in the first century B.C. brought by

Positano to Massa Lubrense along the Amalfi Coast, a stretch of winding road that curls like ribbon candy. The panorama is a cerulean sea that meets rocky vertical cliffs with dramatic hairpin turns. This road leads to Antonio Gargiulo's lemon grove where he tells his story of lemons.

There are more than 45 different varieties of lemons in the world, or 46 counting the one he grafted on a grapefruit tree. Antonio, who had studied law in England, returned to the farm when he learned that his family was about to sell their farm. "My family started cultivating lemons in 1900," he explains. "At that time men worked the lemon

"Italians got serious about lemon cultivation AROUND 1795 WHEN THE BRITISH NAVY mandated lemon juice consumption FOR ITS SAILORS TO PREVENT SCURVY."

Delizia al Limone ~ a sponge cake with cream and lemon, and *Limoncello* ~ the after dinner digestive. Smoked Provolone grilled on lemon leaves is her personal favorite. Her basket now full, she heads to her kitchen ready to make *Marmellata di Limone*, lemon marmalade.

Waiting there is Mamma's daughter Marcella, the pastry chef at *da Vincenzo*, her family trattoria. Poised, blond and with a striking resemblance to her mom, she too enthuses over the *Sfusato* lemons. "I cannot live without them," she confides. "I use their zest, juice and peels, they are magic!" Marcella is renowned for her award-winning *Delizia al Limone*, a delicate lemon and cream cake.

The lemon process starts. First Mamma firmly pricks each lemon with a fork and places it in ice water, this process takes away the bitterness. Her method is simple, no strict measurements, just lots of lemons, sugar and water; slow cooked until thick and tasty, to the cook's liking. She continually

Arab travelers. Alexander the Great also carried lemons to the Amalfi Coast in 300 B.C., and they show up in paintings and mosaics at Pompeii's *'Casa del Frutteto'* in 79 A.D. Jesuit fathers began cultivating them in Sorrento around 1600.

There are two types of lemons in southern Italy's Campania region, the *Femminello Ovale Sorrentino* (or *Massese*) from Sorrento and the *Sfusato Amalfitano* from the Amalfi Coast. Although they have become symbol of Italy's Mediterranean Coast, their origins trace back to India, China and Mesopotamia. Etymology tells us that the word "lemon" is derived from the ancient Persian word *limu*, first recorded in an Arabic literature book in the 10th century.

Lemons flourish in southern Italy and on the Amalfi Coast, a protected UNESCO World Heritage site. The microclimate, volcanic soil, sun and salty sea air provide perfect growing conditions for the ever-blooming lemon tree. To learn more about lemons take a short Vespa ride from

groves and women worked the cattle. The lemons from our farm were shipped to Belgium where citrus did not exist," he says.

"There are two kinds of lemons here in Campania, the *Femminello Ovale Sorrentino* (or *Massese*) and the *Sfusato*", he reiterates. "The big difference between the *Femminello* and *Sfusato* are the skin and size. The *Femminello Ovale Sorrentino* or *Massese*, has a smooth skin, pale color and stronger flavor. They are smaller too with an oval egg shape. The *Sfusato* has an uneven skin. Both types are glorified to be the best lemons in the world, with few seeds and twice as much vitamin C as an orange. The skin contains the essential oils that give it its flavor. The average lemon tree lives to be 70 years. It has one main root that grows deep into the soil to anchor it and a skirt of small superficial roots that grow around it," Antonio says.

Under a pergola abundant with lemons and white lemon flowers (called *zagare* in Italian), Antonio explains: "The main ingre-



LEMON MAGIC:
Antonio Gargiulo and Celeste
Desiderio praise the flavor
of Campania lemons.



dient for *Limoncello* is the *Femminello Ovale Sorrentino* lemon. We peel only the skin with no white pith, the skin contains the most flavorful oils. Then we soak the peels in ethyl alcohol, remove them after a week, add sugar with water, and then freeze. This is *Limoncello*, an authentic elixir, served as an *aperitivo* before dinner or a *digestivo* after dinner."

Antonio's lemons are grown without pesticides, chemical fertilizer or man-made machinery. He covers them in winter with a netting, and grows them on *pagliarelle*, a chestnut wood pergola or trellis. He follows the rules of I.G.P.- the Protected Geographical Indication, a group that certifies lemons grown under specific standards relating to authenticity and geographical territory. COVAL, another consortium, also regulates lemon production.

Italians, such as Antonio's family, got serious about lemons when the Royal Navy mandated lemon juice consumption for its sailors around 1795. Italian families took their shovels and planted lemon trees just about everywhere. The lemon's high vitamin C content prevented scurvy and the British demanded more lemons for their sailors, and this created a lemon boom.

Another little known citrus fruit grown in southern Italy is the *cedro*. It has an elliptical shape, grows as large as a football with thick white pith and has a lemon flavor. Usually eaten raw after dinner, it cleanses the palate.

Lemons - a symbol of fidelity and love-are at the heart of everything on the Amalfi Coast. Lace makers embroider lemon motifs on aprons, artisans mold them into soap, chefs infuse them into antipastos to desserts and the general populace considers them a cure-all for colds, as a well as a natural energy booster.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. Meet Mamma Celeste and cook with lemons, too, at Cooking Vacations Italy. See www.cooking-vacations.com or phone (617) 247-4112 for more information.

How to: *Limoncello*

Limoncello

The peculiar microclimate of the Sorrento Peninsula helps the growth of the unique sfusato Amalfitano lemon: large fruit with thick and scented peel and with superior properties. The *massese*, meaning 'from Massa,' lemon differs from the Amalfi Coast lemon in that it has a thinner peel and a stronger aroma.

Lemons were already being exported to the United States and to Great Britain in the 19th century. Whole books have been written about the medicinal value of this fruit, which contains twice as much vitamin C as an orange. In addition to vitamin C, lemons contain vitamins A and B1-3. The juice is useful for sore throats, mouth ulcers, liver and pancreatic tonics, stomach ulcers, arthritis, gout and rheumatism. Nowadays, they are used not only for health and culinary purposes, but also as the main ingredient of *limoncello*, a lemon liqueur obtained from an infusion of lemon peel. *Limoncello* is an authentic elixir, which is suitable as an aperitif, a digestive or as an evening drink with friends. The ingredients for limoncello are simple and few, and making a batch does not require much work.

- 5 organic lemons
- 2 cups vodka or Everclear
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 cups water

To begin, you need a large glass jar with a lid. Wash the lemons, pat them dry and remove the zest. A vegetable peeler does the job best; it gives you long wide strips of zest with hardly any of the bitter white pith. If you get some of the pith with the zest, carefully scrape it away with the tip of the knife.

Fill the jar with the alcohol and, as you remove the zest, add it to the jar. Mix the ingredients, cover the jar and store it. Now all you need to do is wait. After about 5 to 6 days, combine the sugar and the water in a saucepan. Bring it to a boil and cook until thickened, about five minutes. Let the syrup cool then add it to the limoncello mixture. Then simply strain the limoncello into bottles and discard the lemon zest.

Keep the bottles in the freezer so it is icy cold until you are ready to drink it.



Lemon Risotto

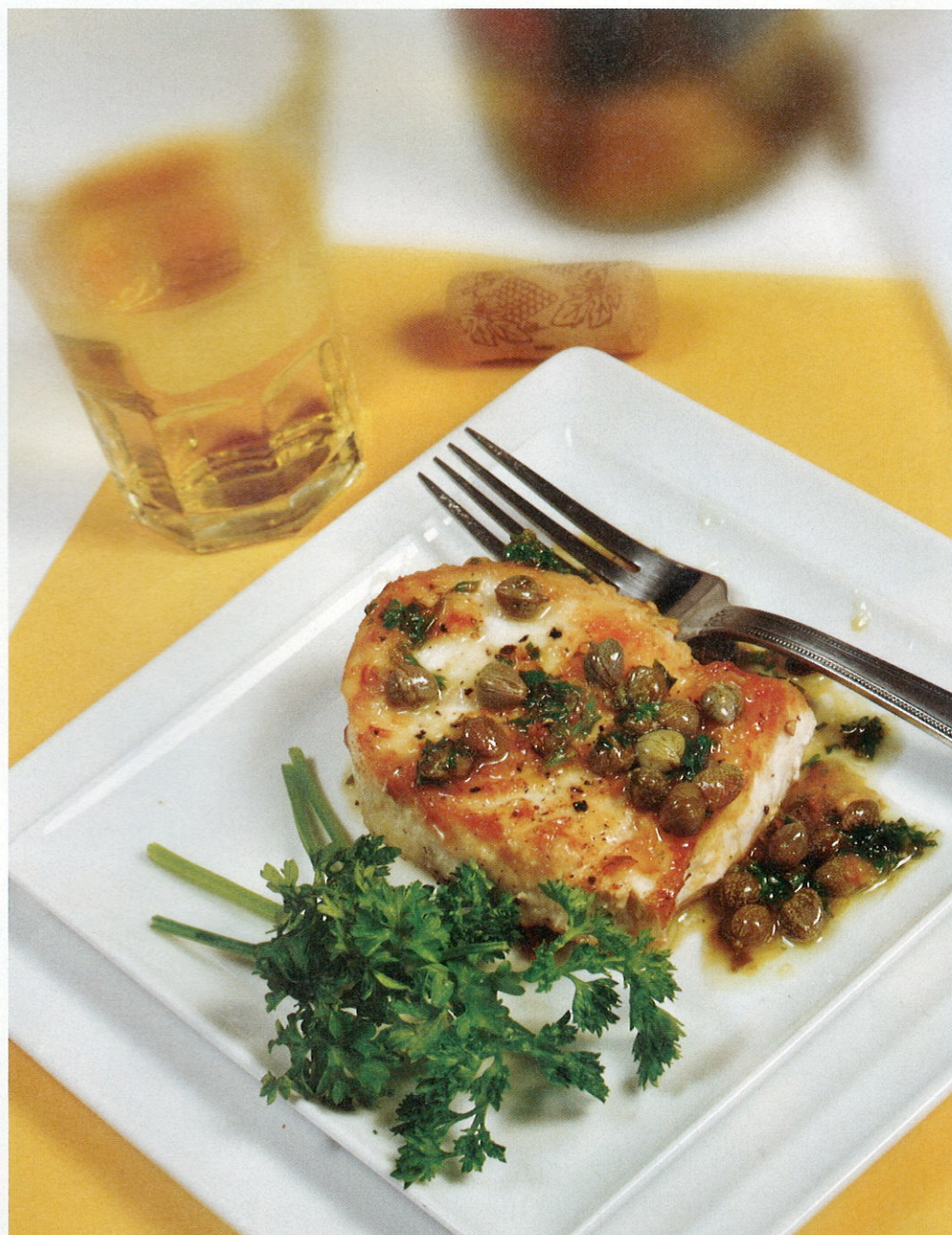
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1 white onion, finely chopped
- 1 pound risotto rice
- 4 ounces white wine
- 6 cups vegetable broth
- 3.5 ounces Parmigiano Reggiano, grated
- Juice and zest of 4 lemons
- Lemon-infused olive oil

In a large shallow pot, melt the butter and add the chopped onion. Add the rice and toast for a moment. Add the white wine and allow to evaporate. Add the broth a little at a time, stirring continuously and adding more as it absorbs. Cook for about 15 minutes.

Just before serving, add the grated Parmigiano, the lemon juice and the lemon zest. Serve immediately with a drizzle of lemon-infused olive oil, a garnish of grated Parmigiano and a bit of lemon zest.

Makes 4 servings.

-Recipe courtesy of Le Tre Sorelle, Positano



Sicilian Swordfish in a Lemon Caper Sauce

- 4 swordfish steaks, 1/2-inch thick
- 1/2 cup flour
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 6 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- Juice of 2 lemons
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 1/3 cup minced fresh parsley
- 1/4 cup capers, rinsed and drained

In a baking dish, stir together flour, salt and pepper. Pat the fish dry, then lightly coat them with the

flour mixture.

In a large skillet, heat 4 tablespoons of olive oil on medium. When oil is almost smoking, add the fish and cook 3 to 4 minutes per side. Remove the fish and place on warm platter; cover with paper towels.

Quickly discard all the oil in skillet and add remaining 2 tablespoons oil to the skillet. Add the lemon juice, zest, parsley and capers and bring mixture to a boil. Serve sauce with fish.

Makes 4 servings.