

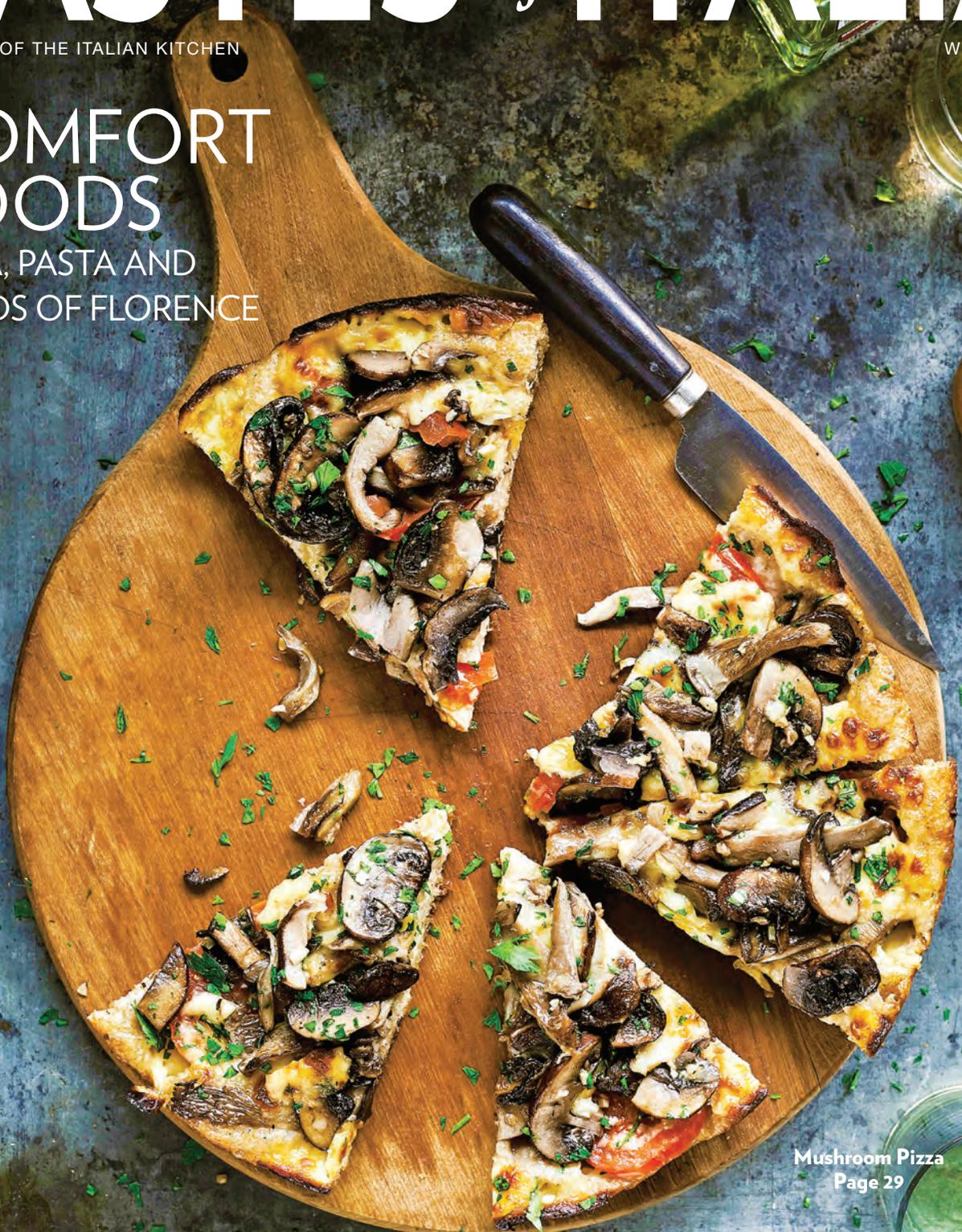
TASTES *of* ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

WINTER 2020

COMFORT FOODS

PIZZA, PASTA AND FOODS OF FLORENCE



Mushroom Pizza
Page 29

Display until March 30, 2020

\$11.95US \$11.95CAN

54 >



HEALTHY DIRECTIONS

Cooking with
Winter Vegetables

COOKING WITH CITRUS

A Squeeze of
Sunshine for Winter

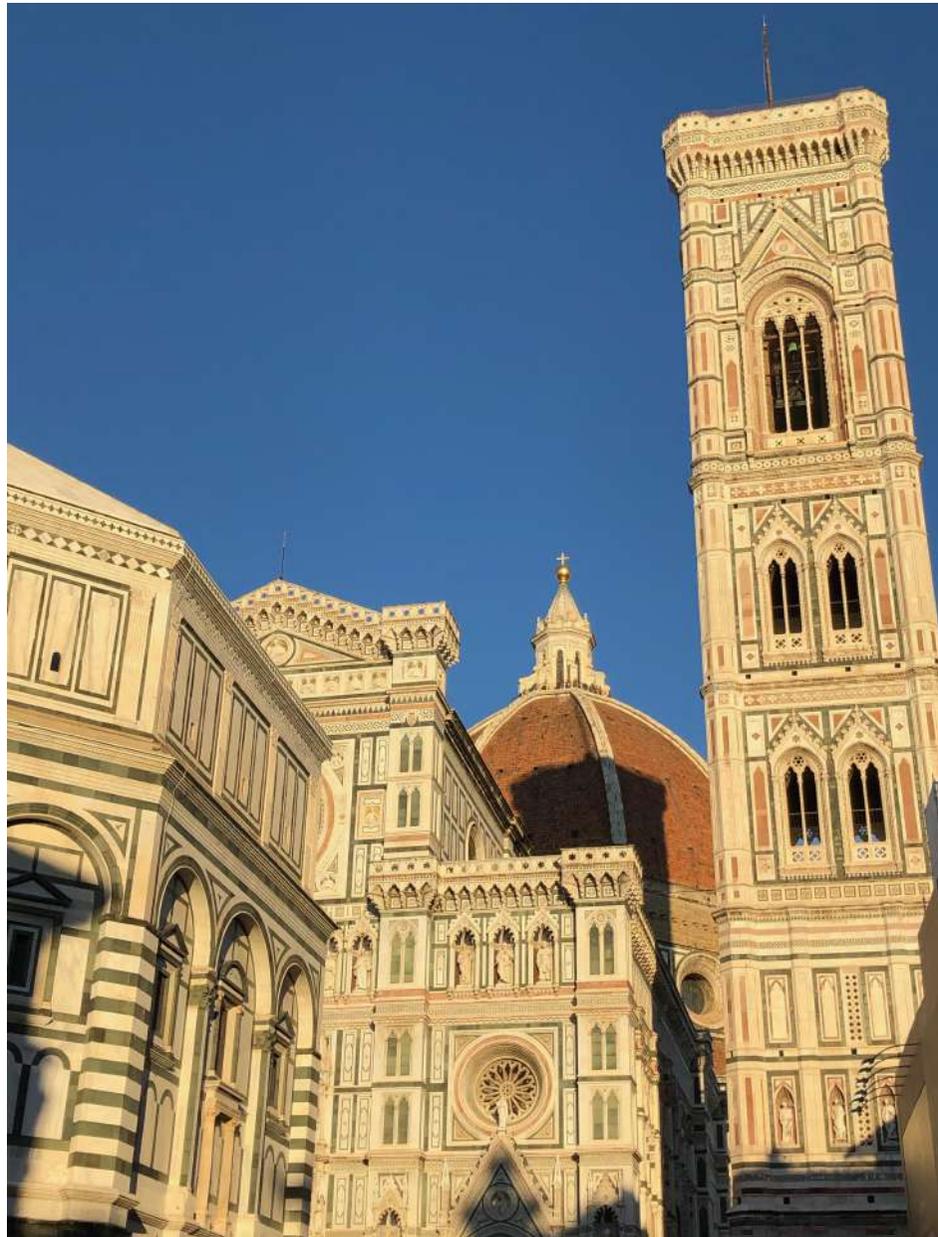
GRILLED SANDWICHES

Making the
Perfect Panini

FOODS OF FLORENCE

THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE, FLORENCE WAS THE HOMETOWN OF THE MEDICI FAMILY, INCLUDING CATHERINE, WHO BECAME THE QUEEN OF FRANCE AND A LEADING FOOD INFLUENCER.

TEXT: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI





NATIVE SOIL

CELEBRATED AS A REBIRTH

or enlightening, the Italian Renaissance took place roughly between the 14th and 17th centuries. At its heart was the ancient city of Florence.

During this period, Italy was not the Italy that we know today. It was divided into independent city-states, each one with a different form of government. Florence was an independent republic, as well as a banking and commercial capital. A wealthy city, it was ruled by the Medici family for several centuries.

Noted for bankers, businessmen and patrons of the arts, the House of Medici helped transform Florence into an intellectual capital, commissioning Filippo Brunelleschi to build the Dome of Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, Giorgio Vasari to design the Uffizi Gallery, and Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci for other long-term projects.

Catherine de' Medici married Henri de Valois in 1533 when both were 14, and he succeeded to the French throne in 1547, making her Queen Consort of France. She and the king had 10 children, and three of her sons went on to be kings of France. She is also credited with shaping many French culinary traditions.

During Italy's Renaissance, the rich ate abundantly, while historians say the middle class had only two meals each day, one in the mid-morning, the other just before nightfall. The poor only had a light meal at the end of the day.

Bread was a commodity for the rich, and its production was heavily influenced by the Salt War of 1540. (Salt was boycotted in the making of bread due to the high taxes that were imposed on it. Today, Tuscan bread is still made without salt.) Occasionally, poorer Florentines saved their money to buy bread, but most often they had fruits and vegetables, and meat only on Sunday.

Soups were popular for all of the social classes. Many of the hearty soups served throughout Tuscany today are similar to what was served during the Renaissance. They were prepared, re-boiled, then simmered again with vegetables, day-old bread, meat scraps or bones from a prosciutto or roast.



Penne with Meat Sauce

- 1 medium carrot
- 2 medium celery stalks
- ½ medium onion
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 13 ounces ground beef
- 3 ounces ground pork
- 1 (28-oz.) can crushed tomatoes
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 pound penne
- ½ cup beef stock, if needed
- Parmigian Reggiano, sliced thinly, if desired
- Sprig of basil, for garnish, if desired

Chop the carrot, celery and onion finely. In a large wide pot, heat the olive oil and add

the chopped vegetables. Sauté until the onion is translucent. Add the ground meat and sauté until it starts to brown. Add the crushed tomatoes. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Reduce the heat to low, cover and cook about 3 hours, stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

Cook the penne according to package directions. Drain and add it to the pot. Add a bit of beef stock, if needed, to dilute the sauce. Cook 1 or 2 minutes to combine the pasta with the sauce.

Serve with slices of Parmigiano Reggiano and a sprig of fresh basil, for garnish, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

NATIVE SOIL

They often included onions or beans. Pasta was popular among Florence's middle class, which also dined on fruits, salads and assorted meats.

The farmlands surrounding Florence produced olive oil and wine, wheat, corn (which became very popular in the late Renaissance) and seasonal fruit. Artichokes, asparagus, spinach, cardoons, beans, broad beans and peas were also a part of the food scene. Truffle and mushrooms were copiously harvested. Chickens, ducks, rabbits and pigs were raised on small estates supplying the region, while in Chianti and Maremma, cows were fattened specifically for the wealthy in Florence. Small pigs and boars were also raised and used for *finocchio*, a Tuscan salami scented with fennel seeds.

Although Florence was the epicenter of the Renaissance, other parts of Tuscany had their own regional specialties. Pisa was famous for black cabbage soup and *torta coi bischeri*, a pastry filled with rice, candied fruit, chocolate, raisins, pine nuts, nutmeg and Strega liquor.

In Arezzo, the traditional dish was *acquacotta*. Translating to "cooked water," it was made with fried onions, tomatoes, eggs and cheese. Siena was known for its very spicy cake specialties, such as *panpepato*, a traditional spiced bread, and *panforte*, a rich, fl t, dense cake made with nuts, bread crumbs (flour has replaced the bread crumbs in modern times), spices and candied fruit.

While much has changed since the Renaissance, you can still sample a taste of it through Florentine cuisine. But there's much more to learn and enjoy. Check out the Renaissance Florence tours at www.cooking-vacations.com.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. www.cooking-vacations.com; (617) 247-4112.



Panforte

- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon ground clove
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup chopped hazelnuts
- ½ cup pistachio nuts, halved
- 1½ cups chopped figs and raisins (or dates and peaches)
- 1 cup chocolate chips
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 teaspoon sherry
- ⅔ cup honey
- Powdered sugar for dusting, if desired

Preheat oven to 300°F.
Coat a 9-inch springform pan with nonstick cooking spray.
Mix all the ingredients well (except the honey and powdered sugar) and break up any clumps.
In a saucepan, heat the honey until it starts to boil. Pour the honey into the mixture and stir rapidly. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 45 minutes.
Remove from the oven and let cool in the pan, then carefully remove it. Dust with powdered sugar, if desired, and then slice or cut into squares.
Makes 24 servings.

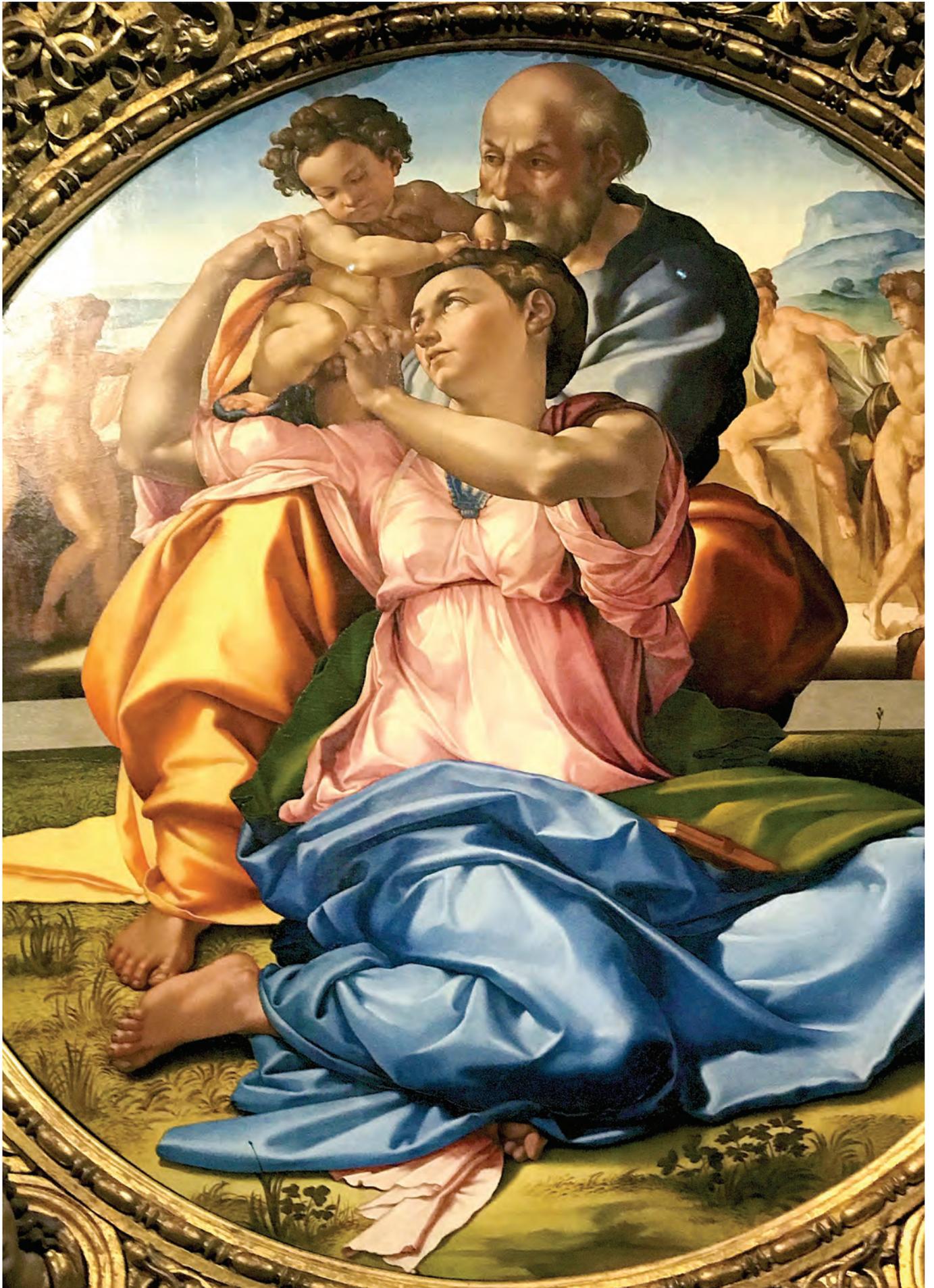


PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

NATIVE SOIL

Torta di Riso

This Renaissance rice cake was a favorite of Catherine de' Medici. Simple and easy to make, it remains on Florentine dessert menus even today.

- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups water
- 1 heaped cup rice
- 1 fresh vanilla bean, scraped out
- 3 large whole eggs
- 1 egg yolk
- 5 ounces honey
- 1/8 teaspoon sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon, or to taste
- Butter, for greasing the pan
- 1/4 cup brown sugar

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Place the milk and water in a large saucepan. Add the rice and the paste from inside the vanilla bean. Bring to a boil. Continue cooking over low heat, while stirring. Once well-mixed, remove from heat and let cool.

In a separate bowl, beat together the eggs, yolk, honey and sea salt. Add the rice mixture and cinnamon and mix well.

Grease a 9-inch baking dish with butter, including the edges. Sprinkle the brown sugar along the baking dish's edges, making sure it sticks to the butter.

Pour the batter into the baking pan and cook about half an hour. Once baked, remove from the oven and let cool. Place in the refrigerator for several hours and serve chilled.

Makes 8 servings.

Onion Soup

Serve this soup in terracotta bowls, if possible.

- 1 loaf day-old artisan bread
- 6 cups hot vegetable broth
- 5 large white onions
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 medium potatoes, chopped into small cubes
- Nutmeg, cinnamon, sea salt and black pepper, to taste
- 3 1/2 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated, divided

Toast or grill the bread and set aside.

Heat the vegetable broth.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Chop the onions finely and put them in

large pan. Add the butter and olive oil. Cook over medium heat until the onions are soft. Turn with a wooden spoon. Add a splash of water to the pan to soften them, if necessary. Add the potato and the hot broth. Cook 20 to 30 minutes. Add seasonings, to taste.

Take the toasted bread and place a slice on the bottom of each bowl. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Add the onion soup to the bowls. Garnish with Parmesan cheese. Bake for 5 minutes. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Bean and Black Cabbage Renaissance Soup

- 1 cup dry cannellini beans
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 to 3 small chili peppers
- 1 head black cabbage, chopped into small pieces
- 6 or 7 cups vegetable broth
- 4 slices Italian bread, toasted and rubbed with garlic, if desired
- Olive oil for drizzling, if desired

Soak the dry beans overnight in salted water. Drain the beans and boil them for about 40 minutes, until soft, adding water if needed.

In a clay pot or deep pan, sauté the garlic cloves and the chili peppers. Add the beans and let them cook for a few minutes. Add the cabbage and stir with the beans. Slowly add the vegetable broth and let simmer for an hour on low heat.

Place the bread on the bottom of the soup bowls, and ladle the soup over the bread. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

Note: For added flavor, make your own vegetable broth, adding your choice of finely chopped fennel, squash, carrots, zucchini, onions or your other favorite vegetables.

Crespelle alla Fiorentina

A Renaissance favorite, these were originally named *pezzole della nonna*, translating to nanna's handkerchief, because of their shape.

For the crepes:

- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 large eggs
- 1 1/4 cup whole milk
- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 1/8 teaspoon sea salt, or to taste

For the béchamel:

- 1/4 cup sweet, unsalted butter
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 ounces all-purpose flour
- Sea salt, to taste
- White pepper, to taste
- Nutmeg, to taste

For the filling:

- 1 pound blanched spinach
- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons fresh ricotta cheese
- 1 extra large organic egg
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- Nutmeg, to taste

Grated Pecorino

Preheat the oven to 275°F.

To make the crepes:

For the crepes, sift the flour into a deep bowl, add the eggs one by one and mix with an electric mixer at medium speed. Then add the milk and melted butter. Add the salt. The mixture should be fluid and without lumps. If it is too thick, add milk. Let the batter rest for a few minutes.

Grease a flat, round 8-inch pan and place on medium heat. When the pan is hot enough, pour 1/4 cup of batter into it and distribute it until it fills the pan. Cook for a minute, but be careful to not overcook. Flip it over and cook another minute. Remove from heat and repeat the process until you have used all the batter.

To make the béchamel:

In a sauce pan, melt the butter over low heat. Add the flour and mix until smooth. Cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the milk and whisk together. Cook for 10 minutes, stirring gently until thick enough and sticks to the back of the spoon. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg, to taste. Set aside.

To make the filling:

Squeeze the moisture from the blanched spinach and finely chop it. Place the ricotta, egg and grated Parmesan cheese in a deep bowl and mix. Fold in the chopped spinach.

Place a heaping tablespoon of the filling onto a crepe, then fold in half and again in quarters. Place in a greased baking pan, touching against each other. Pour the béchamel over the top, add grated pecorino and place in the oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Cathedral of Santa
Maria del Fiore



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI