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ANDREA PANSÀ

It's a

Sweet Life

Amalfi's Café Pansa offers a taste of the sweet life

by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



CHERRY TOPPED: Nicola Pansa with a tray of just-baked Sfogliatella Santa Rosa pastries, a recipe first made by the nuns of Santa Rosa.

"THE PANSA CAFÉ DATES TO 1830. ANDREA PANSA WAS MY GREAT, GREAT, GREAT GRANDFATHER AND FOUNDER OF THE BUSINESS. HIS NAME IS ENGRAVED ON A MARBLE PLAQUE IN THE PIAZZA.

Set in the Gulf of Salerno on the Tyrrhenian Sea is the small, yet historically powerful, town of Amalfi. Once one of the four Maritime Republics along with Venice, Genoa and Pisa, Amalfi has a long story and rich history of dukes that ruled, sea traders who brought the first eggplant and spices to its port, and the Arabs who introduced papermaking.

With origins dating to the fourth century B.C., Amalfi has seen its share of invaders, conquerors, mariners, and tradesmen. Through it all, Amalfi's beauty has never faded and continues to attract visitors from around the world for its history, landmarks and food. The Amalfi Coast is known worldwide for its succulent lemons that are harvested by hand from February through October.

Amalfi, though small in size, has a lot to offer. There is the Piazza Duomo, home to Saint Andrew's Church, the Cathedral of Amalfi which dates back to the 11th century; the Cloister of Paradise, a Moorish-style open-air courtyard; the Basilica of the Crucifix, home to the museum and Crypt of Sant' Andrea, the town's patron saint; and the Pansa Café.

Although not as old as the cathedral, the Pansa Café is a food lover's dream. Nestled at the foot of the stairs that lead to the Piazza Duomo, its elegant outdoor tables, always draped in white linen, spill across the piazza. Waiters arrive at your service dressed in long bistro aprons and carry everything on a silver platter, even if it is just a napkin. Fresh flowers garnish the tables, and when your steamy cup of cappuccino arrives accompanied with a heavenly pastry, you almost have to pinch yourself. I am sitting with fifth-generation owner Nicola Pansa at

the world famous Pansa Café in the Piazza. It is delicious.

When I asked him what his favorite dessert is, he responds, "Ci sono tanti dolci," meaning, "there are many." But his preference is Sfogliatella Santa Rosa and Scorza di limone. The scorze (lemon peel) presents the story of his family's pasticceria, pastry café. And the lemon is the essence of what the family Pansa represents in Amalfi.

"All the lemons we use in our kitchen come from our garden," he says. "Our lemon trees have been cultivated throughout the years in our lemon garden, with love. The fruits arrive in our kitchen, and go straight into the hands of our pastry chefs, who turn them into delicate desserts," he says.

"C'è tanto lavoro ma tanto amore! Sono profondamente orgoglioso," he adds. His words translate to "there's a lot of work but a lot of love, and I am deeply proud of it." He talks with his hands and points to the window that is showcasing handmade chocolates, almond biscotti, Sfogliatella Santa Rosa, candied orange peel dipped in dark chocolate, and sponge cake decked with fresh whipped cream and wild strawberries, and the smell of deep dense Italian coffee fills the piazza.

"The Pansa Café dates to 1830. Andrea Pansa was my great, great, great grandfather and founder of the business. His name is engraved on a marble plaque in the Piazza. In 2010, our family celebrated 180 years of business. We hope to celebrate the next milestone in 2030. It is a date that we are all looking forward to because after all the years that my family has sacrificed, we plan to have a grand celebration. Our family's dream is to pass this business on to our sons and celebrate 200 years in business and six generations of tradition. My brother Andrea

and I are here managing, and we hope our newborn sons will keep the family tradition alive," Nicola explains.

Café Pansa started as a spice shop, an old-fashioned drug store and candy shop, he says. "People came here to buy a little bit of everything: flour, sugar, fruits and vegetables, and have a café, too. There was always a little table in the corner with pastry on it for customers. My great, great, great grandfather followed the trade trends of Amalfi's savvy merchants, expanded and began to sell baking products to the pastry makers," he says. Around 1970, his father, Gabriele Pansa, had an idea to transform the market into a café, selling exclusively high quality traditional pastries.

Today, when you ask any local who has the best pastry and desserts on the Amalfi Coast, their answer is always Pansa. In 2001, the café was awarded the Prestigious Bar Register accolade making it a historical landmark by the Italian Cultural Association as the oldest and most respected producer of confectionery pastry on the Amalfi Coast.

Even prior to Pansa's worldwide recognition, the intellectual set was frequenting Pansa in the mid 1800s. Buongustai, food lovers of all things sweet and delicious, included Henry Longfellow, American poet and educator; Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright; Richard Wagner, German composer and conductor; and, Salvatore Quasimodo; Italian author and poet. They were regulars and found an intellectual spirit.

Nicola goes on: "Each generation has brought new ideas to Pansa; however, the tradition remains. The family strives to keep the old tradition alive, using high quality products and well-trained bakers and pastry chefs. The final product has made its



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pastries, desserts, chocolates and liqueurs known all over the world."

Nine executive pastry chefs work together under the strict supervision of Nicola's brother, Andrea. "He is in charge and manages the kitchen and ordering of the products. I am at the front of the store and manage the staff and greet the guests," he says.

Nicola tells me about the cakes that have been made for famous people over the years, including former President of the Repubblica, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who the family later named a pastiera after.

Nicola reminds me that the pastiera is another one of his favorites along with the Sfogliatella Santa Rosa. The Sfogliatella Santa Rosa dates back to the 16th century and was first created at the Santa Rosa Monastery by the nuns. The pastry's clam-like shape is made with lots of layers, then filled with cream and dark cherries, and baked golden. The nuns first prepared it

in anticipation of the abbot's visit. There was a special celebration for the religious ceremony, and the locals loved the pastry so much they made monetary donations for a piece of the coveted Sfogliatella San Rosa. The donations helped to raise money for the upkeep of the monastery.

"La Santa Rosa is one of my favorite desserts, not only because it has a beautiful story, but also because it is a delicious, gastronomic delight," he says. He has many others, including Marzapane. "It's a Sicilian tradition, not many make it in our region, but we do. The base of Marzapane is made with almond and sugar, in Italian it is called, *pasta reale*. The paste is shaped and painted with natural food coloring recreating mini fruits and vegetables. This dessert was first made for Christmas, but the tourists loved it, and now we make it all year long," he says.

When I tell Nicola that his barista makes the perfect café, he says that makes him very happy. "Only those who know how to make a

café, know the amount of work that goes into making that simple 20-second work of art," he says. His recipe for perfect café: a good machine, fresh beans, high quality milk, and most important, the water. "Our water on the Amalfi Coast is of excellent quality, and that is the secret to our great tasting café. When you have a solid base of good quality products and passionate professionals, it is the recipe for success." These are the words of Nicola Pansa, and he clearly knows the art of success.

Following are some of the traditional recipes you will find throughout Amalfi, some of which you might enjoy at Café Pansa.

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AMALFI FAVORITES: The traditional Sfogliatella Santa Rosa pastries, previous page, shown in stages of decoration, originated with the nuns of Santa Rosa. The delicate dough consists of four buttery layers, which create pastry folds that hold powdered sugar, completed with a cream topping and a cherry. This page shows the city of Amalfi on its seaside perch. Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli.

Mamma Marie Lucia's Anise Biscotti

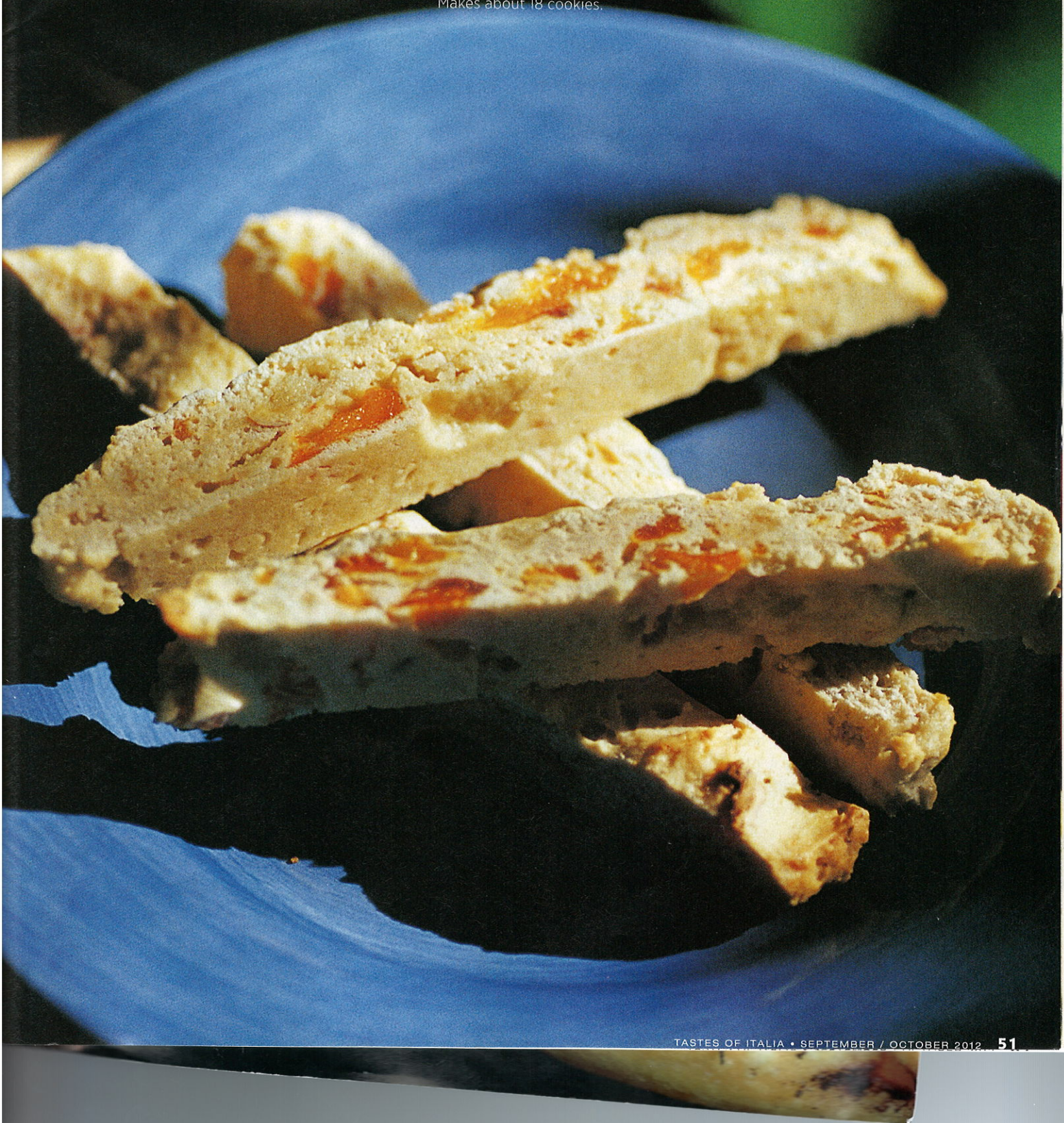
- 3** eggs, well beaten
- ½** cup sugar
- ½** cup canola oil
- 1** tablespoon anise extract
- 3** teaspoons baking powder
- 1** cup chopped almonds
- ½** cup chopped dried apricots
- 2** cups all-purpose flour

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Combine the first seven ingredients and beat thoroughly. Blend in the flour and combine until the dough is soft and sticky. If the dough is too soft, add a little more flour until it is workable. You don't want the dough too soft or too stiff.

Divide the dough in half. On a greased cookie sheet, form the dough into 10- by 2-inch logs. Bake 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from oven and let cool about 5 minutes.

Slice the cookies on an angle and return to the oven for another 5 to 8 minutes.

Makes about 18 cookies.



Sfogliatella Santa Rosa

The Sfogliatella Santa Rosa pastry was first created by the nuns in the Monastery of Santa Rosa at Conca, in Amalfi. The ancient monastery was known to grow medicinal herbs and flowers that were used in cooking and baking during the 16th century. Although years have passed and recipes have changed, Pansa Café in Amalfi continues to make the traditional Sfogliatelle Santa Rosa, which is filled with yellow cream and cherries. The filling calls for semolina flour, which is a basic ingredient traditionally used.

For the pastry:

- 8½ cups all-purpose flour**
- 1¾ cups water**
- ½ tablespoon salt**
- 1½ tablespoon sugar**
- 7 ounces butter or lard, which the original 16th century recipe called for**

For the filling:

- 2 cups water**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- 1½ cups semolina flour**
- 1¼ cups ricotta, drained well**
- 1 cup sugar**
- 3 eggs**
- A pinch of cinnamon**
- ½ cup candied orange peel, cubed**
- Dark cherries, chopped (if you are using canned cherries, drain them well)**
- Confectioner's sugar for dusting**

For the pastry dough:

Carefully blend the flour, water, salt and sugar in a large mixing bowl. Knead the dough with your hands, not a machine, using a folding motion until all the flour is absorbed. The dough will be smooth, elastic, and firm. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate for about 3 hours. When the dough is chilled, divide it into 4 pieces and either use a rolling pin to roll out each piece or a pastry machine, stretching it very thin in a long layer, about 6 inches wide and 16 inches long. If you're using a pasta machine, set it to the last notch. You should end up with four thin sheets of pastry. Brush melted butter on top of the first pastry sheet, then place a second pastry sheet on top of the first. Brush with butter, then repeat with the third and

fourth pieces of pastry. You will end up with four thin pastry sheets stacked on top of each other. Starting at one of the 6-inch wide ends, roll up the pastry into a tight, single log. Wrap the log in cotton pastry cloth or plastic wrap and refrigerate for another 4 to 5 hours. After the pastry has chilled, preheat the oven to 375°F. Remove the pastry from the oven and slice into pieces, about 1-inch wide. It will look like a rolled up ribbon. Take each slice of dough and shape it into a cone or shell-like shape by using your finger to push out the layers of dough. Place on a baking sheet prepared with parchment paper. Set aside.

Prepare the filling:

Bring the water to boil. Combine the salt and flour, then add it to the water. Mix well and remove from heat to cool. In the meantime, in a separate bowl, mix together the ricotta, sugar, eggs, cinnamon, candied orange peel, and dark cherries. Increase the oven temperature to 390°F. When the mixture in the pan is cool, add the ricotta mixture to it and blend well. Stuff each sfogliatella pocket with the filling and pinch the pastry closed. Place on the baking sheet and brush each pastry with melted butter. Bake 20 minutes or until golden. Cooking time can vary depending on the size of the pastry, as well as other factors, such as oven variations, altitude, and humidity, so check the pastries to make sure they don't burn. Remove from the oven. When cool, dust with confectioner's sugar. You may also reserve (or prepare a second batch) some of the ricotta cream filling for garnish. Simply add a dollop to the top of the pastry and add a cherry.

Makes 48 pastries.

Mamma Marie Lucia's Homemade Candied Orange Peel

- 2 medium oranges**
- 1½ cups sugar**
- ⅓ cup water**

Cut 2 medium oranges lengthwise into quarters. Using the back of a spoon, pry back the quartered peels. Scrape away the pith (the soft, white part inside the peel).

If the pith is left on, it will be bitter. Wrap and refrigerate peeled fruit for another use. Cut the peels into ¼-inch-wide strips. In a 2-quart saucepan, combine sugar and water. Bring to boiling, stirring constantly. Add the peel strips. Return to boiling; reduce heat. Simmer, uncovered, over medium-low heat about 15 minutes or until peel is almost translucent, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat. Using a slotted spoon, remove peels from the syrup, allowing each spoonful to drain over the saucepan about 30 seconds. Transfer peels to a wire rack set over waxed paper. Set cooked peels aside until cool enough to handle but still warm and slightly sticky.

Roll the peels in additional sugar to coat. Continue drying on the rack for 1 to 2 hours. Store, tightly covered, in a cool, dry place for up to 1 week. (Or, freeze for up to 6 months).

Mamma Marie Lucia's Citrus Biscuits

- 3 whole eggs**
- ½ cup sugar**
- ½ cup whole milk**
- ⅓ cup canola oil**
- 2 teaspoons baking powder**
- ½ teaspoon baking soda**
- 1 teaspoon lemon extract**
- ½ teaspoon rum extract**
- 1 teaspoon orange extract**
- Zest of 2 oranges**
- ½ cup sliced almonds**
- 3 cups all-purpose flour**


Sugar for topping

- ½ cup sugar**
- 2 to 3 tablespoons water**

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

In a large bowl, beat the eggs well. Add the sugar, milk, oil and the rest of the ingredients except the flour. Mix thoroughly. Add the flour slowly, mixing until dough is workable. On a well-greased cookie sheet, form two logs, each about 10 inches long and 1 ½ inches wide. Top biscuits with sugar syrup. Bake until almost golden brown. Remove from the oven and wait a couple of minutes. Slice into ¾-inch pieces. Bake another 5 minutes.

Makes about 20 biscuits.



Lemon Rosolio Liqueur

Many Italians make their own liqueurs, starting with a base of grain alcohol or vodka. This is a basic recipe for lemon liqueur. Add your own herbs and spices as desired, but always make sure you're using organic ingredients that are free of pesticides.

- 1 organic lemon**
- 1½ cups of 90 proof vodka**
- 1 stick cinnamon**
- 3 cloves**
- 1 handful of organic rose petals or about a half cup (optional)**
- 1½ cups sugar**
- 1 cup spring water**
- 1 or 2 green olives, for garnish**

Wash the lemon well and peel only the outer yellow part. Pour the vodka into a clean sterilized Bell or Mason jar. Add the cinnamon, cloves, and rose petals. Put the lid on the jar and store in a cool, dry place for 5 to 7 days.

After a week, take sugar and water and slowly boil into a simple syrup. Let cool. When completely cooled, add the mix from the jar into the syrup. Let sit for about 30 minutes, then strain. Store in airtight jars in a cool, dry place for a couple of months. Serve with a green olive, if desired.

Makes about 3½ cups of liqueur.