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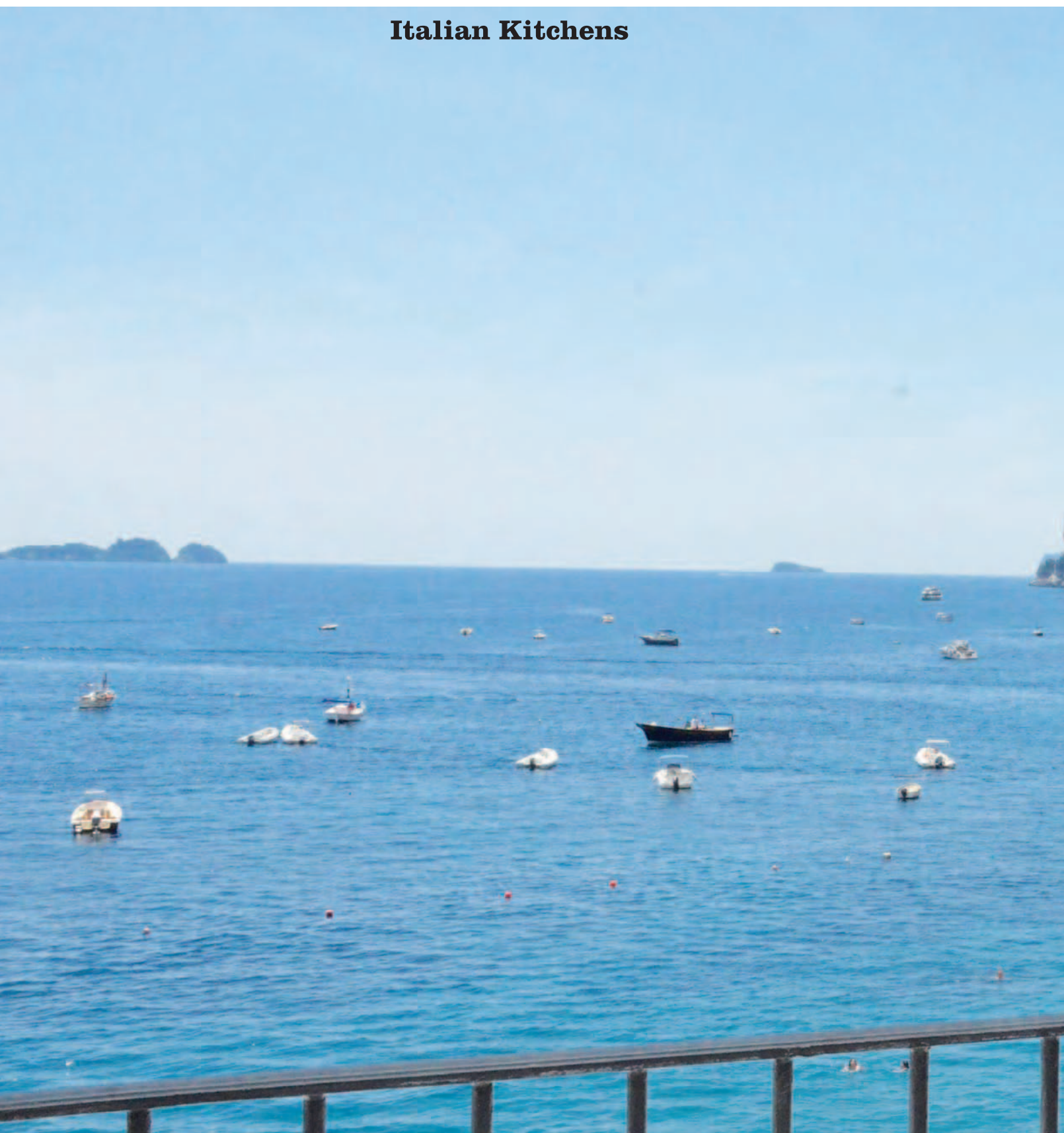
INSIDE
ONE OF
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RESTAURANTS

SECRETS
OF COOKING
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Italian Kitchens



KITCHEN WITH



A VIEW

Imagine a tall, dark and handsome Italian chef preparing your Mediterranean dinner in a castle on the sea.

Story and Photos Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Italian Kitchens

"At 14 years old I had my first job in a restaurant, but my passion for cooking started at a much younger age," says Emilio Desiderio, executive chef at Rada Restaurant in Positano, a seaside gem along the Amalfi Coast. "I always loved to watch and help my mamma cook in her kitchen, and often went to work with my father who was a waiter. I would just watch with fascination," he says.

Rada refers to the part of the harbor where the boats are docked and is the newest addition in the Russo restaurant empire which includes Restaurant Chez Black and Music On The Rocks in Positano.

Chef Desiderio had his first taste of the kitchen when a local gave him a job at San Vincenzo's Ristorante, famous at that time in his home town of Vico Equense. He attended the Scuola Alberghiera (a five-year culinary school for aspiring chefs in Vico) by day, and by night worked in the restaurant gaining hands-on experience in the kitchen.

"When I completed my studies, I joined Giuseppe Russo (known as Peppe around town in Positano), owner of Le Terrazze, 10

erman, arrives carrying a basket of freshly caught fish; assistant chef Antonio is carefully inspecting the just-picked zucchini flowers that will soon be stuffed; and Anna, the pastry chef, removes a fresh-baked torta di pere (a pear tart) from the oven.

Chef Desiderio explains that ingredients are bought fresh and raw because everything is made in-house. For a sample, we start with antipasto and he suggests the Trio di Carciofi, a selection of artichokes prepared three different ways and served on a long plate. One artichoke is roasted served on a piece of toasted Grecian bread; the second one is baked parmigianina style and served on a bed of roasted tomato; and the third is a flash fried fiore di zucca (squash flower) that is stuffed with artichoke and artisan provola di Monaco (a local fresh cheese).

For the fish lover, there is La Triglia (red mullet fish) filleted and stuffed with candied tomato, seared and then served on a bed of jeweled green pea gelée garnished with burrata (a cheese from Murgie Puglia which literally translates to buttered) and sweet green peas.

(a variety of the Amalfi Coast) and orange citrus sauce.

Another favorite is the Caramella di Caprino, literally translating to small candies because of their shape. They're stuffed with artisan goat cheese in Salsa Nerano, a creamy sauce of zucchini and Provola del Monaco.

La Fettucella al Nero di Seppia con na Spuma di Ricci di Mare may be a long name to translate; however, its sweet taste and colorful presence on the plate is a show stopper. A light veil of fresh sea urchin cream is laced over black ink squid pasta (made in-house) and then garnished with a lightly scented ginger foam. It dazzles.

Red sea bream encrusted in black sea salt is served with seasonal vegetables and new potatoes. This fish tops the charts. There is local Tonno Scottato, seared tuna served on a bed of lentils accompanied with a pear that has been slow cooked in red wine. Traditionals such as the Zuppa di Pesce, which is a soup consisting of assorted fish, pezzogna, branzino, ricciola, tonno, rombo (or whatever fresh catch of the day brings

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years ago. This year marks my eleventh year with the Russo group, and my first year in Rada," he says.

At 32 years old, Chef Desiderio has a team of seven chefs in his kitchen. He has cooked for Denzel Washington (a regular guest), Lenny Kravitz and Russell Crowe, to name a few. But, he says, "It does not matter who is at the table, what matters is that they like what is in their plate."

His style of cooking is "traditional and revisited," he says. "We use an artistic spirit to bring out the best with seasonal ingredients of the region," he says, adding that the cooking style of the Amalfi Coast is one of the most beautiful.

As we work our way around the kitchen, the atmosphere heats up: Nicola, a local fish-

Dazzling even the non-fish lover is the signature appetizer which is a purée of baccalà layered between whipped airy potatoes that have been scented with rosemary, a single dark layer of house-made whipped black olive paste running through the center of the all-white creation. It is served in a martini glass and is garnished with edible flowers.

Another winner is L'astice, local lobster steamed in vapor and ever so lightly smoked over cherry wood chips (giving it a subtle hint of cherry), which is served out of its shell on a crunchy brown rice cake and garnished with a passion fruit cream.

One of the signature pastas of the season is Cappelletto di Baccalà served with a shellfish sauce with gamberi rossi, translating to the local small red shrimp and a sfusato lemon

in), is accompanied with a variety of clams, shrimp, calamari and mussels and served in an individual-sized copper pan.

Mediterranean sushi is new on the menu and uses local fish reinvented with a twist such as sushi rolls stuffed with shrimp and lemon infused panko. There is also sashimi, tartare and carpaccio. For the turf-minded, Chef Desiderio serves up Chateaubriand steak for two.

His kitchen is more than a kitchen, it's a studio of artful additions and lined with brimming silver utensils, glass containers of toasted pinoli, dried flower petals and a walk-in refrigerator that looks more like a California closet made for food. When I ask him about the small golden flakes in a glass he responds, "I use them for decoration. I call



Italian Kitchens

them rice chips. First I boil brown rice, puree it in a food processor, spread it wax paper thin on a cookie sheet, and bake it until crisp." It becomes a crispy edible garnish that adds dimension and color to a plate.

All of the aromatic edible herbs, including rosemary, thyme, marjoram, edible flowers, sage, basil, mint and fennel, are raised organically in the chef's garden. Each day there are nine different types of bread in the kitchen from a lievito madre that is over 10 years old. "Bread makes a meal," he says.

While he has accomplished much in his short career, he strives to learn more and improve. Chef Desiderio is currently enrolled in an advanced culinary class in Naples which will allow him to teach other aspiring chefs.

With an appreciation for a wide range of foods, including sushi, this young and dynamic chef has earned his position in a kitchen with a view.

The Russo Restaurant Empire

Salvatore Russo, hailed as the first and original restaurateur in Positano, opened Chez Black in 1949, just after World War II. It instantly became a landmark dining institution. "It was called Chez Black because the foreigners who came to Positano during the '50s could not pronounce my father's name, so they started calling him black...the man with dark skin," says Peppe Russo. Today, Salvatore Russo works with his two sons, Giuseppe (Peppe) and Gianfranco; but "the real boss is my Mamma," says Peppe, referring to his mother, Titina.

You will find the entire Russo family seven days a week working at their restaurants along Positano's Spiaggia—the main beach and ferry port. And when Denzel Washington is in town, you will find him dining with them.

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SEASIDE DINING is part of Rada's appeal. The restaurant hugs the Positano coast. Fresh fish is a popular menu item. Restaurateurs Salvatore and Titina Russo at Chez Black in Positano.

Italian Kitchens

RECIPES

Chocolate Lava Cake With Strawberry Jam

- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- 5 large eggs, beaten
- 7 ounces dark chocolate
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour, sieved
- 1 heaping teaspoon of dark cocoa powder, sieved
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

For the Strawberry Jam:

- 2 pounds fresh or frozen strawberries
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- 3 sprigs of mint

To make the strawberry conserve, place the strawberries and sugar in a thick-based frying pan and cook over medium heat until the strawberries begin to caramelize. Take off the heat and cool.

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Meanwhile, in a bowl, beat the sugar with the eggs until pale and fluffy. Set aside. In a double boiler, melt the chocolate with the butter. Remove from heat and allow to cool until warm. Fold the melted chocolate into the egg mixture.

Adding one ingredient at a time, gently fold in the flour, cocoa powder, and vanilla to the chocolate mixture.

Grease individual molds with butter and flour (a muffin tin works nicely for this as well). Pour the batter into the molds and bake for about 8 minutes. Do not overbake.

Turn the individual cakes onto serving plates and add a spoonful of strawberry jam. Garnish with a few fresh mint leaves. Serve immediately.

Makes 8 servings.

Note: If you prefer, you may use prepared strawberry jam for the topping. Just heat it slightly before serving.

Catch of the Day Fisherwoman Style

- 2½ pounds white fish, such as cod or sea bass
- Sea salt
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic
- 12 cherry tomatoes, halved
- 20 small new potatoes, scrubbed (about five per person), halved
- 1 tablespoon capers
- 4 ounces black olives, halved
- $\frac{1}{8}$ cup white wine to cover the bottom of the pan
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cups fish stock

Fresh parsley, finely chopped
Rosemary sprig, for garnish, if desired
Lemon zest, for garnish, if desired

Clean and fillet the fish, leaving the skin on. Brush olive oil around all sides of the fish. Salt the fish on the skin side only.

In a searing hot pan, place fish fillets skin side down and cook until skin has colored. Add the garlic, cherry tomatoes, potatoes, capers and olives and cook for a minute. Add white wine and the fish stock and let cook for a couple of minutes longer.

Remove the garlic from the pan. Then remove the fish and place to the side. Continue to simmer the sauce over high heat until it becomes creamy and until the potatoes are tender. Then, turn off the heat. Arrange the potatoes on warm dinner plates, then top with the tomatoes, capers and olives, and lastly place the fish on top. Drizzle the remaining sauce from the pan over the top of the fish and garnish with parsley. Serve immediately with roasted vegetables on the side.

Makes 4 servings.

Pork Chops with Apples and Wine

- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup minced onion
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 center cut pork chops, $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick and 6 ounces in weight
- Salt and pepper
- 2 Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored and cut into eighths
- 1 cup port wine

In a large skillet, cook the onion and garlic in the olive oil over medium low heat for 4 minutes. Season pork chops with salt and pepper and add to the skillet. Raise heat to high and sear on both sides until brown. Transfer meat to a paper towel-lined platter and cover meat with a lid or aluminum foil. Set aside.

Add apples and wine to the skillet and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium and cook about 7 minutes, until apples begin to soften. Return meat to the skillet, cover and cook 5 minutes on each side or until meat is cooked through. Serve with apple pieces and pan juices.

Makes 4 servings.

Pasta with Scallops and Lemon Butter

- 7 ounces linguine or spaghetti
- 2 ounces butter

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 teaspoons lemon zest
- 2 tablespoons diced red bell pepper
- Cracked black pepper
- 10 scallops (you may use prawns or other cubed fish)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup diced fresh Italian parsley, divided
- 1 teaspoon dried chile flakes, if desired

Prepare the pasta according to package directions. While the pasta is cooking, combine the butter and oil in a skillet over medium heat. Add the lemon zest, red pepper, and black pepper and cook 1 to 2 minutes. Add the scallops to the pan and cook 20 to 30 seconds on each side or until they are nicely seared. Do not overcook.

To serve, drain pasta and toss with the parsley, reserving some for garnish. Top with the scallops and the lemon butter sauce. Sprinkle with dried chile flakes and remaining chopped parsley, if desired.

Makes 2 servings.

Penne with Mushrooms

- 12 ounces penne pasta
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped red onion
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 1 pound (about 5 cups) fresh white mushrooms (or a mixture of mushrooms), quartered
- 8 ounces (about 2½ cups) of crimini mushrooms, quartered
- 1 (14.5-oz.) can Italian stewed tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sliced pitted Kalamata or ripe black olives
- 6 anchovy fillets, coarsely chopped
- 3 tablespoons chopped drained capers
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Parmesan cheese, grated, if desired

In a large saucepan cook pasta in salted water according to package directions. Drain; set aside.

Meanwhile, in a large skillet, heat the olive oil over high heat. Add onion, garlic and red pepper; cook, stirring constantly, until garlic is fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add mushrooms; reduce heat to medium-high; cook, stirring occasionally, until golden, about 5 minutes. Add tomatoes; reduce heat to medium; simmer uncovered, until slightly thickened, about 15 minutes. Stir in olives, anchovies, capers and salt; add reserved drained pasta. Simmer until pasta absorbs some of the sauce, about 3 minutes. Serve immediately with grated Parmesan cheese, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.



AT RADA, Mediterranean sushi uses local and seafood with a twist, such as sushi rolls stuffed with shrimp and lemon-infused panko.