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One of Italy's leading authorities on nutrition and an expert in food allergies helps create new recipes for those who love the country's authentic dishes but require alternative ingredients when making them.

Story by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Attilio Spiezia uses his expertise to create delicious Italian recipes using alternative ingredients.

Living in Italy is always an adventure of food, culture and tradition. Not only are we discovering young rising star chefs, artisan makers and bakers, but we're welcoming our guests who arrive from around the world wanting to cook authentic Italian. This is especially true at Christmas time.

These guests are travelers who want to immerse themselves in the local culture and learn about the *sagre*, food festivals, *presepi*, Nativity scenes, and Old World traditions. And although each guest's age, nationality and food preferences differ, I have noticed a distinct rise in food allergies and intolerances.

Imagine coming to Italy, the home of pasta, pizza, dolce and gelato, and not being able to eat any of them. But all is not lost. After doing some research, I discovered one of Italy's leading authorities on nutrition, Attilio Spiezia, a biologist in nutrition, in the hope of creating new recipes incorporating alternative ingredients for those who are celiac and lactose intolerant. A graduate of the University of Naples Federico II, he is an expert in food allergies and is a holistic practitioner who loves to cook. Known as "Dr. Spiezia," he also owns Mondo Bio market and café in Sorrento, where I shop.

Recently, he helped me prepare alternative recipes for Christmas, including a gluten-free orange cake and struffoli.

"Buongiorno," he says, entering the kitchen. He is carrying a tray with *bio sugo di mirtillo*, organic blackberry juice along with *biscotti di farro*, cookies made with farro flour and dark chocolate chips. He invites me to an organic *prima colazione* (breakfast).

Born in Naples, Spiezia refers to himself as Neapolitano D.O.C., meaning an authentic Neapolitan. He tells me he is vegetarian. When I ask how strict of a vegetarian he is, he responds, "I live in Sorrento, so, of course, every now and then I eat a little mozzarella."

In general, both vegetarians and vegans

refrain from eating meat. However, vegetarians often consume dairy products and eggs, while vegans avoid all animal products.

Lighthearted and kind, Dr. Spiezia is a leader in the organic food world and has dedicated a lifetime to studying nutrition. His shop sells high quality organic fruits, vegetables, eggs, in-house gluten-free bread, cookies, cakes; extra virgin olive, linseed and sunflower oil; almond, farro, rice, quinoa and potato flour; dairy free milk (soy, farro, rice, almond, kamut, millet, oat, orzo and coconut, to name a few), cheese and gelato. There's a wine, chocolate, nut and dried fruit section as well as environmentally friendly soaps, shampoo, cleaning products, and vitamins.

The café, with both an inside area and outside garden, serves breakfast, lunch and dinner featuring organic vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free food.

"We serve the classic cappuccino, espresso or Americano," he explains, "and desserts, both vegetarian and vegan. We have full-time chefs who prepare seasonal menus six days per week. We are closed on Sunday. We cook risotto almost daily. Remember, in China there are over 500 types of rice. In Mondo Bio café, we use white, brown, red and black varieties, trying to unite the best taste while keeping with our tradition of the Mediterranean diet," he says.

As we begin weighing almond flour and cracking eggs, Dr. Spiezia confirms, "People don't have to say no to Christmas desserts and cookies any longer. Everyone can eat these delicious creations with a few substitutions."

Dr. Spiezia prides himself on leading a healthy and balanced lifestyle. "I eat only organic products and whatever is in season. After many years, I have dedicated my studies to organic nutrition and alimentation. I am very supportive of organic seasonal fruits and vegetables without the use of pesticides and hormones. Our market and our café offer only fresh organic, vegetarian and vegan food," he says.

On the menu today: gluten-free rosemary focaccia; wild black rice risotto with green

peas, zucchini and onion; tofu meatballs in a ragù; sautéed carrots with fresh marjoram; gnocchi with pumpkin; classic vegetarian and vegan ravioli and roasted red peppers with black olives and capers. On the dessert tray: crostata di mele, chocolate chip and coconut cookies and a chocolate Caprese cake.

"Organic isn't a new mode in Italy. This research and information is something that we've had for a very long time. I've been a vegetarian for 30 years, not yet vegan, but I have eliminated many animal-based food products from my diet. I've also reduced and nearly eliminated dairy products," he says. He points to the large display of Italian-grown produce: grapes, red potatoes, mushrooms, pumpkin, lemons, eggplant and zucchini. Mondo Bio does not stick labels onto its produce. Instead, shoppers place their fruits and vegetables in a bag, weigh them, press the number that corresponds to the product, and the scale prints a sticker that the shopper attaches to the bag. Each product at Mondo Bio has the little green leaf logo certifying that it's organic.

The Mediterranean diet is generally a healthy one. "It's rich in fiber, vitamins, extra virgin olive oil, fruit, vegetables and legumes (edible seeds that split in two halves: beans, lentils, peas and soybeans, to name a few). For those who do not eat meat, I suggest protein-rich foods such as eggs, tofu, soy, spirulina (algae), seaweed, lentils, seitan (a wheat-based product) and lupin beans. Farro is another protein-rich food," he points out.

Even the wine, he notes, is produced by artisans and is chemical-free.

"We all know the benefits of eating an organic diet of wholesome whole foods that help us keep a balanced equilibrium," he says. "Our rhythm of life and our mind also contribute to our well-being. Products with less or no gluten and that have not been processed, like organically grown rice, quinoa, corn, millet and farro, are better for you and less stressful on the digestive system," he says, adding that when we are not eating well, "our bodies go off balance, and when they do, they aren't as strong as they need to be when it's

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Coffee Souffle

- 4 large eggs, separated
- 1 tablespoon cocoa powder
- 5 tablespoons brewed coffee
- 1/3 cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 teaspoon coffee powder
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons granulated sugar, separated

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Whisk the egg whites to soft peaks and place in the refrigerator until ready to use.

In a small bowl, mix the cocoa powder and brewed coffee until fully incorporated.

In the top of a double boiler (off the stove), whip

the egg yolks with the confectioners' sugar until light and fluffy. Add the coffee powder and continue to mix about 5 minutes. Cook the mixture in the double boiler over medium heat, whisking until it becomes thick. Add the cocoa mixture and let rest for 5 minutes. Let cool slightly, then fold in the egg whites.

Grease 4 individual souffle molds with butter and sprinkle each with 1 tablespoon of granulated sugar.

Pour the soufflé mixture into the molds and bake for 5 minutes, then reduce the heat to 325°F for 15 minutes.

Makes 4 servings.

Note: You may place the souffle molds in a larger pan filled about halfway with water to bake them "bain marie" style, if preferred.

time to fight a cold, flu or support stress.”

During our conversation, more Christmas cookies and pies are made and trays rotate in and out of the oven. The sweet scent of vanilla, apples and cinnamon permeates the air. “Our desserts are made both vegetarian and vegan. They include pastiere di Natale, zeppole, babà, babà rustico, roccocò—changing with the seasons, made to order, with or without eggs and gluten free,” he explains.

Mondo Bio also bakes fresh bread and desserts daily using farro flour (never white flour) and lievito madre, a natural rising agent. “We use farro flour because it’s an ancient grain that dates back to the Roman times, is exceptionally high in protein and has a delicious nutty flavor. Farro also contains more fiber and has positive benefits on the digestive system,” he says.

So even those with food sensitivities can still enjoy a typical Neapolitan table at Christmas time brimming with gnocchi, mozzarella, struffoli and zeppole; they can still make those recipes, but with modifications.

“Respecting tradition—after all, we are in Naples, the most beautiful city in the world—you can simply modify recipes. In keeping with our tradition, we have substituted ingredients that do not weigh down our digestive system and that assimilate into the body. It’s a step to help people with food allergies and intolerances,” he says.

His own favorite Christmas dolce? “Panettone. It’s not Neapolitan, but I love it. And today, we have created a panettone that is equally as good as the buttery original version from Milan.” He then slices into the airy golden bread and says, “Buon Natale!”

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Light Orange Cake

- 6 tablespoons olive or canola oil
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup orange juice
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup granulated sugar
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups all-purpose flour or any gluten-free
- 3 tablespoons cacao powder
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt
- Zest of 1 orange
- 1 tablespoon baking powder

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a mixing bowl, combine the oil, orange juice and water with the sugar and mix until foamy.

In a separate bowl, sieve the flour, cacao, salt, orange zest and baking powder. Gently combine the first mixture to the flour. Mix well with a spoon. Fold the mixture into a 9-inch square cake pan that has been lined with parchment paper.

Bake about 30 minutes. When done, a toothpick inserted into the center should come out clean.

Makes 9 servings.

Rolled Focaccia with Leek and Vegetables

For the dough:

- $2\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons yeast
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup warm (110°F) water
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup “0” flour
(substitute with all-purpose, if desired)
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup wholemeal rye flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup mashed potatoes
- 1 tablespoon turmeric
- $\frac{1}{8}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon pepper

For the filling:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small leek, chopped
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup carrots, diced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups broccoli
- Salt and pepper, to taste

For the dough:

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Dissolve the yeast in the warm water.

Combine with both types of flours, mashed potatoes, turmeric, olive oil, salt and pepper.

Work the dough for 10 minutes. Place in a warm place to rise for at least 1 hour.

For the filling:

Heat the olive oil in a frying pan. Sauté the leek until it is tender. Add the chopped carrots and cook for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, bring a pot of water to a boil.

Add the salt, then the broccoli and cook for 1 to 2 minutes until just tender. Drain. Add the broccoli to the carrot mixture, toss well for 2 to 3 minutes, and season with salt and pepper, to taste.

To Assemble:

Prepare a baking pan with parchment paper. Stretch the focaccia dough into the pan. Cover the dough with the filling mixture. Roll the dough up lengthwise. Allow it to rise in the pan for another 30 minutes. Sprinkle with a mixture of water, olive oil, and salt. Cook about 30 minutes. Slice and serve.

Makes 8 servings.

Christmas “Biscuits”

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups plus $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons rice flour
- $4\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons potato flour, plus additional if sticky
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter, melted
- 1 large egg

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a bowl, combine all the ingredients and mix well by hand. Once well combined, form into a ball and set aside for at least 30 minutes to rest.

On a well-floured surface, roll out the pastry dough to about 1/4-inch thickness and cut into star shapes with a cookie cutter. Next, place on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake about 20 minutes until golden. Let cool before serving. You may also store in an airtight container until ready to serve.

Makes 12 servings.

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In keeping with our tradition, we have substituted ingredients that do not weigh down our digestive system and that assimilate into the body. It’s a step to help people with food allergies and intolerances.”

Struffoli

Struffoli are small rounds of sweet dough that are flash-fried, drenched in honey and decorated with colorful sprinkles. As Neapolitan dessert aficionado Fabrizio Magoni says, “Struffoli are like a Neapolitan *presepe*—a poor man’s creation, but beautiful when decorated.”

Canola oil, for deep frying, as needed

For the batter:

- 2 cups of any type of non-gluten flour, such as Farina Biaglut, sifted
- ¼ teaspoon sea salt
- 3 large eggs
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract

For the glaze:

- 1 cup honey
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- Multicolored sprinkles or candied orange and lemon fruit

Pour the canola oil into a deep pan or fryer and slowly start to heat the oil to 365°F.

Meanwhile, place the flour and the sea salt in a large bowl. Make a well in the center of the flour and add the eggs, one at a time, mixing slightly after each addition. Add the vanilla extract and mix well to make a soft dough.

Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface and knead. Divide the dough in half and roll out into two rectangles ¼-inch thick. Cut the dough into strips ¼-inch wide, roll into logs the thickness of a pencil and cut the logs into pieces of about ¼-inch long.

Test fry by dropping one piece of dough into the boiling oil. If it sizzles right away, the oil is ready. Fry in small batches, putting only a few pieces of dough in the pan at a time for 3 to 5 minutes until golden brown. Turn them occasionally during frying with a slotted spoon. They’ll float to the top when done. Drain well on kitchen paper.

Meanwhile, in a pan, heat the honey with the sugar over a low heat for 5 minutes. Remove from heat and add the struffoli. Stir constantly until all pieces are coated with the honey-sugar mixture. Remove struffoli with slotted spoon and put onto a serving plate, arranging the small pieces in a pyramid or a wreath shape decorated with an orange in the center. Garnish with colorful sprinkles and leave to set. Serve by breaking off individual pieces.

Makes 8 to 10 servings.

— Recipe from Maria Lucia’s recipe book.

