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Piazza Santo Spirito in Florence.

EXPLORING SANTO SPIRITO

A visit to Florence's Oltrarno neighborhood includes a charming marketplace of local artisans raising money to save the frescos of a beloved church.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Piazza Santo Spirito is bustling with life on this warm winter Saturday. Florentines walk arm-in-arm. A few Americans are peppered in the crowd holding gelati in cones, while a group of English students carrying backpacks look for Gusta Pizza. Caffè terraces spill into the street with a vivacious energy.

My husband Rino and I circle the nearest caffè looking for a table on the piazza, but everything is full. We walk inside and attempt to order a coffee, but a group of Florentines line the bar elbow-to-elbow leisurely sipping caffè while conversing in Dante's language. With no room for sipping, we leave and stroll across the square. We consider heading to Piazza Santa Croce or Boboli Gardens, but our conversation is interrupted by a beam of soft yellow sunlight cutting through the piazza and reflecting toward a door on the side of the Santo Spirito church. We follow it inside. Spontaneous visits like this are always a curious experience.

At the entrance, a group of well-heeled Florentine women welcome us. The hostess at the desk tips her red felt hat and explains, "It's a benefit for the church of Santo Spirito."

They've organized a market of artisans under the arches in the cloister; they are raising money to save the frescos of Santo Spirito. We pay our entrance fee of five euros

and walk under the arches.

Above our heads are ancient lunettes, small half-moon shaped spaces filled with washed-out frescos depicting the life of Saint Augustine from the early 17th century. They're barely visible in faded shades of rose, baby blue and white.

We learn that the Basilica of Santo Spirito is one of the main basilicas of the Renaissance located in Oltrarno, a term that refers to the district of Florence located on the other side of the Arno river. The church has an unfinished facade that dominates the square with the same name. The basilica was built on the ruins of the 13th century Augustinian convent and was a prestigious center for religion and politics in the city at that time. It's the last masterpiece of Filippo Brunelleschi, engineer and pioneer of the early Renaissance. We also learn that Michelangelo was once a guest here and, in one of his first commissions, built the wooden cross that's displayed on the altar.

In the center of the cloister is a garden with a pond, a working fountain and lily pads. In the eclectic mix of local vendors who are here to support the cause is Signor Guido, a Tuscan farmer who grows saffron. He produces *zafferano in stigma*, pure and precious threads, and sells it in glass jars, along with saffron-inspired chutneys and sauces made with fruits and vegetables. Art patron Signora Fabrizia, a scholar and

specialist in antique and rare fruit, displays fruits from her garden. She lives on a farm in the countryside of Florence and grows a thousand varieties of organic fruits and vegetables, while studying their ancient past. There's also Signora Rosalinda, another artist who crafts necklaces using antique Florentine broken plates hand-painted with delicate flowers and flora. Each kind person at Santo Spirito has a story to tell and a handmade treasure to sell related to flowers, fruits, vegetables and cooking.

A gentleman farmer who displays *zucca giallo*, pumpkins, propped on a vintage suitcase draws us in.

He quickly introduces himself—Signor Davide Palmi—and wishes us a good day. He's selling organic vegetables from the garden. He hands us a bunch of green grapes and fills us in on his background. Born in Florence, he lives in Chianti and always wanted to work in the open air. After graduating from college, he began working with honey bees and producing honey.

"Then I worked with lumache, escargots, and I sold them to trattorie, before I began cultivating gardenias. My love for fruits, vegetables and plants continued to grow and led me to designing gardens and landscapes for clients throughout Italy. My philosophy is: when I plant a tree, I know it will live hundreds of years after I've gone," he says.

His crystal blue eyes sparkle as he speaks.





The Palazzo di Bianca Cappello in Oltrarno on Maggio 26 reflects true Renaissance style.

Tuscan Bread and Vegetable Soup

This soup is easily adjusted to suit your own taste. Add water or vegetable broth to make it thinner or leave it as is if you prefer a heartier consistency.

- 1 pound 2 ounces, fresh cannellini beans, or use 8 ounces of dry beans
- 10 ounces potatoes, peeled
- 10 ounces green cabbage
- 10 ounces black cabbage
- 4 medium tomatoes
- 7 ounces Swiss chard
- 3 or 4 cloves fresh garlic
- 3 medium celery sticks
- 3 medium carrots, peeled
- 2 medium zucchini
- Sea salt, to taste
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 teaspoon red chili pepper
- ½ teaspoon thyme
- Day old artisan Italian bread, toasted
- Sea salt, to taste

If using dry beans, presoak them one day before in water with 2 teaspoons of sea salt. Slow cook the beans in water for 40 minutes or until tender. Drain the beans and put to the side. If using canned beans, drain them.

Chop all of the vegetables. Place them, except the onion, in a large saucepan. Add just enough water to cover the vegetables and cook 40 minutes. Remove the saucepan from the heat and add the cooked beans. Add sea salt to taste.

Next, add the olive oil to a large earthenware casserole and sauté the onion; add the chili pepper and thyme. Cook over a low to medium heat until the onion is soft and transparent.

Cut the toasted bread into cubes and place in the casserole. Next, pour the vegetables over the bread and cook 10 minutes, then remove from heat.

Before serving, place in an oven preheated to 350°F for 20 minutes. If desired, garnish with a drizzle of olive oil before serving.

Makes 4 servings.





A perfect meal
for a chilly winter
day in Florence.

"The best part of my job, aside from cultivating plants, is becoming friends with my customers and cooking together. Some of my best friends in Chianti are chefs. I grow the produce, they cook, and we all dine together. It's a perfect recipe," he says.

Signor Davide practices biodynamic farming and has certified organic goods. Over the last 20 years, he's converted the soil throughout his many acres of farmland into certified biologia, organic. He uses only natural fertilizers (certified organic), practices crop rotation and doesn't use synthetic pesticides. He works closely with Antinori vineyards and grows olives and grapes with them following the *coltivazione biologica*, natural cultivation.

"We plant, cultivate and pick every fruit and vegetable by hand. In addition to the technical part and controls, there are registrations, too, so I can actually sell the products. I have a store in the countryside where we sell organic olive oil, jams, honey, eggs and wine, and fresh squeezed juice, in addition to the seasonal produce," he says. Farm guests are invited to pick their own produce.

"We often end up cooking together in my villa kitchen," he says.

Fruits and vegetables are, of course, seasonal. Winter brings black cabbage, escarole, pumpkin, red radicchio, spinach and winter red beets.

"We sow our land with passion knowing that the water is clean and that our fruits and vegetables are better tasting," he says.

In January, all types of winter vegetables are cultivated. "We cook hearty cabbage soup, fettunta, toasted bruschetta with sautéed black cabbage, and pumpkin soup. I add one potato when I make my pumpkin soup. The potato releases just the right amount of starch when it's slow cooked, making a delicious creamy consistency," he says.

Signor Davide has also created an educational program for the children of Florence. "They come to visit my farm and learn about agriculture. I show them how to plant seeds, carrots and tomatoes, and when they return two months later, we plant them in the soil. My small organic farm is just a small stamp in the geography of

Tuscany," he says.

This time of year, one of his favorite comfort foods is cream of pumpkin soup. "It's very simple to make," he says. "When your ingredients are genuine, the food tastes better. I am not a chef, but I love to cook."

By this time, hours have passed and we're all hungry. We help Davide pack up and we all head to our favorite Florentine restaurant, Omero, and break bread like old friends, having bonded over the traditions and delights of organic Tuscan farming.

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Cream of Pumpkin Soup

- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 ounces of white onion, finely chopped
- 2.2 pounds of pumpkin or butternut squash, cleaned and cut into pieces
- 1/2 pound of potatoes, cubed
- 4 1/4 cups of vegetable broth
- Sea salt and black pepper, to taste
- 1/8 teaspoon of freshly grated cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon of freshly grated nutmeg

For the crostini:

- 4 slices of Italian artisan bread
- 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil
- Fresh garlic for rubbing on the toasted bread

Put the olive oil in a large saucepan and warm up over a low heat. Add the chopped onion and sauté until soft and transparent. Add the chopped pumpkin and potato, and just as much vegetable broth as needed to keep everything moist. Next, add sea salt and pepper to taste and cook over a low to medium heat for about 25-30 minutes or until the pumpkin is tender. Remove and allow to cool.

Once cool, use a hand blender or food processor to blend until creamy. Add cinnamon and nutmeg to taste.

For the crostini:

Thinly slice the bread and place on a pan lined with parchment paper and

toast in the oven; or heat up a ribbed grill and toast the bread on each side until brown. When done, drizzle olive oil on each slice and rub each slice with a fresh clove of garlic.

Serve the pumpkin soup warm, garnished with the crostini and with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil, if desired.

Makes 8 servings.

Rustic Apple Cake

- 1 1/2 pounds Rennet apples, peeled and thinly sliced
- Juice and zest of 1 lemon, divided
- 3 organic eggs, separated
- 1 1/4 cups sugar
- 4 tablespoons butter at room temperature, plus about 2 teaspoons for the top
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Place the apple slices in a small bowl and add the lemon juice. In another bowl, beat the egg whites with an electric mixer until they form stiff peaks. In a separate large mixing bowl, beat the egg yolks with the sugar until they are pale and frothy. Add the softened butter and keep beating.

After 2 minutes pour in the milk, a little at a time. Mix the flour with the baking powder and grated lemon zest and gently fold into the egg mixture. Gradually fold in the whipped egg whites, folding gently from the bottom of the bowl towards the top. Stir in the apple slices, saving some to place on the top of the cake.

Butter and flour a 10-inch round cake pan and pour the apple batter into the pan. Arrange the remaining apple slices on the top and scatter with a few shavings of butter.

Bake 40 to 50 minutes. Use a toothpick to test when the cake is done: when the toothpick comes out dry, it is ready. Wait 10 minutes, then turn the cake onto a wire rack to cool.

Makes 8 servings.



Signor Davide Palmi,
gentleman farmer.