



At Home In Anacapri

To Anacapri's verdant plain, we upward climb with willing feet, without whose grand and lovely sights a visit here is incomplete.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

The island of Capri stretches four square miles and lies on the cusp of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Bay of Naples. Moorish white houses set on rocky limestone cliffs wrapped in endemic flora have made the blue *isola* a dreamy destination for travelers throughout time. Lying 1,932 feet above Capri is Anacapri, from the Greek for *Capri of above*.

Capri was not always an island. As legend says, it was once part of the Sorrentine Peninsula and was disconnected during the Phlegrean volcanic eruption. Say the word *Capri*—Italians say it with an accent on the first syllable—and immediately one conjures up images of the Blue Grotto, the buzzing *Piazzetta*, the Roman Emperor Tiberius—known to throw his concubines off its cliffs—Capri pants, and a guest list of jet-setting VIPs. It is no wonder that in 29AD Emperor Augustus traded Ischia, the neighboring volcanic island, for it. Augustus named it *Apragòpoli*, a place of “*dolce far niente*,” meaning *sweet do nothing*, and built several villas and temples dedicated to the Nymphs. His successor, Roman Emperor Tiberius, also lived and reigned on the island for 10 years, building

another 12 elaborate villas.

However Capri is not only a land of kings, queens, castles and villas, there is also a simple folk residing in Anacapri and they are called *Ciammura*. *Ciammura*, pronounced ‘cha-moore-ra,’ are the *contadini*, the farmers who have been growing fruits and vegetables and making wine for centuries.

In local dialect, *Ciammura* translates to the mountain people or the natives of Anacapri. Swedish royal physician Axel Munthe resided in Anacapri from 1901 to 1943, and wrote, ‘on the top of the stairs is Anacapri, but only gente di montagna. (mountain people) live there.’ Years later, a distinct line stills exists between Capri and Anacapri, and the *Caprese* and *Anacaprese*.

Until 1874 the only thing connecting Capri to Anacapri was the Phoenician stairway or *La Scala Fenicia*. Chiseled in stone and climbing one thousand seventeen stairs up from the port *Marina Grande* to the *Villa San Michele*, the stairs were built by the Greeks and named after the Phoenicians. Upon reaching the top, you see grapevines, olive trees, vegetable gardens and orchards running wild. Tending these lush gardens are the *contadini* or



pastene. Even Tiberius kept a skilled gardener on hand named Serpullo. The vegetarian Emperor Tiberius grew an elaborate vegetable garden at his Villa Jovis from which he would make *Cianfotta*: a vegetable medley of delicately chopped onions, browned with olive oil in a casserole, and then slow cooked with artichokes, potatoes, zucchinis, asparagus, shelled peas, peppers, onion, tomatoes, broad beans, olive oil, parsley and basil and served with toasted garlic bread. This ancient specialty is still served today and is usually paired with the local white wine, Falanghina.

Recipes over time have not changed, and you will still find this local dish served from Monte Solaro to the gardens behind le Boffe, a *paese* of white casbah villas off the Piazza Vittoria. An almost hidden turn off the Piazza Vittoria leads you to a winding footpath lined with flora, farms and to Maria's garden.

Open the wrought iron gate that frames a welcoming ceramic tile bearing the name *Maruzzella*, (a nickname meaning little Maria or tiny sea snails) and step inside to the garden and cantina kitchen of Maria Acampora. A long country wooden table topped with fire engine red bell peppers, sweet cherry tomatoes, garlic and eggplant greet you, and there in her apron is Maria.

"I don't measure, I use my eyes," she tells us in Neapolitan dialect. Her burning black eyes are the color of the olives that she serves spiked with fennel.

She opens the door of the 100-year-old wood-burning oven and the sweet smell of *salsiccia paesana*—handmade sausage wrapped in wild laurel leaves—hits your nose.

"From spring peas to poppies, summer roses, celery, potatoes, spinach, zucchini, eggplant, black cherries, oranges, lemons and autumn squash are just a few of the things growing in our organic garden.

"What's in our garden is on our table," Maria explains. Her garden stretches from the foot of her kitchen and down toward the sea.

The table spread includes what Maria calls 'food for the farmers,' *zucchini alla scapece*—flash-fried squash cut on a mandolino to paper thin coins, dressed with mint, olive oil and sea salt; *Caprese*—a handmade braid of mozzarella dressed with cherry tomatoes and basil; *involtini di melanzane*—thinly sliced grilled eggplant that have been rolled and stuffed with smoked mozzarella and topped with diced cherry tomatoes; *fagiolata*—fresh brown beans slow cooked with onion and pancetta in the brick oven, and *fritturine di*



MARIA'S GARDEN:
Bounty for her table

basilico & frittireine fiore di zucchini—small flash fried puffs or *boffe* as they are called, consisting of fresh basil and squash flowers flash fried in sunflower oil and sprinkled with sea salt. *Zeppole Anacaprese*—sweet golden puffs twisted in a knot, lightly flash fried, dredged in sugar, filled with a *crema pasticciera* and topped with a black cherry are for dessert. This *antica dolce* dessert recipe, as Maria calls it, is made with flour, potatoes, sugar, butter and a little lemon.

Maria is just one of the Anacaprese women who keep the harvest traditions alive. Anna Pane, her neighbor, tells us about the *Ciammura*.

"The Capri people call us the *Ciammura*, farmers and peasants," she explains in her soft dialect. Anna, is an award-winning chef and owner of La Rondinella, her family restaurant. She tells more about the people and the town.

"Anacapri was always the poor part of town, and some 60 years ago our family restaurant was the only place with a television; everyone came to watch it," she says.

Ciammura is a pasta dish that has been handed down in her family and includes local ingredients that were always on hand, *alici e olive verde*, fresh sardines and fresh cracked green olives. This dazzling combination of fresh garden flavors with the ever so small delicate sardines tossed with linguine is a winner.

"Our food style is traditional, we use lots of vegetables that grow year round along with fresh local fish," Anna explains. "What we make at home is what we serve in the restaurant."

She shares her recipes for a traditional *contadini* lunch including, *Polpettine Con Peperoncini Verdi*—mini meatballs with sweet green peppers—heartly pan roasted sweet green long peppers with cherry tomatoes and garlic topped with small sized meatballs; *Pezzogna all' Aqua Pazza*—Fish in Crazy Water—fresh fish from the dentex family slow cooked with garlic, cherry tomatoes; and, a *Torta Caprese Bianca*—white Caprese cake—a flourless cake made with almonds.

"We are simple people, and that's what counts," says Maria. The traditions of Anacapri and its harvest take place each September with an autumn festival called *Settembrata* which celebrates the Autumn Harvest. Anacapri, a verdant plain, so close and yet so far from Capri.

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White Caprese Cake

- ¾ cup butter, softened
- ¾ cup + 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 6 eggs
- 10 ounces white chocolate
- 10 ounces almonds, peeled
- Zest of 3 lemons
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 tablespoon Limoncello
- Powdered sugar, for dusting
- Lemon zest curls for garnish, if desired

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, cream butter with an electric mixer for about 10 minutes until foamy. Add the sugar and continue to beat for an additional 10 minutes. Add the eggs one at a time while still mixing.

Meanwhile, chop white chocolate with al-

monds in food processor until finely ground. Add to the butter mixture and mix well. Add the lemon zest and lemon juice. Lastly, add the baking powder and Limoncello and mix until well combined. Prepare 12-inch round baking pan with butter and parchment paper (or butter and flour).

Pour batter into the prepared pan and bake for 40 to 50 minutes until golden. Remove and allow to cool completely. Once cooled, flip it out of the pan and serve dusted with powdered sugar and garnish with lemon zest curls, if desired.

Makes 12 servings.

Courtesy of Anna Pane,
La Rondinella, Anacapri



Ciammurra - Anacaprese Pasta

- 12 ounces linguine
- 4 to 5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 whole cloves garlic
- 20 fresh anchovies, large pieces
- 1 tablespoon dry white wine
- 3 1/2 ounces pitted green olives, chopped
- Fresh parsley for garnish, if desired
- Salt to taste

Prepare the linguine according to package directions. While the linguine is cooking, prepare the sauce. In a large pan, heat olive oil then add the garlic and sauté. Add the anchovies and sauté until they are golden. Add the white wine and allow to evaporate a moment, then add the chopped olives.

Meanwhile, cook the linguine in boiling salted water and drain when just before al dente. Add the linguine to the pan with the sauce and sauté together another 2 to 3 minutes to finish cooking. Add chopped fresh parsley and salt to taste and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

-Courtesy of Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri

Fish in Crazy Water

- 1 pound sea bass or sea bream
- Sea salt to taste
- 8 cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 1 or 2 teaspoons virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons or more fresh chopped parsley
- Crostini



Clean the fish well and descale it if necessary; place it in a large shallow pan on the stove. Cover it half way with water. Add sea salt to taste. Add the tomatoes and olive oil. Cook over a low heat for 15 to 20 minutes.

When the fish is cooked, serve it warm in its juice with crostini on the side. Garnish with chopped parsley.

Makes 4 servings.

-Courtesy Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri

Basil Puffs

- 1 1/4-oz. package dry yeast
- 1 1/2 cups water
- Pinch of salt
- 3 1/3 cups flour
- Pepper, if desired
- Basil, handful, ripped
- Sunflower oil, for frying

Mix all ingredients except oil together and allow to rest 10 to 30 minutes depending on how warm it is outside. The batter should be elastic and pull back when you put in the spoon. Spoon the batter into hot sunflower oil and fry puffs for 2 to 3 minutes, turning so they turn golden on both sides. Drain on paper towel and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

Variations: Instead of basil, try making them with rosemary, arugula, sage, zucchini flowers or local herbs.

Mini Meatballs with Green Chile Peppers

For the meatballs:

- 5 ounces ground beef

- 2 pieces stale bread (without crusts) dipped in milk
- Handful Parmigiano, grated
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- Salt, to taste
- Pinch of parsley
- 1 egg

For the Green Chile Peppers:

- 7 ounces long, mild green chile peppers
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 whole garlic clove
- 5 ounces cherry tomatoes, about 10 to 15
- Pinch of oregano
- Handful of fresh basil
- Salt to taste

For the meatballs, mix together the ground beef, moistened stale bread, Parmigiano, garlic, salt, parsley and 1 egg. Form into small balls about the size of marbles (about 1/2 tablespoon each). Fry or bake meatballs until browned.

Remove the tops of the green chile peppers (seeds will come out with the stem). In a large pan, heat olive oil and add the whole garlic clove. Add the cherry tomatoes and sauté about 5 minutes until cherry tomatoes are soft.

Add the green chile peppers and cook about 10 minutes, covered. Add the cooked meatballs and toss together for an additional 10 minutes so the meatballs take on the flavor of the green chile peppers. Add oregano, fresh basil and salt to taste. Serve immediately as an appetizer or second course.

Makes 4 servings.

- Adapted from a recipe by Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri

