

COOKING WITH FAMILY AT THE HOLIDAYS

Tastes of Italia

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DECEMBER 2013

THE INDULGE ISSUE

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An Italian-Style Holiday Feast

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The sleepy hilltop town is a food lover's dream

AGEROLA

Specialties range from traditional breads like pane biscotto and taralli to Torta al Limone dessert.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

It's a tradition in Italy that the first granddaughter takes the name of her nonna or grandmother of the maternal side. So my name is Irma," says the home cook who owns a country guesthouse in Agerola. She's telling me about the local cuisine and culture, reflecting on her own grandmother as she speaks.

"My nonna was an active woman who had a big garden and pulled the weeds one-by-one by hand. Lemon trees shaded her land. She kept tradition alive and made biscotti and taralli (a pretzel-like snack food) in her wood-burning brick oven. But most importantly, she taught me how to cook," she says.

Irma was born and raised in Agerola, a hilltop town that overlooks Amalfi. This part of the mountainous region cuts off from the Amalfi Coast and is almost frozen in time. Things move slowly in Italy, and they move slower in Agerola. It is not on most travelers' places to stop, yet it boasts a rich history and offers much to see and do.

Set between the villages and hamlets of Bomerano, Campora, Pianillo, Ponte, San Lazzaro, and Santa Maria, is this gorgeous, green hilltop

town. It is a food lover's heaven. Known for its biscotti, taralli, fiore di latte, salumi and salsicce (link sausages) made by artisan's hands, Agerola sits in the shadow of the more popular Ravello and Positano. But it is a gem in its own right, and its food traditions are one example.

The pane biscotto and taralli are made from local recipes that have been passed down for centuries by word of mouth; each family claims that their recipe is the best. Ingredients are simple and include water, flour, fennel, pepper, sea salt, and yeast. The method is the same for both pane biscotto and taralli. You start out with the dry ingredients, which are mixed in a bowl, the water is then added and the dough is kneaded until smooth. The dough is left to rise (for about a half hour), then it is rolled by hand into ciambelle, (doughnut-like shapes) and treccie (braids). Next they are immersed into boiling water for about two minutes; when they rise to the top they are taken out, put on a rack to drain, put into a hot oven and baked until golden brown.

Both are ancient baked breads that are cooked



DENSE AND RICH, this Chocolate Walnut Cake brings together dark cocoa and walnuts, making it the perfect dessert for the holidays—or any time of year. Sprinkle with confectioners sugar just before serving.



FICO D'INDIA (Indian fig), known in English as cholla pear cactus, produces fruit that can be used to make jams and jellies, and also provides a festive look to the arid region along the Amalfi Coast.

twice. They were once packed in tins by sailors and travelers on horseback because they have a long shelf life. Versatile enough to be dunked in a morning cappuccino, or broken into pieces and tossed with fresh chopped tomatoes, basil, olive oil, salt and pepper or soaked in a glass of red wine, they make the perfect spuntino, salty or sweet. The pane biscotto, the big rounds of bread (the size of a bagel) are used to make Caponata, a refreshing salad consisting of chopped ripe cherry tomatoes, fiore di latte (local fresh cheese) that has been cut into small pieces, Cetara tuna, black olives, red onions, extra virgin olive oil, green basil and sea salt. The juice of the tomatoes and extra virgin olive oil are absorbed by the biscotti, and the flavors melt together for a perfect Mediterranean poor man's salad.

I watch Irma start to prepare her signature recipe called totani e patate (squid and potatoes) in her homey country kitchen. Copper pans hang from up high, wooden shelves are lined with jars of homemade jams and jarred tomatoes, and a bouquet of dried thyme tied tight in twine dangles on a golden hook. She talks while she cooks, and explains the regional breads. "The breads here have a soft texture, which is a big contrast to the traditional hard biscotti and taralli. They are made with white, wheat or corn flour. We put the flour in a big mixing bowl, make a well, then add the yeast and water. Then we let it rise and bake it in the oven. There are still lots of families who have wood-burning brick ovens, and together they make bread at home. In my family we make bread and pizza and our guests are always invited to join in," she says.

Her big eyes, the same color as the olives on the pizza, light up as she explains how famous the pizzaioli are from Agerola. "Because we are in the province of Napoli and in the heart of Campania, pizza is rolled out and spun into wood-burning brick ovens by everyone. It's a staple food, and Saturday night in Agerola is pizza night." She slices and dices freshly caught totani (squid) into bite size pieces, as she shares her knowledge on Agerolese food. "Agerola is home to more pizzerie, pizza shops, per square meter than in any other place in Italy. Each region makes its pizza differently, and in Agerola we make it a little thicker!" she says.

Fiore di Latte, fresh cow's milk mozzarella, is another speciality of Agerola. In fact, the mountains themselves are called Monti Lattari or Milk Mountains. The local cheese artisans make their living by producing some of the finest cheeses in Italy, such as Provolone Del Monaco,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOCKING VACATIONS

NAMED FOR
HER maternal
grandmother, Irma,
the owner of a
country guest house
along the Amalfi
Coast, delights
visitors with stories
of the recipes she
teaches them to
prepare.

caciotta and ricotta. Cheese makers rise with the sun, boil the milk, add the rennet, and hand-mold it into braids and rounds—large and small. Each producer makes small quantities supplying only the regions from Sorrento to Salerno. By early morning the cheese is already in the markets, and by mezzogiorno (midday), it is sold out.

Although the region of Campania is hailed Felix Campania, which means “happy countryside” because of its vast assortment of vegetables, sausage is also an important staple food. In the old days, people cooked and ate what they had in their gardens and farms. Since cows, pigs, lamb and goats graze wildly on the hillsides, butchering and making cured meats was natural. Handmade sausage (fresh and dry) spiked with fennel, red hot chili pepper and cheese, along with pancetta, prosciutto and salumi, are typical meats that are produced here. “Each family has their own recipe for homemade sausage, of course never sharing the recipe with the next,” Irma says.

She has now added the totani to the steaming pan of fried potatoes. In a few moments the blend has caramelized into a sweet and salty fusion. The smell is heavenly.

Irma is passionate about her craft and invites those who stay at the guesthouse to join in and pick fruits and vegetables from the garden, chop, slice and dice in hands-on cooking classes making traditional Agerolese lunches or dinners that include a seasonal appetizer, pasta, main course and dessert with a toast of wine included.

Her favorite recipes are “any and all pasta...pasta con calamaretti, pasta with little squids; schiallatella e vongole, a thick pasta noodle with clams; pasta with red cherry tomatoes, capers and alici di Cetara; and paccheri con zucca, oversized pasta tubes sautéed with fresh pumpkin,” she says.

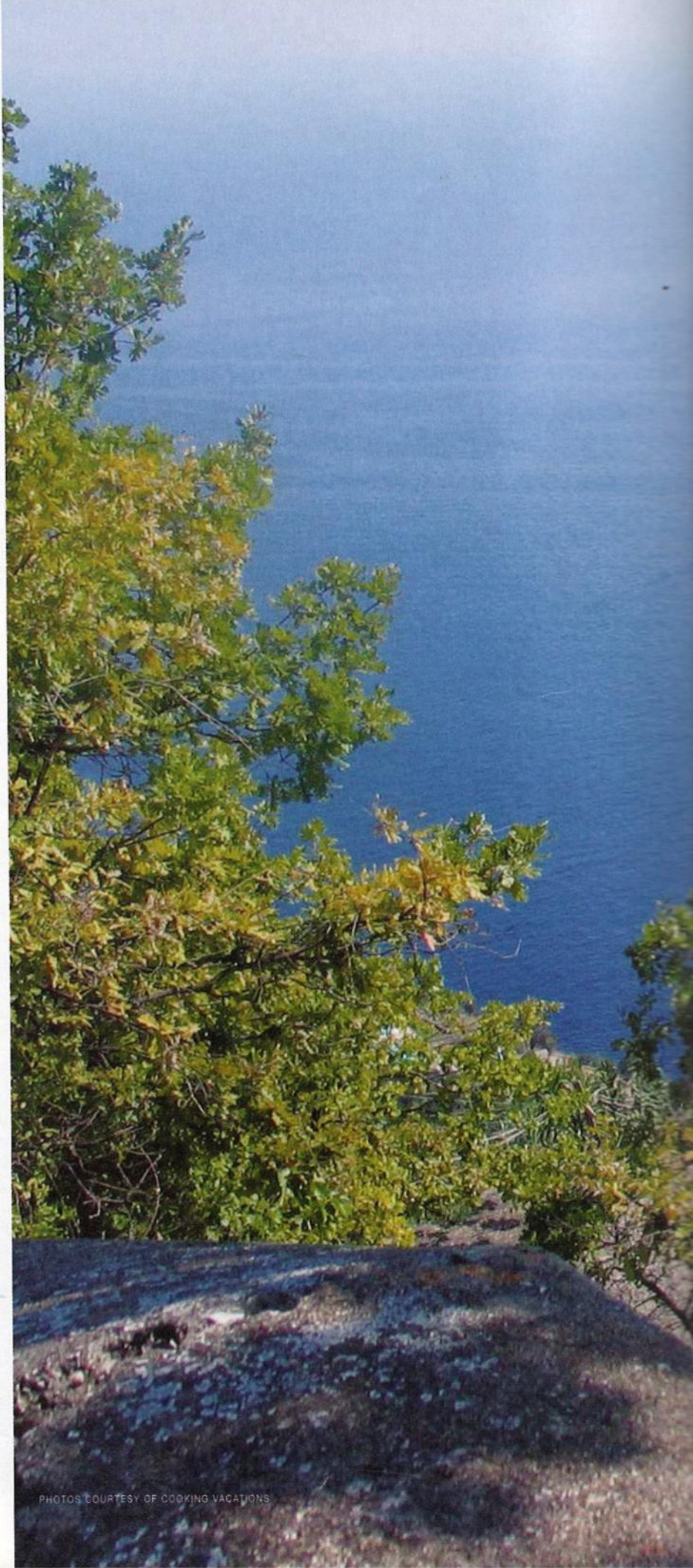
“What is your favorite thing to eat?” I ask her. “Polipi! I love octopus prepared any style—in a salad, alla Luciana, with pasta. I prefer polipi over sausage any day, and always followed by a big piece of torta di limone for dessert!” she says.

To visit Irma’s Kitchen, see www.Cooking-Vacations.com

Travel Notes

When you visit Agerola and its surrounding communities, bring your camera or sketchpad and capture Mother Nature at her best. Go straight to the high point for a natural view spanning the Punta, a natural terrace that takes visitors between sea and sky. Visit the former Castle Avitabile, (Colonia Montana), the Castel Lauritano and the Chiesa di San Pietro Apostolo. Take the scenic five-hour hike to the Vallone delle Ferriere waterfall, starting from San Lazzaro. Drive along the winding road from the Amalfi Coast up into town and see murals where artists have created patchworks of art en plein air. And, of course, sample the food along the way.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF COOKING VACATIONS



THE VIEW OF the Church of San Michele in Furore, as seen from Irma's garden. Agerola is part of the municipality of Furore, which lies along the Amalfi Coast.

the Recipes

Irma's Torta al Limone

Flour and butter for preparing the pan

- 4 large eggs
 - 2 cups sugar
 - 1 cup milk
 - 1¼ cups butter, softened
 - Zest of 2 medium lemons
 - 4 cups all-purpose flour
 - 1 tablespoon baking powder
- For the simple syrup:
- ½ cup sugar
 - Juice of 2 medium lemons
 - 3 tablespoons water
- 2 tablespoons apricot jam
 - ⅓ cup crushed hazelnuts

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Butter and flour a 10-inch round cake pan; set aside.

In a bowl, beat the eggs and add 2 cups sugar until pale and fluffy. Continue to mix, quickly adding the milk, butter, zest from the lemons, and the flour sieved with the baking powder. When everything is well mixed, pour the batter into the cake pan. Bake about 45 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool.

Meanwhile, prepare a simple sugar syrup. In a pan, combine the juice of the 2 lemons with ½ cup of sugar and 3 tablespoons of water. Bring to a boil and cook until the sugar is well dissolved, about 5 minutes. Let cool slightly, then pour the syrup over the cake, soaking it thoroughly. Spread with the apricot jam and sprinkle with crushed hazelnuts.

Makes 8 servings.

Pasta and Squid

- 2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, flattened roughly
- ⅛ teaspoon dried chile pepper
- 1 pound squid, cleaned and chopped into rings
- 8 ounces cherry tomatoes, halved
- 4 ounces peeled canned tomatoes cut

into pieces

- 1 pound tube-like pasta
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley

Heat the olive oil in a large pan. Add the garlic and chile pepper. Sauté. Add the squid rings. Let cook for a few minutes until some of the liquid in the pan has evaporated (liquid will be released from the squid). Add both types of tomatoes and mix well. Cover and cook for 10 to 15 minutes over medium heat.

Cook the pasta according to manufacturer's directions. When al dente, drain the pasta and reserve 1 cup of the water. Add the pasta to the pan and toss. Cook about 1 minute, adding a little pasta water if desired. Add the parsley and serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.

Chocolate Walnut Cake

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 1 rounded teaspoon baking powder
- 1½ cups dark brown sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup milk
- 3 ounces high quality dark cocoa powder
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ⅓ cup walnuts, finely chopped
- ½ cup olive oil
- Confectioner's sugar for dusting

Preheat oven to 350°F, then butter and flour an 11-inch round cake pan. Set aside.

Sieve the flour, salt, and baking powder into a bowl and mix well. In a different bowl, beat the sugar and eggs together. Slowly incorporate the flour mixture, adding the milk a little at a time to keep mixture moist. Sieve in the cocoa powder and the cinnamon, stir in the walnuts, and lastly, mix in the oil until the batter is well mixed and smooth. Pour batter into prepared

cake pan and bake for 40 to 45 minutes, testing to see when it's done by inserting a skewer into the center. It should come out clean. Be careful not to overcook as this makes the cake dry instead of keeping it moist.

Remove the cake from the oven and let it rest for 15 minutes. Just before serving, dust with confectioners' sugar. If you do dust it too far in advance, the cake's moist surface will absorb the sugar and you won't be able to see it.

Makes 10 servings.

Caponata

There are many variations to this traditional Italian salad. The amounts listed below for the seasoning ingredients are suggestions; you can adjust them to your taste. Also, if you're using taratelli or another very crispy bread, you might want to soak the bread first to soften it. This is a matter of taste; some people prefer the bread a little on the crispy side.

- 3 pieces of day-old toasted Italian bread
- 18 ounces (about 2 cups) cherry tomatoes, cut into halves or thirds
- 7 ounces fresh mozzarella, cut into pieces
- Small bunch of fresh basil, leaves torn into small pieces
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Break the day-old bread into pieces. Take a large bowl and add the mozzarella, tomatoes, basil, dried oregano and the garlic. Add the olive oil, vinegar and salt. Adjust seasonings according to taste. Let rest about 5 minutes. Add the broken bread and mix well before serving. You can also add tuna, olives, eggplant, or other ingredients that suit your taste.

Makes 4 servings.



PASTA AND SQUID
is a traditional recipe
of the Agerola region.