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BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SUMMER 2018

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NOTTE DELLE STELLE

A chef's charitable vision has become a can't-miss culinary event.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



t's early June and on the Amalfi Coast the temperature is already hitting 86°F. But, I'm hoping it will cool off because tonight over 100 of Italy's Michelin star chefs will be showing off their cooking skills along the marina of Seiano in Vico Equense.

The event, called the FestaVico, Repubblica di Cibo (the Feast of Vico, the Republic of Food), starts at 8 p.m. It's a charity event that was created in 2002 by executive chef Gennaro Esposito, who is also a Michelin-starred chef. He was born and raised in Vico Equense and today he's the owner and chef at La

Torre Saracino in Vico and Mamma on Capri, both Michelin-starred.

When I meet Chef Gennaro at the marina moments before the doors officially open, waiters in long white aprons continue to wheel in cases of Taurasi, Prosecco and Barolo, and two Neapolitan bakers walk sideways carrying 500 sfogliatelle piled high on a silver platter. It's an anxious moment, but Chef Gennaro is calm.

"In my profession, forgetting your origins is a deadly sin, a gesture of pride that also excludes the possibility of future discoveries. Let's all remember that," he says.



Chef Gennaro Esposito
founded the Feast of Vico, The
Republic of Food in 2002.

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An employee with Mediterranea Olive company fills a customer's order.

Then, he takes my hand with a firm grip, pulls me in, and kisses me on each cheek. “Benvenuto!” he says, welcoming me.

“Grazie, Chef.” He insists we pose for a photo.

“Tell me about yourself,” he asks.

“I’m Lauren, an Italo-American, married to an Italian man from Pompeii, and we live six months on the Amalfi Coast and six months in Boston.”

“You’re a lucky woman!” he says.

“Tell me a little about yourself,” I say. “I know that you’re famous and I also know that you’re kind.”

He smiles and hugs my shoulder tightly. “I’m a person who spends my life working at my profession and also dedicating my time for this benefit event. This event celebrates a moment for our chefs so that we can be together and share our tastes, information and research. This success is a magical moment for Vico Equense because everyone—chefs, families and children—enjoys a night out and returns home with a new experience that’s filled with good energy. Most of all, we have helped hospitals and children. And, this fills my heart,” he says.

As the crowd thickens, Chef Gennaro is getting closed in by a

group of food fans trying to take photos with him. He stops for a few photo ops, then kisses a baby, and resumes talking to me.

He’s a talent. Kind-hearted and down-to-earth, he stands there in the middle of the show like a rock star.

He calls the event, “Notte delle Stelle,” night of the stars, and it’s an outdoor eating and drinking party.

“I created this event because I wanted to give back to those less fortunate. We’ll raise over 215,000 Euros (about \$264,000) which are earmarked for ALTS (the Association for Breast Cancer Fighting), Pro Foundation (Prevention and Research in oncology), Never Give Up (Prevention and Treatment of Nutrition Disorders and of nutrition), We With You for the Mici (school camps for children with inflammatory diseases and chronic intestinal disorders) and Santobono Onlus (Operational Microscope Project),” he says.

“When I came up with the idea for a summer food event, I wanted do something that got the chefs out of their kitchens, while having fun. There’s such a close camaraderie between us and it grows stronger each time we reunite in Vico. Cooking on the beach was the perfect idea. We never see people because we



Wine from Casele del 700 is poured into a decanter at the festival.

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are always behind the stove,” he says. His brown eyes sparkle as he pores over the crowd.

Then, we begin our tour of the different food stands. He introduces me to the chefs in tonight’s line up. There’s Silvia Regi Baracchi, Michelin starred chef and owner of Relais Il Falconiere, and Nino di Costanzo, master pastry chef at Antonio Maresca. Chef Andrea Pansa is the owner and chef of Pasticceria Pansa Amalfi, whom I already know. We continue to the piazza where Neapolitan pizzaioli are frying up pizza fritte and doling out slices from a paddle.

Artisan food and wine suppliers are serving samples of all kinds. In the line-up are: Tenuta di Poggio, an organic winemaker from Pisa with a “biodynamic passion for wine”; Mediterranea Olive, an expert grower and purveyor of natural Italian olives who insists I try them all; Casale del ‘700, a cantina from Gagnano led by a woman who took over her father’s vineyard in order to keep the tradition going; and Carmasciando, an artisan cheese maker from Lombardia, who has been passionate for tutti formaggi since he was a baby.

Lastly we move to the dessert area, set under swaying palm trees with the scent of Caffè Kimbo permeating the air. A team of 50 pastry masters showcase their decorative cakes, biscotti, desserts, gelato, sorbetto and chocolates—under the stars.

“That’s why I call it ‘Notte delle Stelle!’ Chef Gennaro smiles as he sips his Caffè Espresso Napoletano.

For information about this year’s festival, see festavico.com or contact the Italian National Tourist Board North America, italiantourism.com.

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Lemon Almond Cake

- ½ cup dry polenta
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups whole blanched almonds
- 1 medium lemon
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup whole milk
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- Confectioners’ sugar for dusting, if desired

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Spray a 9-inch springform pan with baking spray. Set aside.

In a bowl, mix together the polenta,

flour, baking powder, and salt.

In a food processor or blender, finely grind the almonds. Cut the lemon in half and squeeze the juice into the almond mixture. Add the ground almonds and lemon juice to the cornmeal mixture.

Add the olive oil, milk, eggs and sugar. Blend well. Add the almond extract and blend well.

Pour the batter into the springform pan and bake about 40 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean.

Remove the cake from the oven and let cool. Sprinkle the top with confectioners’ sugar, if desired.

Makes 8 servings.



Roasted Fish with Olives and Wine

Simple but filling. Serve this dish with a crispy loaf of Italian bread and your favorite white wine.

- 2 pounds fresh white fish
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup black olives
- 4 cloves of garlic
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 tablespoon capers, drained
- ½ cup dry white wine
- ¼ cup water
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

- 1 bunch parsley, chopped, for garnish

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Season the fish with salt and pepper. In a bowl, combine the ¼ cup oil, olives, garlic, tomatoes, capers, wine and water.

Place the fish in a baking dish. Pour the contents of the bowl over the fish. Bake until the fish is cooked through, about 20 minutes. Do not overbake.

Remove from the oven and drizzle the fish with the 4 tablespoons olive oil. Top with chopped parsley, if desired and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

“This success is a magical moment for Vico Equense because everyone—chefs, families and children—enjoys a night out and returns home with a new experience that’s filled with good energy.”

- Chef Gennaro Esposito, founder of FestaVico





The Amalfi Coast holds many culinary and cultural treasures. The drive from Vico Equense to Salerno, shown here, includes passing through scenic coastal towns like Sorrento, Positano, Amalfi, and Ravello, all of which offer inviting food, wine and sights.