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Between — *the* — ***Mountains***

DISCOVER THE **TOWN OF TRAMONTI**, WHERE GREAT
WINES ARE MADE FROM **FAMILY VINEYARDS**.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI





Bread and Tomato Salad

- 4 pieces Pane Biscottato, twice-baked
hard bread (substitute with day-old
toasted wheat bread if needed)
- 3 fresh tomatoes, chopped
- ¼ onion, chopped
- Oregano, pinch, to taste
- Fresh basil, to taste
- Extra virgin olive oil, to taste
- Salt, to taste

Dip the Pane Biscottato in water for a few seconds then allow excess water to drop off. Break it in small pieces and mix with chopped tomatoes, onion, oregano, fresh basil, ripped by hand, salt and a generous amount of olive oil. Mix well to combine and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

*Recipe courtesy of Tenuta San
Francesco, Tramonti*



In Italy, every little paese has its own story, big or small, known or not, and in every story there are invaders, rulers, kings and saints. Sometimes it's the little paese, not yet so traveled, that are the most precious and peaceful. Tramonti is one of them. Set in the Lattari Mountains, which run parallel along the Tyrrhenian sea, Tramonti means between mountains. The town is unknown to most people, however it has a rich and interesting past that first started with the Picenti settlers. They came from what is now the Marche region on the Adriatic Coast. They moved to the mountains when exiled by the Romans. Over time Franciscan monks, Saracen pirates and European literati followed.

One of the first Europeans to discover Tramonti was Henrik Ibsen. European playwright, theatre director and poet. He first set the travel trend to Tramonti in the 1800s where he spent many a mild winter holiday.

Artist and guazzo maestro Peter Ruta summers there and has for the last 65 years, painting en plein air; and most recently, pop singer Justin Timberlake flocked to its hills for a little bit of green peace.

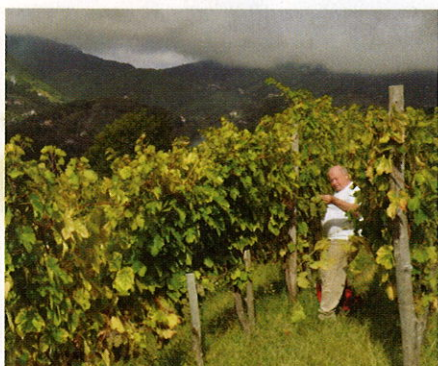
Today Tramonti is known for its superlative wine made by a family of great winemakers at Tenuta San Francesco. The Tenuta or farm is set on pastoral land that is owned by four men, better known as the quattro signori; Vincenzo D'Avino, Luigi Giordano and brothers Gaetano and Generoso Bove. Today is the vendemmia, the first day of the wine picking and the winemakers will cut their grapes by hand. And I am on the road to the vendemmia with my Italian driver, Gennaro; everyone calls him Rino.

There is only one road up to Tenuta San Francesco, and it starts in Maiori with a sharp turn inland off the strada statale 163. As we turn, the shimmering Tyrrhenian Sea disappears and verdant hills appear. The landscape begins to swirl between colors of emerald green and dark deep burgundy, and the vineyard's yellow leaves cover vines that will soon sleep until spring.

We arrive 500 meters above sea level, between plains of small hamlets, where the air is clean and silent. The quattro signori are waiting. Crates of grapes have already been cut and are ready to be pressed. "Ciao buongiorno. Benvenuti a Tenuta San Francesco," everyone shouts. Signor Luigi explains, "The blushed ones are sweeter, they've taken more sun," as he lifts one of the crates filled with



GRAPE LIFE: Top row, this page: Gaetano Bove, Luigi Giordano. Second row: Vincenzo D'Avino, Eva Bove's dolce. Third row: Tramonti vineyard that provides grapes to make the Per Eva white wine. Photos on page 54, top to bottom: The church of San Francesco, the Tintore grapevine, and Sig. Catello Coppola picking grapes. Photography by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli.



Franciscan monks who have lived in the monastery here were also generous and helped the poor farmers. The farmers in turn always gave the monks their milk and chestnuts, along with vino novello, or new wine, which came out in November. And each year the monks offered thanks to the farmers and hung three statues of San Francesco over the doors of their houses, cantinas and animal's stables. They posted the prayer of San Francesco on the largest wooden wine barrel to protect the wine. The monks also gave three incenses and three alici, small anchovy fish, to each family. The incenses were burned in their homes to bring good luck and the alici were used to make a traditional recipe of spaghetti, walnuts, breadcrumbs and alici.

Gaetano explains "my family keeps this tradition alive every Christmas and New Year's, and my wife Eva makes the traditional spaghetti with walnuts, breadcrumb and alici."

He shares a proverb about Saint Francis: San Francesco prende e da, Saint Francis takes and gives." He is the patron of Tramonti and its wine and milk. During bad weather, wind and rain, one monk would ring the church bells by hand sometimes all night long. As long as the church bells could be heard, the farmers knew Saint Francis was nearby. Some say it would take just one ring of the bell before the weather calmed, the sun returned and serenity was restored.

"I remember this story from my childhood and I remember it every time we make wine," he says. Today there are no monks who ring the bells in the tower, and only one monk who lives in the monastery.

"We grow Tintore, Falanghina, Ginestra, Biancolella, Pepella, Aglianico and Piediroso grapes now at Tenuta San Francesco. Four hectares are covered with centennial vineyards to produce the red, Tintore, uve secolari Prefillossera, meaning ancient vines of around 300 years old that survived the fillossera (the phylloxera plague that wiped out about 90% of Europe's grapes), and Piediroso, meaning 'red feet,' because the vines look like purple pigeon's feet. Two-and-a-half hectares are used to produce the Falanghina, Biancolella and Pepella, the white Tramonti wine. The other half hectare is used for a genetic selection of Aglianico and Piediroso," explains Signor Luigi.

Gaetano says, "Pepella is a particular grape because it grows in two steps. Its first growth gives it its sugar and its second growth gives it its color. It's a very rare grape. Ginestra is another rare grape and when you eat it off the vine it tastes like jam. It's sweet, aromatic and perfumed. Falanghina has a high level of sugar, is fresh, and has a strong capacity to make a mineral rich wine that ages well.

Piediroso turns to a deep red color when ripe. Aglianico is a wine that the ancient Romans drank, as was Tintore. Tintore is only found here and probably dates back 2,000 years. Traces were found in ancient vessels that were buried in Roman villas. It's said that Tiberio drank Tintore wine," Gaetano says.

"This year we have a good harvest. Guarda questa pigna di uva. They smell like wine, they don't smell like grapes, but wine," Signor Luigi tells us. His cheeks are rosy like a child who has been playing in the wind all day.

Gaetano's Neapolitan accent deepens, "Tenuta San Francesco was born because of our passion and love for the land of Tramonti. Our families, the D'Avinos, Giordanos and Boves, are three historical famiglie di contadini, families of farmers, who have always been known for the cultivation of the vineyards. In 1994, we founded a cooperative for 50 small winemakers, and our project was to create 'una cantina grande' that would valorize the name Tramonti. The cooperative did not succeed, and so our four families decided to use our hands and land in another way. We planted four hectares of new white grape vines to our vineyard, because in Tramonti's long historical past the grapes were prephylloxera red. We started by selling our grapes to other winemakers, but in 2004 the price of grapes dropped so low that we were not even making enough money to pay for a day's work. So instead of selling our grapes, we decided to make our own wine.

"We needed to, at least, recoup our money for the cost of the grape production," he says.

The men thought carefully on how to make their dream a success, and something struck, "la cucina e' a base di mare!" Knowing that the cuisine of the Amalfi Coast is based on fresh local fish, the men decided to produce a superior white wine that would pair well with fish. They produced Tramonti Bianco in 2004. It was first sold in Positano, and then at the famous Hotel San Pietro. It sold out in three months!

Vincenzo goes on to say, "This gave us the force and courage to restore the abandoned cantina that belonged to my wife's family and we installed wine making equipment. Little by little we acquired other vineyard properties."

Gaetano tells about the first white reserve, "In 2005 Per Eva was born, la prima riserva di Bianco, and I dedicated it to my wife and to all the women who supported us in our endeavor. The grapes used for Per Eva are from the original vineyard of the Franciscan monks, and where my wife Eva was born."

He continues, "4 Spine, la prima riserva rosso, came next, and it translates to the 'four thorns of the rose.' We dedicated this one to

pink colored grapes to his shoulder.

"Ecco provate," he offers me a bunch. "We began our work at 7:30 a.m., there are no hours here, and later we will press. E faticoso, -it's a good tiring work." Signor Luigi is short, strong and walks with a limp. His slanted uneven shoulders tell the story of a man who has worked hard his whole life. He is a winemaker and one of the partners at Tenuta San Francesco. "This is my work, without the vineyard I don't have work. I make a lot of wine, but don't drink too much." He is proud of his vineyard and grapes, even if he doesn't drink much wine.

Their vineyard is named after the great Italian saint, San Francesco, whose 15th century church and convent are in the valley. He was a noble, rich saint and always dressed in un saio, a long caramel colored robe with a rope belt. He always gave money to the poor.

ourselves. Next came E'Iss, la riserva rosso, our red reserve. E'iss is made with the rare prephylloxera Tintore, and is the most prestigious one due to the limited amount of grapes and the age of the vines. E' Iss, translates to 'this is it' in Neapolitan dialect. The volcanic sandy soil saved the vines from the phylloxera. New to the list is Tramonti Rosato, a rose."

A soft voice from behind a rustling vine says, "Sono uno vignaiolo," and the voice goes on to say, "not an owner, nor worker, I am a friend who comes every year to lend a hand in the vendemmia, because my great-grandfather had worked this land." The voice belongs to Signor Catello Coppola.

He holds up a bunch of green grapes and tells me to eat them with their skin on, because it's the skin that is good for our skin. He invites me to stay for lunch explaining that his wife is bringing "panini per tutti con maiale, and everyone will eat together in a picnic lunch."

As I follow the men through the vineyard, I learn about artisan wine making and their passion for the land and vineyard they love. Their faces, still tanned even though it's mid October, tell a story from the heart.

This project has been a heartfelt and cultural one for the four signori. If the men did not keep the winemaking tradition alive, it would have ended. However their dream to keep the art of grape growing and winemaking came true. And this time they've succeeded. "This is our story, E' Iss," says Gaetano.

Today Tenuta San Francesco offers wine tastings and lunches featuring cibo contadino, farmer's food. It is a food culture experience honoring the farmer. On the menu, panzanella, a salad made with twice-baked bread, onions, tomatoes, sea salt and extra virgin olive oil; minestra, a hearty soup made with seasonal greens, beans and ham; and fagiolo tabacchino, a light brown colored bean taking its name after its tobacco color and used in pasta fagioli or stewed with onion and olive oil. Artisan salumi made by Vincenzo and Luigi, homemade baked sausage with vinegar peppers and assorted grilled meats on the open fire are some of the main courses. Seasonal cheeses, like pecorino, naturally raised apricots, apples, figs, walnuts and chestnuts, a steamy espresso and Eva's ricotta coconut cookies are served for dessert.

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.

Sweet & Sour Pork

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 1/4-pound pork tenderloin, cut in pieces
- 2 to 3 Papacelle red peppers, chopped, pickled in vinegar (may substitute 1 fresh red pepper, chopped, and 1/4 cup white vinegar)
- Salt, to taste

Heat olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add pork pieces and sauté for about 2 minutes to brown on all sides. Add Papacelle peppers (or red pepper and white vinegar) and reduce heat to low. Cook, stirring occasionally, for about 15 minutes. Add salt and taste and serve with roasted potatoes on the side, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

- Recipe courtesy of Tenuta San Francesco, Tramonti.

Pasta with Potatoes from Tenuta San Francesco

- 4 to 5 potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 2 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 3 ounces Pancetta, chopped
- 10 ounces Pasta Mista (mixed pasta)
- 1/4 cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano, to taste
- Fresh basil, to taste

In a large pot, cook chopped potatoes in boiling salted water until soft (about 10 minutes). Remove the potatoes and save the water.

In the meantime, heat the olive oil and sauté onion and pancetta together. Add the potatoes and sauté together to flavor.

Bring the potato water back to a boil and cook the pasta until al dente, to taste. Drain and add the pasta to the potato mixture, adding a scoop of the pasta water as needed if it is too dry. Toss together to combine the flavors. Add grated Parmigiano Reggiano and fresh basil, to taste. Serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.

Tenuta San Francesco's Ricotta Coconut Balls

- 7 ounces ricotta
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 1/2 cups shredded coconut, plus additional for dusting

In a mixing bowl, mix ricotta, sugar and coconut until smooth. Roll teaspoonfuls of the ricotta mixture into balls, and roll in coconut. Place on serving dish and chill in the refrigerator until ready to serve.

Variation: add 1 to 2 tablespoons cocoa powder to half of the ricotta mixture, to make half white and half chocolate balls.

Makes about 40 balls.

Ugly But Good Cookies

- 4 egg whites
- 2 cups powdered sugar, divided
- 14 ounces almonds, chopped
- Pinch of cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 tablespoon cocoa powder, or additional if desired

In a large pot, whip egg whites with 1 cup powdered sugar until stiff peaks form. Mix chopped almonds with the rest of the powdered sugar, and gently fold them into the egg whites, stirring from the bottom to keep the egg whites from deflating. Add cinnamon, vanilla and cocoa powder and heat over low heat, stirring gently, for about 5 minutes until the egg whites dry out a bit.

Spoon mixture onto cookie sheets lined with parchment paper and bake in a preheated oven at 300°F for about 15 minutes until lightly browned.

Variations: add additional cocoa powder to part of the mixture to make a darker-colored chocolate variety. Try substituting part hazelnuts/part pistachios instead of almonds, or ground nuts of your choice.

Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

- Recipe courtesy of Tenuta San Francesco, Tramonti.