



Tastes *of* Italia

FEBRUARY 2012

WINTER WARMUP

PIZZA, PASTA AND MORE

One Dish Wonders

SEE PAGE 45



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JANUARY 2012

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EXCURSIONS

ART & COOKING

Satisfy the senses with a visit to
Florence, surrounding yourself with
exquisite art and fine food.

[By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli]



INSPIRING SPIRES: The neo-Gothic Basilica di Santa Croce (Basilica of the Holy Cross) is the principal Franciscan church in Florence.

A few steps from the Basilica Santa Croce in Florence, where the Franciscans built their first church that later became a temple of glory, is Borgo Santa Croce. The Borgo Santa Croce is a small short street lined with Palazzi storici (historical buildings) that date back to the Renaissance. The most famous include the Torre degli Alberti, Palazzo Antinori Corsini, Palazzo Spinelli (a famous restoration school) and the Palazzo Mori Ubaldini degli Alberti. This section of Florence, home to important palazzos where the Renaissance artists once lived, is just a few steps from the Uffizi Galleria. At number 8 is the home and studio of Giorgio Vasari.

Giorgio Vasari was born in Arezzo in 1511. He was an architect, painter, humanist, scholar, art critic, historian, and writer. His home on the Borgo was eventually given to him by Cosimo I de' Medici. On the hot September day that I visited, the shutters of his studio were open. The doors outside, however, remained closed and were open to the public last fall after years of restoration and funding. I was lucky enough to have a peek inside.

With my Moleskine notebook in hand, I looked up to the weathered Florentine shutters at 8 Borgo Santa Croce, on a palazzo crackling in an uneven color of sun-burnt orange. The numbers jumped from number 8 to high digits, and I could not find my way.

Striking a conversation and asking if I needed directions, was Salvatore, a noted architect and Renaissance art restorer. He extended his worn working hand splattered with paint and invited me in. I followed his footsteps, footsteps of Vasari. He opened the door of the master's studio. A ribbon of frescos painted by the hands of the great artist himself wrapped the walls. Pastel images of allegories following a soft Michelangelo-esque style tell the story of time past. Stretching from floor to ceiling they looked almost real.

Vasari, equally a powerful writer, architect and painter, penned *Vite de' Più Eccellenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani*, translating to *Lives Of The Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors And Architects*. The book was written in the 16th century. His extraordinary writing captures biographies and literary lives of Italian artists and is a unique source of information on Renaissance Italy.

His architectural contributions are equally important. When Cosimo I de' Medici wanted

FLORENCE ART: A statue of David stands in the Palazzo Vecchio, in an area filled with artistic treasures.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

to build the Uffizi Palace he called Giorgio Vasari to do it. Vasari, architectural mastermind, designed the Uffizi in 1560 and also the Vasari Corridor. The Vasari Corridor connects the Uffizi Galleria with the royal Palazzo Pitti, formerly home of the Medici Family. His architectural talents also transformed Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella into the Mannerist style of that time. Historians credit him with the term, *Rinascita* or Renaissance.

I learn from Salvatore that as a young boy Vasari studied with Andrea del Sarto, and was a friend of Michelangelo. His frescos adorn the Palazzo della Cancelleria, also known as the Sala dei Cento Giorni in Rome, and the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. He was an important figure for Cosimo I in the creation of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno at the Palazzo dell'Arte dei Beccai, an organization for important Tuscan artists in Cosimo's court.

In 1568, Cosimo commissioned him to paint *The Last Judgment* inside Filippo Brunelleschi's Duomo, and it was completed by Federico Zuccari in 1579. Vasari's work, done in true fresco on smooth plaster, clearly stands out from Zuccari's. Giorgio Vasari died in Florence on June 27, 1574.

"He worked, created and entertained in this house," said Salvatore. "Renaissance Florence boomed and was a time of rebirth for Italy with a great cultural change and much intellectual endeavor. There was a renewed interest in the arts, certainly due following the dark ages," he said.

The Renaissance brought an era of liberation in cooking, too, with the arrival of Arabic spices adding new flavors to Italian cooking. There was an artistic explosion of new food trends during this time, due to the influence of sea traders coming from the East with new spices and food products. In addition to a host of the new exotic spices, coffee was brought to Italy for the first time. And although coffee was not initially accepted into the Italian way of dining, slowly Italians began drinking espresso after dinner and cappuccino for breakfast.

Catherine de Medici also contributed to the Italian Renaissance. Niece to Lorenzo de Medici, she married Henry of Orléans in 1533, and moved to France taking her Florentine cooks and Italian cooking style with her. The Queen's recipe book included Cinestra, a broth made with Marsala, beaten eggs, cinnamon, nutmeg and sugar and Carabaccia, onion soup, which was her favorite.

Although the French referred to her unflatteringly as "the Italian grocer," her Florentine style of cooking using artichokes, peas and beans quickly caught on in France. For example, duck prepared with orange (*canard à l'orange*) and pasta strongly influenced French cuisine at that time. Thanks to Catherine, sorbets, ice cream, fruits in syrup, pastry making, and Italian imports from China such as forks, knives and glasses became the trend in Renaissance Italy and spread their way throughout Europe.

Salvatore tells me about Vasari's favorite recipe, *Acquacotta*, "a traditional Tuscan vegetable soup that comes from the area where the great artist was born. It translates to cooked water and its ingredients are fried onion, celery, tomato, Swiss chard, peperoncino, egg, dried bread, parsley, garlic, salt, olive oil and Parmigiano Reggiano or Pecorino cheese. The soup is slow stewed and served with Chianti wine," he says.

Blame it on the old red and blue Florentine street number system on the Borgo Santa Croce. Lost directions turned into an afternoon lesson in art inside the Sala di Giorgio Vasari - and an appreciation for those who came before us.

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Sicilian Caponata

This relish, served over pita triangles or garlic toast, can be a throwback to more ancient times by substituting powdered almonds for the tomatoes. Sometimes a light dusting of unsweetened cocoa powder is added to this recipe, which is served as an appetizer.

- 1½ pounds eggplant, cut into 3/4-inch cubes, skin left on**
- ¼ cup olive oil**
- 4 inner celery stalks, chopped**
- 1 onion, finely sliced**
- 6 ounces canned tomatoes, minced**
- 1 tablespoon sugar**
- ½ cup red wine vinegar**
- ½ cup capers**
- ½ cup green olives, sliced**
- Salt, as needed**

Place the eggplant cubes on paper towels and sprinkle them with salt all over. Allow to sit for 1 hour, then, using other paper towels, dry them off.

Heat the oil in a skillet until hot but not smoking and sauté the eggplant cubes until golden brown. Remove and drain on paper towels. Add the chopped celery and fry it in the same oil until it is golden, then remove and drain on paper towels. Repeat with the onion until it is soft, then add the tomatoes. Cook for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

In a saucepan, combine the sugar and vinegar and heat them. Add the capers and olives and simmer for about 10 minutes. Add in the eggplant, celery and onion-tomato mixture. Simmer for about 5 minutes, then remove from the heat and allow to stand for about an hour before serving as an appetizer.

Makes 8 servings.



Cassata Siciliana

- 1 large sponge cake, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup Marsala, divided
- 1½ cups ricotta
- ⅔ cup sugar
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 ounces candied fruit, finely chopped
- 2 ounces candied orange peel, chopped
- 2 ounces semisweet chocolate, grated
- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- ¼ teaspoon green food coloring
- 3 tablespoons water
- ½ cup glacé fruit for garnish

Line the sides and bottom of an 8-inch mold with aluminum foil, then line it with sponge cake slices, reserving some to cover the top. Sprinkle with half the Marsala.

In a blender, combine the ricotta, sugar and vanilla and blend on low. Add the candied fruit, candied peel, and the chocolate and mix until well-blended.

Add this mixture to the mold, cover with the remaining slices of sponge cake, and sprinkle with the remaining marsala. Cover the mold with aluminum foil, press down on the molded ingredients, and refrigerate for 3 hours.

In a double boiler, melt the confectioners' sugar and add the food coloring and water. Stir well with a wooden spoon and take care that it does not brown. Unmold the cassata and cover with the icing and the glacé fruit. Slice thinly and serve.

Makes 8 servings.

Baked Hunter-Style Chicken

- 1 organic chicken, whole and chopped into large pieces, bone-in
- Olive oil, as needed
- Oregano, to taste
- Rosemary, to taste
- 2 medium carrots, sliced into disks
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 6 ounces of porcini mushrooms
- 4 to 5 cherry tomatoes, halved
- Sea salt, to taste
- ¼ cup dry white wine

Preheat oven to 400°F.

Place chicken pieces in a large baking pan large enough so they are in a single layer. Splash a bit of olive oil over the chicken, then sprinkle oregano and rosemary generously over the top. Add sliced carrots, onions, mushrooms and halved cherry tomatoes. Sprinkle salt over the top to taste.

Put in the oven and allow to bake for about 5 minutes. Take out of the oven and pour the white wine over the top and turn the pieces of chicken.

Bake for about 45 minutes to 1 hour or until the chicken is golden brown, turning the pieces frequently in the oven so the chicken does not dry out. Serve hot.

Makes 6 servings.

Fried Zucchini with Anise

- 2 quarts salted water
- 1 pound zucchini, cut into very thin rounds, about 1/8-inch
- ¾ cup flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon anise seeds, crushed in a mortar
- Juice of half a lemon

In a pot, bring the water to a boil. Add the zucchini and when the water returns to a boil, drain them immediately into a colander. Dry the slices on paper towels.

Place the flour and salt in a bowl and dredge the slices until covered.

Heat the oil in a skillet and cook the slices over medium heat until they are crisp and browned. Drain them on paper towels and in a bowl toss them with the crushed anise seeds and sprinkle with the lemon juice.

Makes 4 servings.



Zuppa di Cipolle **Catherine de Medici's** **Renaissance Favorite**

- 3 ounces butter**
- 4 large yellow or white onions**
- 4½ cups vegetable stock**
- 1½ ounces flour**
- Salt, to taste**
- 4 slices of bread, toasted and cut into small pieces**
- ½ cup grated Fontina cheese**

Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Slice the onions into fine rings and fry on low heat until soft and golden brown. Stir occasionally to keep the onion slices from sticking. Add the stock and blend in. Gradually add the flour and blend again. Let cook for 20 minutes. Add salt to taste.

Place toasted bread pieces in ovenware soup bowls. Pour the cooked onion stock over the bread. Garnish with grated Fontina cheese. Put the bowls in the oven at 180°F until the cheese is melted.

Makes 4 servings.