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HARVESTING GRAPES
Workers carry grapes to
the winery.

Festival of the Grapes

Settembrata Festa
dell'uva ~ Festival of
the grapes

*by Lauren Birmingham
Piscitelli*

Traveling through Italy is always enchanting. With its 20 glorious regions, each one boasting diverse landscapes, cuisines, wines and traditions, it's impossible to call one region your favorite. In fact, when anyone asks me, I always say, "Italy's regions are like children, you love each one differently." There may be one slight exception to the rule, however, when it comes to festivals. Although I would never miss Savigno's festa del tartufo (truffle festival), Bolonga's heavenly Choco event, and Rome's artichoke sagra, there is one little village that has stolen my heart for its festa. This place is Anacapri.

Set above the jet-set center of Capri, nothing has changed in Anacapri over the years. The dreamy white-washed houses covered in bougainvillea remain, men and women walk arm-in-arm along pedestrian paths (no cars ever), and gelaterias and cafés lazily dole out cones and cups at café tables spilling out into the piazza. It's the rhythm of this place that first captured my attention. And, of course, the spirit of the great Roman Emperors, Augustus and Tiberio, who ruled from here, lingers on. Whatever the case may be, this sleepy hilltop village has a tried and true tradition called Settembrata. It's an annual end of summer festival dedicated to

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the wine harvest, and it's been going on for almost 100 years.

The Settembrata is celebrated in honor of la festa dell'uva, the grape festival, and is unique to Anacapri. The festival takes its name from the month September and starts on the last Sunday of August and continues through September with colorful activities and events. It began as a blessing for the vendemmia, the grape harvest, and as a way to kiss summer good-bye.

I learned about the Settembrata from Signor Franco, a local Anacaprese and winemaker who lives on the south side of the island. His wife, Rosa, is one of the well-known pacchiane, Neapolitan women who dress in turn-of-the-century costumes and cook typical farmer recipes for the occasion. Today is the first day of the festival, and Rosa and I are on our way to the piazza where I will give her a hand making pizze fritte.

The festivities start with a parade, including women dressed as pacchiane carrying baskets filled with grapes on their heads. The local farmers follow, pushing large wheelbarrows piled high with grapes. Creative floats of Capri boatmen and replicas of the Faraglioni, Capri's famous twin rocks, and the Piazzetta's clock tower follow. A marching band and string of antique Fiat 500s are the last to pass. The procession continues along the pedestrian walkway of Via Giuseppe Orlandi and ends on Piazza Diaz in front of Santa Sophia's church. After the parade, everyone heads to the bancarelle, outdoor kitchens, just off the square where the local women cook. Traditional foods are prepared on site and served to all.

"The first Settembrata was created in 1923 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Edwin Cerio, and Lino Lipinsky," says Franco. The men, humanitarians who lived on Capri at the time, created an event to honor the farmers who worked so hard all year. Here, locals hoped and prayed for a healthy harvest. La Settembrata was halted only once during World War II. It reconvened and the celebration has continued ever since, he says.

Signor Franco tells me that in the 1950s the tradition included baking capretti al forno, goats in the oven, on



CHURCH OF SANTA SOFIA in Anacapri.



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the square. Although Italians still eat goat, today's Settembrata serves simple peasant foods like pasta fagioli, zeppole, maccheroni, pizze fritte, biscotti and biancollela, local white wine.

The best part about Settembrata is Rosa's pizze fritte and watching her make them. She rolls up her sleeves and begins mixing fresh yeast cakes with tepid water. She puts them aside until the yeast is activated. Next she fills an over-sized silver bowl with flour and slowly starts to add a little olive oil and salt and mixes it well with her hands. Lastly she mixes in the yeast.

"Cooks must use their hands. It's the touch of the hand that makes it taste good," she says as she pinches the dough. The dough has now transformed into a sticky texture and she quickly turns it onto a floured surface and begins to knead. "Work the dough until you know it's right. There's no measured time, you need to watch it with your eye and then you'll know with the touch of your hand when it's smooth," she says. When it's just the

right texture, she places it in an oiled bowl and covers it with a towel until it doubles in size.

While the dough rises, Rosa simmers a half-bushel of fresh cherry tomatoes. The sauce is simple. Ingredients call for a couple of crushed garlic cloves gently browned in warm olive oil, a pinch of sea salt, tomatoes and a branch of fresh basil left to slowly simmer.

When the dough is ready, we remove it from the bowl and divide it into small rounds working them for several minutes—folding them over with one hand then circling into spheres, making sure to keep the opening underneath. We've filled several trays and now the dough needs to rise for another 10 minutes.

As the Settembrata festivities kick off and the orchestra members can be heard tuning their horns, Rosa and I take the rounds of dough and flatten them into disks and start frying them. When they're done, we drain them on paper towels. I garnish them with

tomato sauce, mozzarella, grated Parmesan and basil.

This Settembrata is always festive, but this one brought a special honor: Rosa never shares her recipe with anyone, but today she shared it with me.

Travel Notes

The Settembrata is organized by the Municipality of Anacapri and is held in the four ancient quarters, the quaint town's neighborhoods: Le Boffe, La Porta, Le Stalle and La Pietra. Throughout the month, there are performances including ballets, operas, acrobats, mimes and jugglers, as well as Neapolitan folk music and tarantella dancers, jazz concerts, poetry readings, artisan craft markets and tours to the castle of Barbarossa, the fortress and il Faro, the lighthouse.

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A COUPLE rides in the parade.



ANACAPRI CELEBRATES
Settembrata with a parade
and other festivities.

Top left: A woman carries grapes the old-fashioned way. Top right: A decorated grape cart. Bottom left: A couple in vintage garb for a poetry reading. Lower right: Majolica tile represents the grape harvest.



The Recipes

Roasted Stuffed Tomatoes

- 6 medium tomatoes
- 4 tablespoons olive oil, for drizzling on the tomatoes (adjust amount as needed)
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2½ to 3 cups day-old Italian bread, crusts removed, cut into cubes
- ½ cup chopped parsley
- ½ cup pitted black olives, chopped
- 3 tablespoons of capers (place in a cup filled with water and soak for half an hour before using, then drain)
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- Sea salt and pepper, to taste
- Basil leaves for garnish

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Cut the tomatoes in half and core, putting the pulp aside in a bowl.

Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper. Place the halved tomatoes on the cookie sheet. Drizzle with olive oil and bake 15 minutes.

Add the bread cubes to the bowl with the tomato pulp. Add the parsley, black olives, capers, and Parmesan cheese. Sprinkle with sea salt and pepper, to taste, then mix well.

Remove the tomato halves from the oven and spoon the mixture into them. Place them back in the oven and bake 30 minutes until golden brown. Serve warm, garnished with basil.

Makes 6 servings.

Fried Little Pizzas

In this recipe, Rosa begins with a concentrated yeast mixture, then adds flour and liquid, which may be different from what you're used to. If you prefer, you may use your own favorite pizza dough recipe.

- 1 ounce fresh yeast
- 2 tablespoons lukewarm water (110°F)
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups superfine flour, known in Italy as 00 flour
- 2½ cups water
- 3 tablespoons peanut or sunflower oil for frying, more as needed
- Toppings, such as tomato sauce, mozzarella, grated Parmesan cheese, basil, etc., to your liking

Add yeast to the lukewarm water and mix until fully dissolved. Add salt and stir. Slowly add the olive oil, flour and water, and mix with your hands. When dough becomes sticky, turn

out onto a floured surface and knead until the dough is uniform and smooth, about 10 minutes. When done, place in an oiled bowl and allow to rise until it doubles in size.

When it has risen, break the dough into 8 smaller balls and work them for several minutes, folding over with one hand, then circling into spheres, making sure to keep the opening down. Put balls on a tray and allow to rise in a warm place about 10 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Take each ball and flatten into a disk.

Fry each disk in hot oil and drain on paper towels. Top with tomato sauce, mozzarella, grated Parmesan, and basil, if desired, or with toppings of your choice. Bake about 8 minutes until the cheese melts. Serve hot.

Makes 8 pizzas.

Pasta with Beans

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ medium onion, diced
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- 2 garlic cloves
- 1 medium carrot, diced
- ½ celery stalk, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- ½ cup white wine
- 2½ cups tomatoes, diced into small pieces
- 14 ounces cannellini beans, cooked
- 1 pound maltagliati, mismatched shapes of pasta
- Fresh basil for garnish, if desired

Warm the olive oil in a large pan. Add onion, parsley, garlic, carrots, and celery. Sauté with salt and pepper, to taste. When the ingredients start to caramelize, add the white wine and cook for a few minutes until the wine has evaporated. Add the chopped tomatoes, then add the beans and let simmer about 10 minutes.

Cook the pasta al dente in salted boiling water. Drain.

Add the pasta to the pan with the tomatoes and beans and simmer about 5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and garnish with fresh basil, if desired.

Makes 10 servings.

Butternut Squash with Prosciutto and Grapes

- 2 butternut squash (about 1½ pounds each), halved lengthwise and seeded
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- ½ cup prosciutto, diced
- ½ cup minced yellow onion
- 1 green bell pepper, seeded and diced

- 2 teaspoons dried sage
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups instant rice
- 1 cup seedless grapes
- 4 tablespoons crumbled feta cheese

Preheat oven to 350 F.

To prepare the squash shell, scoop the filling from each butternut squash half, leaving about 1/2 inch of it with the skin. Chop the filling into small dice and set aside. Boil the squash shells in rapidly boiling water for 3 minutes. Drain and place upside down on a baking sheet. Set aside until ready to use.

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add prosciutto, onion, green pepper and diced squash; sauté 3 minutes. Add sage, salt and pepper and stir to coat. Add chicken broth and bring to a boil. Gradually add instant rice and return to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 10 minutes, until liquid is absorbed. Remove from heat and let stand 10 minutes. Add grapes and toss to combine.

Spoon rice mixture into halved squash (making a mound on top of squash) and transfer stuffed squash to a foil-lined baking sheet. Sprinkle feta cheese over top. Bake 30 to 35 minutes, until squash is tender and cheese is golden. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

Greens with Grapes, Pecans and Gorgonzola Vinaigrette

- 1 cup seedless red grapes, cut in half
- 3 cups greens, such as radicchio, escarole, spinach, frisee, dandelion or a mixture
- 1 tablespoon red onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- Black pepper, to taste

Place the grapes, greens and onion in a large bowl. Dress with vinegar, oil, salt and pepper. Toss gently and serve.

Makes 6 servings.



ROASTED STUFFED TOMATO
with basil for garnish.