

Sampling Southern Italy

Tastes *of* Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

APRIL 2017

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COOKING ON THE AMALFI COAST

Meet the charming Antonio Pisani, the chef who delights guests at the popular Lido Azzurro Ristorante.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

“**B**uonissimo! There’s pezononia (similar to red sea bream); totani (local squid); and gamberetti (small pink tender shrimp),” Chef Antonio explains as he points to the catch-of-the-day on the back of his *Apria*

Mara Italian boat. Even though it’s 4 a.m., he’s not tired at all, but we are.

As the sun slowly rises over the town of Amalfi, Chef Antonio Pisani, a couple of friends, my husband, Rino, and I are just pulling in from a middle-of-the-night fishing trip. Salty, wet, and cold, we collect our belongings as Chef Antonio sails his boat into the slip. Then we’ll head to the kitchen to clean the fish.

Born and raised in the ancient city of Amalfi, he is the son of an innkeeper. His mother, Maria, once owned a property in the town’s center, and being a “Renaissance woman,” he says, she turned it into a B&B.

“She loved to cook so much that she eventually offered dinner to all the guests staying there. I pitched in and helped my mom, learning every aspect of the business. And, like most families on the Amalfi Coast, our family naturally fell into tourism,” he says.

“While my mom cooked, cleaned and played hostess, I ended up spending my time in the kitchen with her. I learned everything I know from my mamma—how to mix dough and make the bread, roll out the perfect homemade fresh pasta with all the sauces that go with it, and bake the local desserts like eggplant and chocolate. In Italy, men cook too!” he says, his laughing eyes telling the family story.

Today Chef Antonio, nicknamed Bijoux, is the man behind Lido Azzurro, translating to blue beach. His restaurant overlooks the port of Amalfi and is just a short walk from the historical center on Lungomare dei Cavalieri, 5.

His website reads, translated from Italian: “Always open, closed on Mondays. Never in the summer. Feast days vary from January to February.”

If you have not been there, you should go. Who has been there? Everyone. From Alain Ducasse to Gianni Agnelli, and even the Royal Family of Jordan. Not only is Lido Azzurro away from the crowds, it boasts a private dining area built on stilts extending over the sand and sea below. It has a chic retractable white roof to ward off the Mediterranean sun and offers a picturesque view looking onto Amalfi. His wife, Simone, works alongside him greeting clients and waiting on tables, while the main waiter, Vittorio, serves pasta, tableside, from a pan.

Chef Antonio’s philosophy for cooking is simplicity. “I use only daily catches from the local sea, usually ones that I catch, along with in-season vegetables coming from Agerola, meats from Scala, and fresh pasta that I make daily in-house,” he says.

He also uses his mother’s recipes. “They are ancient recipes that were passed down in my family. I revisit each one adding a touch of modernity. Our cuisine



Chef Antonio Pisani in the kitchen of his Amalfi restaurant, Lido Azzurro.

PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



PHOTOGRAPHY: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Top: The fresh catch of the day. **Below:** Freshly caught shrimp will be prepared for guests.

is prepared in a simple way, keeping ingredients to a minimum, allowing each flavor to stand on its own, while keeping the tradition of times past," he says.

"I was fortunate to be Amalfitano. It's a small town that has everything. Amalfi dates back to the fourth century B.C. It was an important trading port and was once one of the four Maritime Republics, along with Venice, Genoa and Pisa. The sea traders who came and went were the first to bring eggplant, exotic spices including vanilla, cinnamon, ginger to its port, and the Arabs introduced papermaking here. Even today you'll see signs of Arabic influences in its cuisine with combinations of salty and sweet. For example, we prepare our escarole with raisins and pine nuts."

Signature items on the menu are antipasto that includes two kinds of raw shrimp; squash flowers stuffed with ricotta; tomato and mozzarella sandwiches flash fried; and chopped raw tuna.

For main courses he serves spaghetti with sea urchins; black pasta made with cuttlefish ink in a cuttlefish sauce; and pasta with capers and olives. They are similar to classic dishes served on the Amalfi Coast, like fish in a lemon sauce, fish in parchment paper, and stuffed squid.

He prepares desserts daily featuring the citrus of the Amalfi Coast in delights such as a dense chocolate cake baked with caramelized citrus; lemon soufflé; flaky pastry layered with sheep ricotta; and lemon gelato.

The interesting wine list features local small vineyards, including Apicella from Tramonto, and others like Verguzzo La Tunella from Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Rebbiano d'Abruzzo. But the staff's advice: Drink the local wines, because even in Italy you probably will not see them outside of Campania.

The food is excellent, the ambiance romantic, even in the afternoon. And if you are really lucky, Chef Antonio will have made his eggplant and chocolate dessert. It's made like lasagna and includes candied orange, pine nuts and a few shots of Concerto, a liqueur whose recipe was invented for the first time by the nuns of the Convent of Pucara in Tramonti. "It's made with over 10 different herbs, so we call it Concerto, a concert of flavor!"

The perfect ending to a wonderful meal along the Amalfi Coast.

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PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Vittorio, a server at Lido Azzurro, serves pasta tableside for a guest.



Puttanesca-Style Pasta with Salted Anchovies

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 whole garlic clove
- 1 chili pepper, whole
- 5 salted anchovies
- 3 tablespoons capers
- 6 black olives
- 10 cherry tomatoes
- 2 pounds of spaghetti

In a large pan, heat the olive oil then add the whole garlic and chili pepper. Rinse the salted anchovies and remove the spine.

To the pan, add anchovies, capers, and olives. Sauté about 5 minutes. Add the cherry tomatoes and continue to cook for about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, cook spaghetti in boiling salted water until al dente. Drain and add the pasta into the pan. Toss together for a minute or two before serving.

Makes 10 servings.

– Adapted from a recipe by
Chef Antonio, Amalfi

Fried Caprese

- 4 medium tomatoes
- Provolone cheese
- 1 bunch fresh basil
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup cornmeal
- ¼ cup bread crumbs
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- ¼ cup olive oil
- Salt, to taste

Cut the tomatoes in flat round slices. Put a slice of cheese and a couple of basil leaves between two tomato slices.

Mix the flour, cornmeal and bread crumbs.

Dip the filled tomatoes in the egg mixture and then in the flour mixture.

Heat the olive oil in a deep pan and fry the caprese until golden. Salt to taste. Serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.

– Adapted from a recipe by
Chef Antonio, Amalfi

Stuffed Calamari on Escarole

- 3 medium potatoes
- 5 medium zucchini
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 whole calamari (squid), cleaned
- Pinch of salt
- 2 cups escarole
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 whole garlic clove
- 1 tablespoon of capers
- ½ cup black olives

Slice the potatoes and zucchini into very small pieces. Heat the olive oil in a pan and sauté potatoes for several minutes. Add the zucchini.

Chop the calamari legs into very small pieces and add to the pan. Cook about 15 minutes, adding a pinch of salt when almost cooked.

Put this mixture in pastry bag and stuff the bellies of the calamari. Close with a toothpick. Don't overstuff as they will swell as they cook. Cook the calamari in the pan for about 10 to 15 minutes, depending on their size.

Wash and cut the escarole into small leaves. Boil for 10 minutes. Drain and set aside.

Heat the extra virgin olive oil, add whole garlic, capers and pitted olives. Once the garlic is browned, add the drained escarole and sauté it in the pan for a few minutes.

Prepare a bed of escarole in each plate and lay the stuffed calamari on it.

Makes 8 servings.

– Adapted from a recipe by
Chef Antonio, Amalfi