

# TASTES *of* ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SPRING 2020

IN SEASON  
SALUMI, SPRING RAVIOLI  
AND THE AMALFI COAST



Spaghetti with Peas,  
Asparagus and Pine Nuts  
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**TUSCANY'S AREZZO**

Gnudi, Crostini  
and More



ON TOUR

# HISTORIC FEAST

RICH IN DELICACIES OF THE PAST, INCLUDING ART AND ARCHITECTURE, AREZZO IN EASTERN TUSCANY IS A CAN'T-MISS DESTINATION WITH MUCH TO OFFER IN FOOD AND DRINK AS WELL.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

**A scenic** street Anghiari in the Province of Arezzo.



## ON TOUR

**“BUONGIORNO. CIAO SIGNORA DEBORAH!** Volete voi un caffè o un cappuccino?” The barista asks what kind of coffee we would like as he pivots from his La Pavoni coffee maker to the counter while steaming cold milk into foam.

I am here at the historic Caffè dei Constanti on the Piazza San Francesco in Arezzo in eastern Tuscany with Signora Deborah, a tour guide and chef. The landmark bar, first opened in 1804, is buzzing with townsfolk. Behind the long marble countertop, the barista repeatedly fills the pod with finely ground coffee while waiters serve award-winning brioche, cornetti and traditional gattò. There’s even a signature gelato called “La Vita è Bella,” translating to “life is beautiful,” and dedicated to the 1997 movie of the same name which was filmed here.

Arezzo is a gem in many ways. Just 37 miles southeast of Florence, Arezzo is an ancient town whose first city wall dates to the 5th century B.C. It’s known for its art and history dating back to Etruscan times, when it was part of the Dodecapolis, one of the 12 most important Etruscan cities. The city is set along Via Cassia, known as the Road to Rome, which was an important trade route during the Roman time, making it not only important for pottery, but gold and silver, too.

Today, Arezzo keeps the tradition of its goldsmith trade with artisan shops that continue to produce gold and silver jewelry at great pricing.

Deborah is the perfect tour guide for this must-see destination. Following our delicious sips, we start our tour over ancient cobblestones that have been worn out by knights on horseback and Etruscan soldiers in battle. I feel like I am on a movie set as Arezzo is made up of towers and palazzos in a mix of medieval and Renaissance architecture decorated with noble coats of arms that overlook the Piazza Grande. It’s a patchwork of stone buildings, some with wooden porches, a medieval tower and loggia, making it almost surreal. Cars are not allowed in the old part of the historic city, which give it a peaceful feel.

We start our tour at the Piazza Grande — the big square. The piazza has a trapezoidal shape and is built on a downhill slope. It was also the scenic location chosen by Roberto Benigni, Italian screenwriter and starring actor, for the shooting of his Oscar-winning film, *La Vita è Bella - Life is Beautiful*.

“The Piazza Grande is a synthesis of different architectural styles spanning from the 13th to 18th centuries. During the Middle Ages, the piazza was larger than it



**Landscape view**  
of Arezzo area in  
eastern Tuscany.



ON TOUR



A wine tasting room in Arezzo

PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

**Deborah, Arezzo**  
guide and chef

## ON TOUR

is today and the Logge del Vasari did not exist. The outdoor market was also held here along with the Giostra del Saracino, the ancient Joust of the Saracens, with knights on horseback in battle. This tradition of the joust is reenacted in the same fashion twice a year,” Deborah tells me.

The Logge is an absolute masterpiece that was created by painter, architect and writer Giorgio Vasari at the end of 1573. It was embellished by its famous loggia where ancient artisan shops and businesses still exist today. Vasari was born in Arezzo in 1511 and died in 1574 before it was completed in 1595. We call this *il cuore di Arezzo*, the heart of Arezzo.

“One of the most vibrant events that Arezzo is known for is the Fiera Antiquaria, an antique fair which has taken place continuously every first Sunday of the month and the Saturday before since 1968. We can thank its founder and art dealer, Arezzo-born Ivan Bruschi, for the event. During the fair, the piazza hosts more than 500 stalls that spill onto the city’s side streets attracting over 30,000 visitors from every corner of the world. Vendors sell, visitors buy and vendors trade silver and gold, jewelry, Roman coins, art, antique clocks and watches, jewelry, paintings and furniture.”

Deborah talks with her hands while peering through very fashionable black oversized glasses. We walk to the Palazzo della Fraternita dei Laici, a museum displaying archeological artifacts, that includes a library, paintings and sculptures, prints and drawings.

“This Palazzo dates to 1375, with both a Gothic and Renaissance facade,” she says. It was decorated by the subsequent addition of the bell tower designed by Giorgio Vasari and a 16th century clock made by Felice da Fossato in 1552, she adds. The ground floor is Gothic and dates to 1377, while the second floor is Renaissance and dates to 1434.

“Let’s continue our walk to the Palazzo del Tribunale located next to the Fraternita with its elegant semicircular staircase,” she says. We admire the circular apse from where we are standing here in the Piazza Grande and the outside of the domed Pieve di Santa Maria that is decorated with columns and capitals in different styles. The church’s facade is on the opposite side of the Corso Italia, the main street of the city.

Arezzo features countless palaces that retain their original Medieval character with wooden balconies and crenellated towers—including the Faggiolana Tower of the thirteenth century, Palazzo Cofani Brizzolari and the Lappoli Tower house—all dating back to 1200 and 1300. A crenellation was a rampart built around the top of a castle with regular gaps for firing arrows

Walking through Arezzo with Deborah is like



Castello di Brolio, a Tuscan wine

PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

having a storybook read to me while stepping back in time. Morning has turned to mezzogiorno (mid-day) and the church bells are now ringing.

My reverie is interrupted when Deborah announces, "It's aperitivo time. Spritz time! Italians love their aperitivo!"

We slip into Chiantineria Arezzo, a beautiful sitting-room-style restaurant and wine bar, located on Via di Seteria, for an Aperol spritz. Following our break, she returns home and I head to the Medieval church of Saint Francesco dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi. Inside this place of worship is the Legend of the True Cross, a Renaissance fresco by Italian artist Piero della Francesca. Its pastel colors and gentle strokes take my breath away.

Wanting to learn more about Giorgio Vasari, my next stop is Casa Vasari. He bought this house in 1541 and frescoed each room and vault with biblical scenes and allegories in precious pastels. Vasari had an illustrious life whose work took him to Rome, Naples, Pisa and Florence. He was befriended by Michelangelo, employed by the Medici family (painting the walls and ceilings in the Palazzo Vecchio, the frescos in the cupola of the Duomo and the Vasari Corridor). He was also the architect who created the Loggia at the Palazzo degli Uffizi

There's much to see in Arezzo, including the Cathedral of Saint Donato e Pietro, the Medici Fortress, the archaeological Museum and Roman Amphitheatre.

After exploring Arezzo on my own, I meet Deborah in her home kitchen where we start cooking, exploring some of the traditional dishes and wines of the area.

She starts by opening a bottle of Castello di Brolio Chianti Classico DOCG. "This wine pairs well with today's menu. It needs time to breathe. It's produced on a vineyard with a castle and Renaissance gardens," she says. The area produces several wines, all of which are excellent.

With a white linen apron tied tight around her waist, Deborah cuts the bread which will be toasted for crostini.

"Like every region in Italy, Arezzo's cuisine is traditional and goes back to its poor past," she says. We sip and swirl while mixing spinach and ricotta cheese for the Tuscan gnudi. We prepare pepper beef stew and pappa al pomodoro, bread and tomato soup. I even learn how to make gattò, a delicate sponge cake roll stuffed with cream and soaked with liqueur.

My home cooking class and experience is a joy! I have not only prepared and learned so many cooking tips that I would have never learned on my own, but I also have a new friend. We raise our glasses of Chianti Classico and toast to beautiful Arezzo. Salute!

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# THE RECIPES



## Traditional Tuscan Pepper Beef Stew

- 2 pounds veal, cut into big cubes
- 3 to 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Black pepper, to taste
- Sea salt, to taste
- 4 cups good quality Chianti wine
- 5 to 6 slices Tuscan bread
- 2 cloves fresh garlic, sliced lengthwise

In a crock pot, sauté the meat in the olive oil on a low, slow heat, then add the sea salt and pepper. Cover with wine and cook on low heat for at least 2 hours until the meat is extremely soft and tender.

Serve hot with slices of bread that have been rubbed with the garlic. Makes 6 to 8 servings.



## Gnudi Tuscan Gnocchi with Ricotta Cheese and Spinach

- ½ pound baby spinach or spinach leaves (if using mature spinach, remove the stalks, rinse and pat dry)
- 12 ounces ricotta (sheep or cow), well drained
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano
- 2 medium eggs, fresh and organic
- 1 cup “00” flour or all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Freshly grated nutmeg, to taste

### For the sage butter:

- 1 bunch fresh sage (make sure the leaves are stripped from the stalks except for 2 to 3 sprigs)
- 3 tablespoons salted butter
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano, plus extra for sprinkling, if desired

Gently steam the spinach, making sure

not to overcook. Squeeze well. Chop with a knife and remove the excess water by squeezing the spinach in your hands. Set aside.

In a medium bowl, stir together the ricotta and spinach until well combined. Add the Parmigiano Reggiano, eggs, and flour and stir until combined. Season with salt, pepper, and nutmeg to taste.

Take the mixture and form small balls by hand. Continue until all of the mixture has been made into small balls.

Bring a large pan of salted water to boil. Lower the gnudi balls into the water, reduce heat to a simmer and cook for 3 to 4 minutes. (Cooked gnocchi floats to the top of the water.) When cooked, remove with a slotted spoon.

**For the sage butter:** Heat the butter in a large frying pan on low heat, add the sage and fry until crisp. Add the gnudi to the pan with grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, to taste. Swirl the ingredients well until mixed.

Arrange the gnudi on a platter, top with remaining sauce and additional grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.

## Tuscan Bread and Tomato Soup

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 to 3 garlic cloves, to taste, minced
- 6 to 8 slices toasted bread, torn into bite-sized pieces
- ½ pound ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
- 4 cups hot vegetable broth
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 2 to 3 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped by hand
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
- Fresh basil, torn, for garnish
- Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan and cook the garlic with the bread. Add the tomatoes to the pan and the broth. Add a pinch of salt and cook until thick and most of the liquid has evaporated, about 1 hour. Add the basil and season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Serve warm with basil and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.





## Chicken Liver Crostini

- 1 pound chicken livers
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ red onion, chopped
- ½ carrot, chopped
- ½ celery stick, chopped
- 1 sprig fresh sage, chopped
- 1 sprig fresh rosemary, leaves picked and chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons capers, chopped
- Hot vegetable broth, as needed
- ¼ cup Vin Santo wine
- 1 tablespoon anchovy paste
- Sea salt, to taste

Rinse the chicken livers well under running water and put them in a saucepan.

In a frying pan, heat the olive oil with the onion, carrot, celery, sage, rosemary and bay leaf. Add the butter, the chicken livers and the chopped capers and cook about 40 minutes on a medium-low flame, stirring frequently. Add some hot broth if the mixture becomes too dry.

When the chicken livers are cooked, add the Vin Santo.

At the very end, gradually add some anchovy paste, stirring and test tasting. Adjust any additional salt or Vin Santo to taste.

Serve on slices of toasted Italian bread.

Makes 12 servings.