

ITALIAN WINES FOR SUMMER

Tastes of Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

AUGUST 2016

**Fresh
Tastes of
Summer**

**Let's Grill
the Catch
of the Day**

**Seaside
Dining in
Italy**

**Celebrate
Tomatoes**

**Summer in
ANACAPRI**



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Seaside Dining

Located in the upscale Le Sirenuse Hotel in Positano, the Michelin-starred La Sponda restaurant features Gennaro Russo, a young, but accomplished executive chef whose Campanian roots – and extensive culinary training – are serving him well.

Story and Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Ciccone, like Madonna. C-i-c-c-o-n-e,” says Signor Giovanni Ciccone, direttore, general manager, of Le Sirenuse in Positano. “Your reservation is confirmed for 8 p.m. at La Sponda. I suggest you come earlier. You’ll be able to see the sunset, take photos, enjoy an aperitivo and meet me. I leave at 7 p.m., so I look forward to meeting you.”

My husband, Rino, and I arrive a few minutes before 7 p.m., camera and note pad in hand. This experience—dining at La Sponda and meeting its new executive chef, Gennaro Russo—will be a little vacation in the town I call home.

Le Sirenuse Hotel in this idyllic Amalfi coast town is a gem. In addition to fine rooms and suites, the hotel includes a spa, pool, bars, and, of course, the Michelin-starred La Sponda.

The property infuses you with a surreal touch of luxury. Soft lighting, the scent of hundreds of lemon flowers, cascading white orchids, and climbing bougainvillea vines neatly manicured, welcome us at every turn. There’s an air of informal elegance. We make our way to the café bar and a staff of tall, dark Italian waiters address our every whim. They’re friendly, we chat and learn most of them are from Amalfi, Positano and Praiano.

We start our evening with Prosecco. Toast-

ed Sicilian almonds, green Gaeta olives and kettle chips served in Vietri plates arrive as we enjoy the aperitivo. The surroundings are inviting. A neon sign reading, “Don’t Worry,” hangs from the ceiling. A valuable collection of classic oil paintings and antique furnishings are part of the eclectic mix of old and new. In one corner, a young English couple dressed in Ralph Lauren asks us how to say seafood in Italian. In another corner, an American couple celebrate their 50th anniversary and everyone wishes them *auguri*—best wishes.

From this dream place, Rino and I look out at the twilight of Positano. It moves in slow motion, as locals pull down their blinds and the last boat puts its way into the port.



Head sommelier Cristian Fusco suggests a red wine from Tenuto San Francesco vineyards and winery.



Built into a cliff overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea, the views from Le Sirenuse are breathtaking.

NATIVE SOIL



The daytime dining room at La Sponda Restaurant includes a view of the dome of the Church of Santa Maria Assunta.

Meanwhile, the waiter in the dining room lights the 400 white tea candles in the silver chandeliers. It's a nightly tradition. Guests of all kinds fill the dining room and take their seats at the tables.

I must admit, I'm a little intimidated. However, from the first *benvenuto*, given by gregarious Signore Vincenzo Galani, Maitre d'Hotel to Chef Gennaro, the experience is inviting. There's a warm down-to-earth feeling demonstrated by all.

Chef Gennaro walks out of the kitchen to say, "Ciao, ciao." He blushes when I congratulate him on his recent appointment to executive chef. I thank him for stepping away from the kitchen and we set an appointment for the next day where he will show me some of his recipes. But tonight is all about the Mediterranean cuisine of Chef Gennaro and

his ascent to executive chef of this wonderful restaurant.

To get started, we opt for the chef's tasting menu, a plethora of local seasonal produce from sea and land. A starter, compliments of the chef, includes a cream of zucchini and fennel custard topped with baby micro salad. The antipasto, a local white fish seared and cut into bite-size portions, is garnished with herbs. Gagnano linguine with seafood follows, and the main course is San Pietro fish served in a citrus sauce with new potatoes and fennel. Dessert comes in three acts: a pre-dessert—a French raspberry mousse topped with an airy foam; a main dessert—an 85 percent dense chocolate cake topped with vanilla gelato; and a post-dessert—mini Neapolitans of babà al rum e cioccolato and crostata along with French strawberry

macarons.

Wines flow from white and red to rosé, and include Per Eva from Tramonti, Franz Haas, Valle Reale Vigneto di Popoli and Ottaviano Lambruschi. Strolling Neapolitan musicians softly serenade guests with classics like "Santa Lucia" and "Torna a Surriento."

At 29, Chef Gennaro is hot at the helm of La Sponda. He has 30 supporting chefs with him in the kitchen, and everything is made in-house. Born and raised in Somma Vesuviana east of Naples, the rising star chef has an extraordinary amount of experience. He is an only child, born to a father who was a butcher. "I've eaten so much meat growing up, I really prefer fish," he says.

When I ask him when he first became interested in cooking, he responds, "My parents both worked, so I had to teach myself to cook.



The entrance to the Hotel (Albergo) Le Sirenuse.

NATIVE SOIL

I got tired of pasta every day, so I took some cooking classes,” he explains.

Turning his passion into a career, he trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, where he learned “technical exactitude and the art of working as a team,” he says.

For the last two years, Chef Gennaro has worked as sous chef de cuisine under former Executive Chef Matteo Temperini at La Sponda. His prior work experience included a stint at Don Alfonso's. He worked three years as chef de partie in Michelin-starred Lasserre and L'Ambroisie in Paris. There was also an experience with Chef Massimo Bottura at the Osteria Francescana in Modena—second in the 2015 list of the world's best restaurants. Earlier this year, Chef Gennaro was recognized at Cucinare, a trade food fair in Pordenone, where he was awarded the FriulAdria prize for the most promising under 30 years old. But all the accolades didn't prepare him for what would come next.

His sparkling brown eyes blink quickly, and he leans in closer with a smile as he speaks. “I didn't expect such news,” he says, referring to his appointment as La Sponda's executive chef. “I had no idea. When they told me, it came as a total surprise. But after traveling around and living in France, I am honored that I was given this opportunity. The French, they liked me. They liked my way of cooking, and even let me create Italian additions to the menu, like pasta from Gragnano!”

But, he adds, they don't have our quality food, like Vesuvio tomatoes. “It's good to be back home,” he says.

I spent the next day in the kitchen with Chef Gennaro. He shared more stories, showed me his recipes and wanted me to try everything—from biscotti, to spaghetti and just-made gelato.

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Positano's Church of Santa Maria Assunta is in the center of town, and its beautifully tiled dome can be seen from various parts of Le Sirenuse. The Li Galli Islands are visible in the distance.



Marinated Anchovies

When shopping for rock salt, choose a variety that has coarse crystals that aren't too large. Coarse sea salt will also work.

- 1 pound fresh anchovies
- 1 pound rock salt
- 3 1/2 ounces (about 1/4 cup) brown sugar
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 1 sprig of fresh thyme, chopped
- Extra virgin olive oil, as needed for the marinade

Clean anchovies well and rinse under running water. Remove the head and holding each one by the tail, remove the inside spine. Hold the anchovies by the tails—the trick is to keep the tail whole—and splay them open.

Lay the cleaned anchovies in a colander or

tray with holes and let drain. Once you have cleaned all the anchovies, lay them in one layer in a platter.

Mix the rock salt and brown sugar with a spoon and pour the mixture over the anchovies. Cover and set aside for about 15 minutes.

Wash the anchovies and transfer them to a paper-towel-lined plate to dry. Place the anchovies on a serving dish, creating layers, and garnish each layer with garlic and thyme. Cover with extra virgin olive oil and refrigerate 24 hours. Bring the anchovies to room temperature before serving.

Makes 6 servings.

— Recipe courtesy of Chef Gennaro Russo, Le Sirenuse



Spaghetti di Gragnano con Pomodorini del Piennolo

Gragnano in Campania is known for its dried pasta. This recipe calls for spaghetti. The sauce is made from pomodorino del piennolo, which are similar to cherry tomatoes. They grow well in Campania, making this pasta and sauce the perfect match.

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 12 ounces cherry tomatoes, cut in half
- 1 bunch (about 1 cup) fresh basil leaves
- ¼ cup water
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1 pound spaghetti
- 2 teaspoons sea salt

In a pan, heat the olive oil and sauté the garlic until golden. Add the cherry tomatoes, basil, and water. Cook for 10 minutes on low-medium heat.

In the meantime, add the sea salt to a large pot of water and bring to a boil. Add the spaghetti and cook until al dente. Remove from the heat and drain. Toss the spaghetti in the pan with the cherry tomato sauce. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

—Recipe courtesy of Chef Gennaro Russo, Le Sirenuse