

PASQUETTA: A CLASSIC EASTER HOLIDAY DESSERT

Tastes of Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

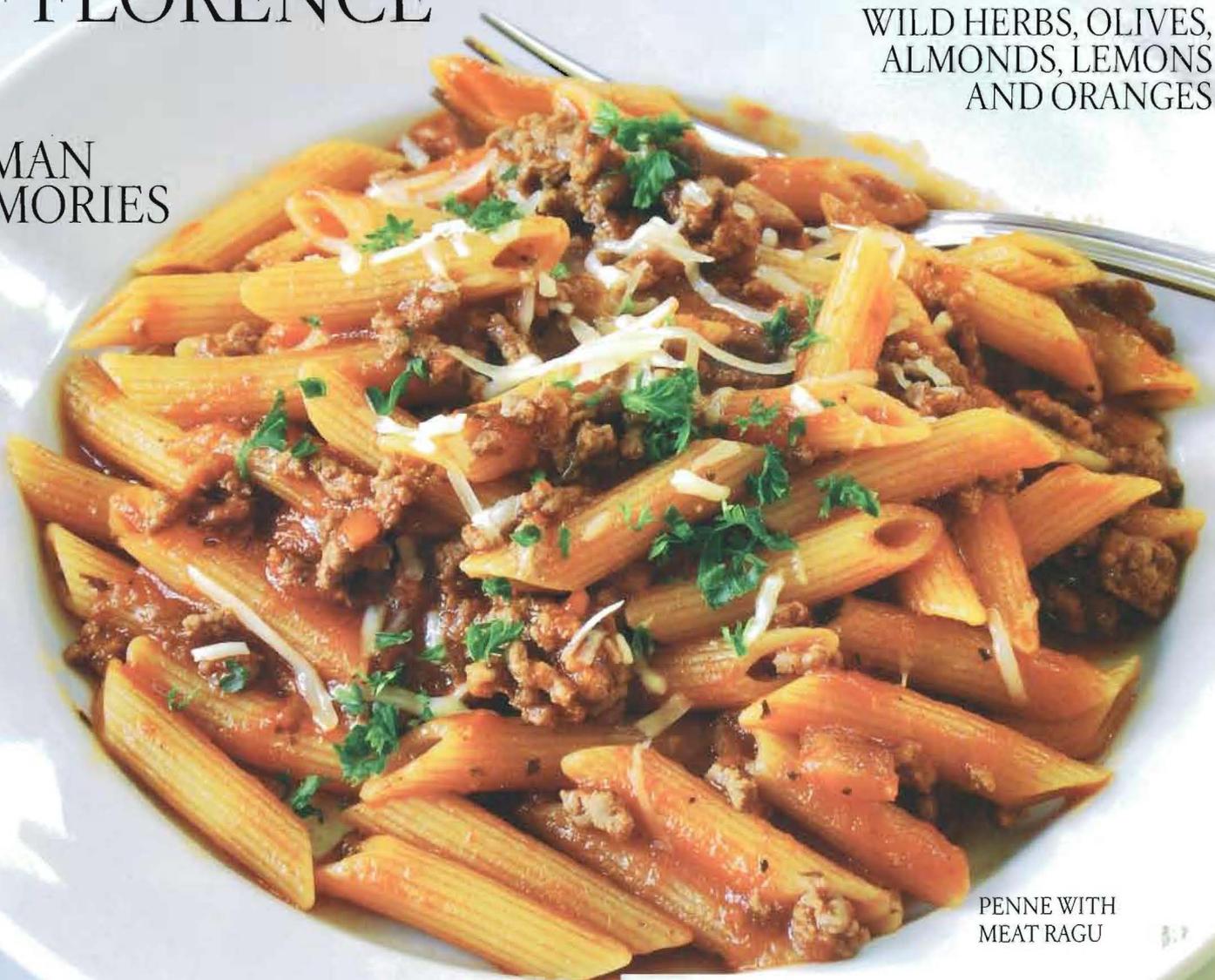
APRIL 2011

GREAT FLAVORS OF FLORENCE

EXOTIC TASTES OF SICILY

WILD HERBS, OLIVES, ALMONDS, LEMONS AND ORANGES

ROMAN MEMORIES



PENNE WITH MEAT RAGU

TUESDAY NIGHTS

SIX EASY SOLUTIONS

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native intelligence



Florence *is* Forever!

Each visit inspires the next return.
Beautiful timeless piazzas filled with
elegant people, lines always at the
Uffizi for yet another peek of
Botticelli's Primavera...

[By *Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*]

native intelligence

A quick moment from the busy Oltrarno, through the Porto Romano and upward is the Poggio Imperiale. An imperial avenue, lined with tall cypress and set between ancient olive orchards, turns into an almost one-way country road that leads to San Felice a Ema, and home to the Villa of Mr. Rodolfo Cacioli. Set in the breast of the Acciaioi Hills, the Villa is a magical property dressed in white. The peacefulness of this area is diverse from the bustle of downtown Florence. Upon settling in, Benedetta greets me, Chef Luciana has dinner waiting, and Signore Rodolfo welcomes me to the land of Kings and Queens past.

undisclosed family from Siena.

"Three hundred years later, the family from Siena sold the property to the Del Riccio family. The Del Riccios expanded the property giving it larger quarters with a symmetric harmonious form. Their symbol was the porcupine and you can see it on the front ground," he says. "At the end of the 1800s, my family bought the villa and here is our family emblem. It was found in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence," he points to the marble shield with three stars and three moons that now is mounted on the wall of the villa.

San Felice a Ema is a territory not traveled by tourists. It is a landscape of rolling hills in muted greens speckled with Tuscan rooftops, singing bell towers, villas of the Italian elite, and on a turn, a glimpse of Brunelleschi's Dome in the distance. The landscape is surreal and looks more like a Giotto masterpiece. Although times have

had fired the terra-cotta tiles that were being made by the thousand in the construction of the Duomo.

"Another recipe incredibly antico is il sugo finto alla contadina. It is a hearty thick sauce made without meat. It is delicious and needs lots of time to cook. The ingredients; sage, celery, parsley, onions, are sautéed until caramelized with pasta tossed in. As it slow cooks the sauce darkens looking like a sugo di carne alla Bolognese, but it contains no meat at all," says Signore Rodolfo.

"My favorite is Pappa al Pomodoro, a hearty tomato soup thickened with day old bread. I remember my Mom would cut the hard bread with a double edge knife just for the soup. She also prepared a minestra of vegetables, without potato, but with cavolo nero – a long black leafy cabbage with an incredible taste and flavor! Ah, La Ribollita another typical Fiorentina soup

An ambrosial apple cake and a steaming espresso ARRIVE AT MY TABLE—A PERFECT ENDING TO AN AFTERNOON AT OMEMO.

A cook at heart and great storyteller of all things Florentine, Signore Rodolfo invites me to his table and begins to tell of the villa's past.

"The villa belonged to Acciaioi family, one of the most powerful and wealthy families of the 14th century Italy. The villa was their summer residence and its architecture tells a story of its illustrious past. Look at the lion rampant which is carved in stone above the door, it was a symbol of their dynasty. The origin of this villa was the *altra* Medieval tower, it was used as a look out military tower to protect the family. For centuries the land of this villa was the exclusive territory of the Medici Family with the crossroad outside, Via Maria Celeste, being the main road from the Chianti hills to Florence," he says.

The Acciaiolis were so connected to their religion that they constructed the elaborate Monastero di Certosa in 1342 at the request of Niccolò Acciaioi. They married into the Medici family and their splendor continued. In 1470 they sold the villa to an

changed since the Florentine greats of Giovanni Boccaccio, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Petrarca, and Galileo Galilei broke bread here, the cuisine has not and the Tuscan bread remains without salt.

"The most traditional dish from Florence, and one I make most often in my kitchen, is Peposo. The Tuscan beef stew is, "molto antico," he emphasizes. "It was made before the discovery of America, so there are no tomatoes in it."

Using *pezzi meno nobili di carne*, translating to less than noble pieces of meat... tough parts of the meat—even an ankle—it is slow cooked with red wine, salt, garlic and lots of black pepper," he explains.

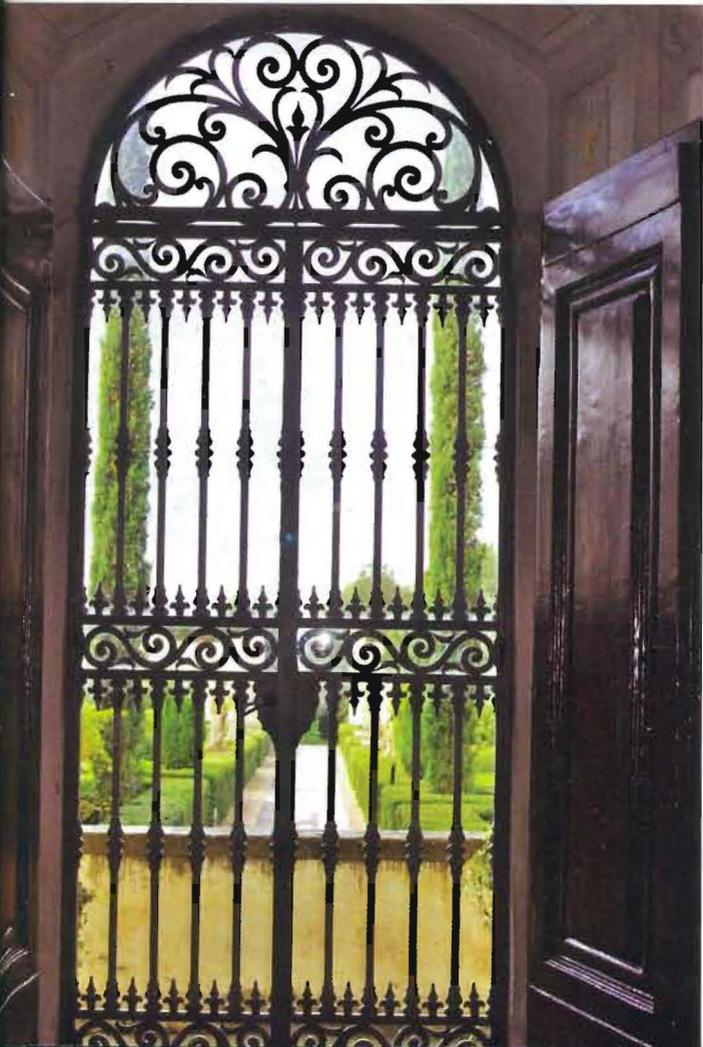
Peposo was first made during the 1430s when architect Filippo Brunelleschi was constructing La Chiesa Santa Maria del Fiore, the famous Duomo in Florence. The beef stew originated in Impruneta, a small town south of Florence, known for terra-cotta. Peposa was slow cooked in clay pots that were slipped into kilns during the night using the residual heat that by day

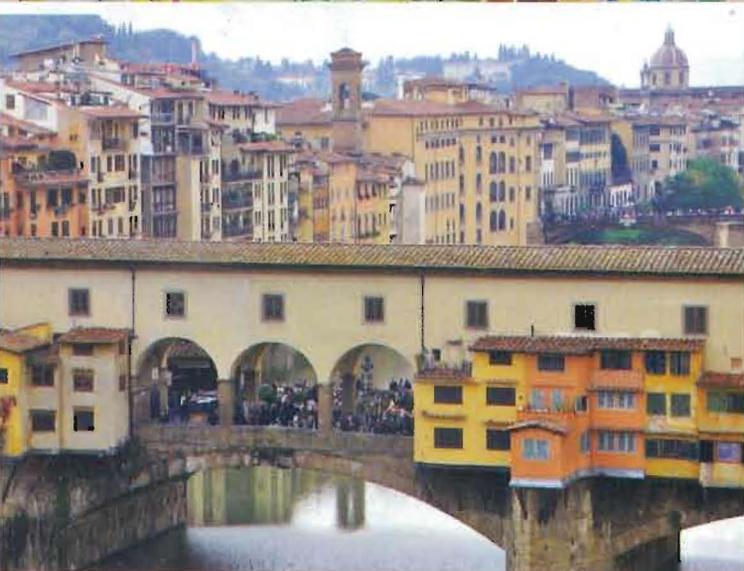
meaning 'reboiled.' At lunch you eat it as is, and for dinner you re-boil it and it tastes even better. These are silly things, but are they're good – incredible and make me smile," he tells the story of his family recipes and the peasant foods for *gente di campagna*.

"Lampredotto is eaten at the outdoor kiosk and La Trippa alla Fiorentina is eaten at home. The best lampredotto, served steaming hot, is at a kiosk at Porto Romano," declares Signore Rodolfo. Made from the stomach of the cow, it is boiled and served on a panino with salt, pepper and salsa verde or piccante. Trippa sold by pushcart vendors is a tradition that started on the streets of Florence in the early 14th century.

Breaking bread with a local is the best way to learn and understand the long story of Italian cuisine. Signore Rodolfo, un *Toscano vero*, gives his food notes on a local trattoria with a big wine cellar.

Named after its former owner, and not Homer the ancient Greek epic poet, is





Trattoria Omero. It's an almost hidden place with an unassuming entrance on the Via Pian dei Giullari. Roseanna with cousins Carlo and Roberto Soldani are the owners. The entrance opens into a half café bar, half mercatino and its shelves are lined with blue paper bags of Antonio Mattei's Prato cantucci, artisan pappardelle, Pecorino di Rocca & Gran Riserva, Porchetta Cotta a Legna, Salumi Toscano, Vin Santo and canvas bags piled high with dry Tuscan beans. A savory smell of all things good fills the air.

A menu del giorno is available in the trattoria including, Praline di Caprino fresco (da allevamento biologico) al tartufo pregiato di Acqualagna, organic artisan cheese shaven with fresh truffles from Acqualagna; Taglierini al Tartufo Bianco, fresh pasta ribbons shaven with white truffles; Lombattina di Vitello al Limone con Cipolline Borettane all'Aceto Balsamico, veal loin chops cooked with lemon sauce and served with aged Balsamic and Bis-tecca alla Fiorentina.

Fettunta, as they are called in dialect, small toasted garlic bread, drizzled with

olive oil and sprinkled with pepper are served on a white plate. And within minutes buttery yellow ribbons of Pappardelle in slow cooked sauce of tomato & cinghiale arrive to the table. Warm Tuscan white beans and a bottle of Chianti complete a traditional Tuscan pranzo, without ever seeing a menu.

Roseanna invites me to the wine cellar for a timely pause after the heavenly lunch. The cellar, home to hundreds of interesting wines including a youngling Chianti Castello di Monnalisa, a super Tuscan Due-mani, and a 1967 vintage il Poggio Riserva Castello di Monsanto with a 350Euro price tag, keeps company to hundreds of prosciutto that hang from wooden beams up above. Although there are over 300 wine varieties in the cellar, Rosanna exclaims, "Chianti is my favorite."

As I return to my table, I hear waiter Signore Antonio informing a foreigner at a neighboring table that formaggio is only put on Pasta al Pomodoro and not Pasta al Tartufo (pasta with truffles). An ambrosial apple cake and a steamy espresso arrive at my table—a perfect ending to an afternoon

at Omero.

Florence is forever! Each visit inspires the next return. Beautiful timeless piazzas filled with elegant people, lines always at the Uffizi for yet another peek of Botticelli's Primavera, and the eternal fire of the chestnut roaster at the corner of Piazza della Repubblica who continues turning castagne on hot coals with weathered hands. Florence's beauty captures everyone. After a full day walking and tasting my way through the Renaissance city of art, I retreat to the Villa offering a close proximity to the city and beautiful peace of the Tuscan countryside.

Cooking with Chef Luciana at the Villa Florentine's Slow Cooking program is available at Cooking Vacations, www.cooking-vacations.com.

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. www.cooking-vacations.com; (617) 247-4112.

Tuscan Meatless Sauce

- 1 medium carrot
- 2 medium onions
- 1 bunch fresh parsley
- 5 basil leaves
- 9 ounces of cherry tomatoes
- Extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup vegetable broth
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Chop the carrot, onions, parsley, basil and cherry tomatoes. In a large saucepan, heat a small amount of extra virgin olive oil and add the vegetables. Sauté over low heat for about 5 minutes until the onion is translucent and the tomatoes softened.

Add the broth, a pinch of salt to taste and allow to cook over low heat for about 30 minutes. When it is ready, the vegetables should be broken down into a smooth and creamy sauce. Add salt and pepper to taste and use as a sauce for your pasta.

Makes 4 servings.



Apple Cake

- 3 large eggs
- ½ cups granulated sugar + 3 tablespoons to sprinkle on top
- 4 tablespoons butter, melted
- ½ cups "00" Italian flour or all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract or zest of 1 medium lemon, as preferred
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup pine nuts
- ½ cup raisins
- 6 medium Renett apples (or another tart apple with a soft flesh, such as Fuji) peeled, sliced thin, and divided

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a large mixing bowl, mix eggs with the sugar until foamy. Add the melted butter, flour, vanilla or zest, baking powder and salt. Mix well and divide in half.

Mix half of the dough with the pine nuts, raisins, and the slices of 5 apples (save about 1 apple to put on top).

Butter and flour a 10-inch round cake pan and pour apple mixture into the pan. Spread the rest of the dough on top, then top with the rest of the apple slices and sprinkle with a generous layer of sugar (a couple of tablespoons).

Bake in a preheated oven at 350°F for about one hour. Use a toothpick to test if it is done, if it comes out dry it is ready.

Makes 8 servings.

Note: "00" Italian flour may be purchased at specialty markets or through various sources online, including King Arthur Flour, www.kingarthurfLOUR.com.



Onion Soup

- 1/3 cup butter**
- 3 cups onion, sliced**
- 2 tablespoons flour**
- Salt and black pepper, to taste**
- 2 quarts vegetable broth**
- Toasted bread cubes**
- Grated Parmigiano Reggiano**

In a large pot, heat the butter over low heat and add the onions. Cover and allow to

cook for about 30 minutes on low. Next add flour, salt and pepper and mix to dissolve the flour. Add the broth slowly, stirring continuously and cook for about 15 minutes.

In the meantime, cut slices of bread into cubes and toast. In each serving bowl, place the toasted bread then pour the soup over the top. Sprinkle with Parmigiano Reggiano and serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.



Tuscan Garlic Bread

- 8 slices of Tuscan bread (without salt)**
- Extra virgin olive oil, as needed**
- 1 clove garlic**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**

Toast bread slices on a grill until golden. Rub each slice with garlic and drizzle olive oil over each one. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste and serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.

Penne with Meat Ragu

- 1 medium carrot
- 2 medium celery stalks
- ½ medium onion
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, Tuscan preferred
- 13 ounces ground beef
- 3 ounces ground pork
- 1 pound peeled tomatoes, pureed or 1 (28-oz.) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon tomato concentrate, optional
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 pound penne lisce (smooth penne)

- ½ cup beef stock, if needed
- Parmigiano Reggiano, grated, if desired

Chop the carrot, celery and onion finely. In a large wide pot, heat olive oil and add chopped vegetables and sauté until the onion is pale in color or blonded. Add the ground meat and sauté until it starts to brown. Add the pureed peeled tomatoes and the tomato concentrate, if desired. Add salt and pepper to taste and reduce heat to low. Cover and cook sauce for about 3 hours over low heat,

stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

When ready to eat, cook the penne in boiling salted water for about ¾ of the cook time (very al dente). Drain and toss in the pan with the ragu, adding a bit of beef stock if needed to dilute the sauce, and finish cooking the pasta for a minute or two with the sauce.

Serve hot with Parmigiano Reggiano grated on top, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

