

# It's A Dream Place

*Stories & Recipes of Food, Love and the Amalfi Coast*

Lauren A. Birmingham





*Scrivo in blu, il colore del mare,  
I write in blue, the color of the sea.  
- Lauren*

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Michelin-Star Recipes by Executive Chef Andrea Migliaccio

Photography by Lauren A. Birmingham

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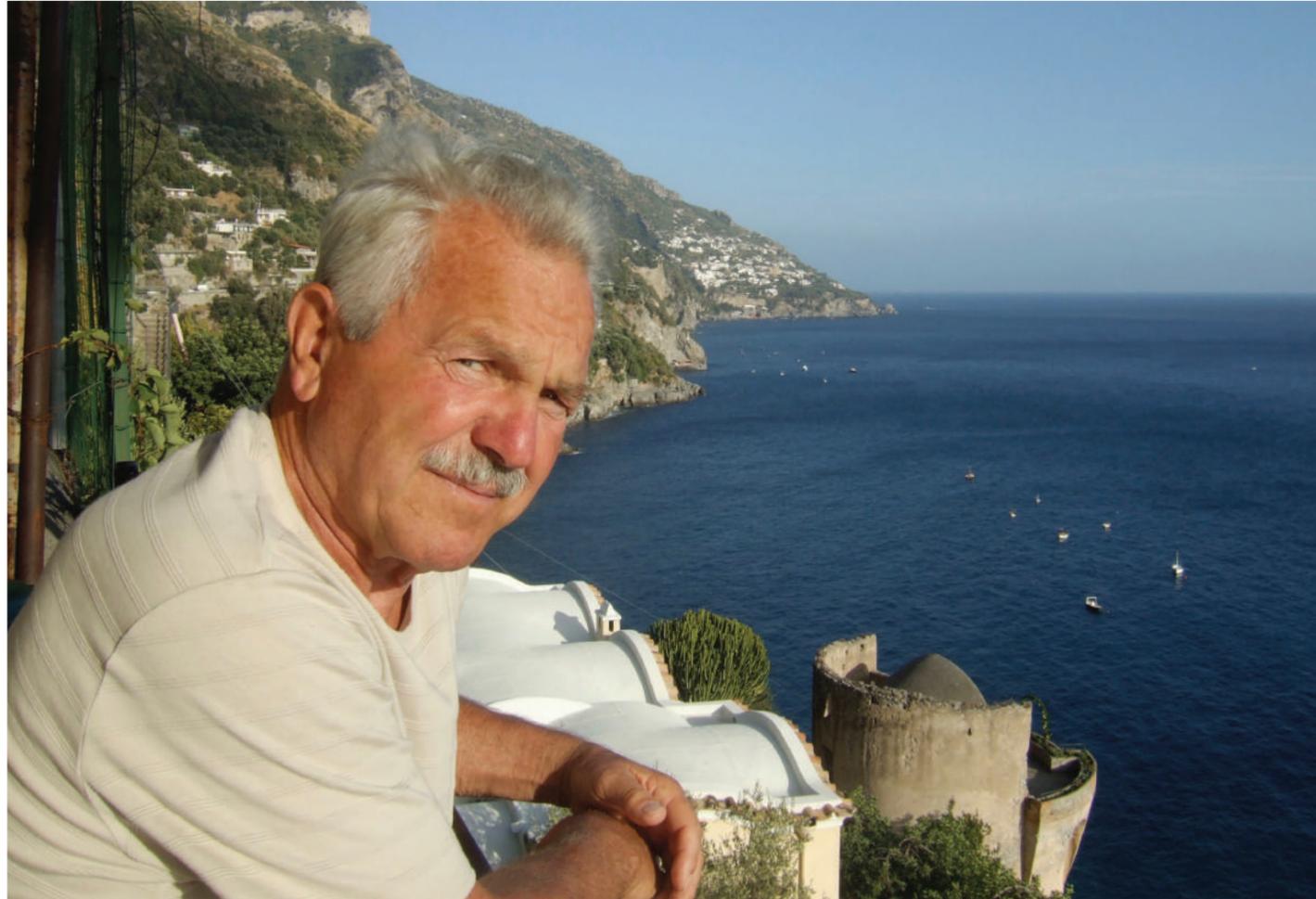
*We were driving along the Amalfi Coast without a road map in a sporty Fiat 500. As we whirled around yet another curve, I caught my first glimpse of Positano from a distance. It looked like someone had scattered confetti all over the mountainside. The little specks of color on the vertical slopes were actually monazeni, the fishermen's pastel-colored houses, painted in butter yellow and faded pink. I will never forget that first image of Positano. It cast a spell upon me.*



*“I don’t measure, I cook with my eyes.”  
Marie Lucia, my mom*

## *Sei Sempre Con Me*

### *Dedicated to my father*



Laurence Birmingham, my father

My father's name was Laurence, Lorenzo in Italian, after San Lorenzo – the patron saint of chefs and cooks. In Italy, the first-born boy often takes the name of his father or grandfather; I was given his name because the doctor thought I was going to be a boy. So I was named Lauren.

I called him daddy. Everyone else called him Mr. B. He was Hollywood handsome and adored by everyone. He loved to travel and was the first one to pack his bags for trips from New York City to Italy and France. He loved the outdoor cafés of Paris, the medieval village of Roquebrune and the marketplace in Menton in the south of France. But most of all, he loved Positano. He was the first to dress up for a party and was always ready to open his best bottle of wine. He'd say, "Why save it? Every day is a special occasion."

My father shined in our lives while we were growing up – four kids in a close-knit Italian family. He'd fill the pool to the brim in spring and invite the whole neighborhood over for a pool party. In summer, he'd chauffeur us to the beach, sail around Narragansett Bay in his boat, fish for lobsters and dig for clams. Linguine and clams was his favorite. In winter, he'd drive us back and forth to ice-skating practice – even when it snowed – and sat through cheerleading practices and hockey games from 6 a.m. until midnight. He always listened and guided us without curfews. His gentle words were, "Use your own discretion and don't disappoint me." We never did.

As we grew older, he'd hold court around his big, round ceramic table, the one we bought from Piccadilly Ceramiche on the Amalfi Coast, weighing 300 kilos. He'd sip his homemade wine and tell us stories about growing up with his *Nonni* Costanzo and Antonia Caparrelli while his grandchildren – Chloe, Siena, Ava and Chase – ran around the table and played hide-and-seek.

When I married Rino in the Madre Assunta Church in Positano, he cried while he walked me down the aisle, then gave me away with a kiss. Just before he turned away, Rino gave my father a kiss – one on each cheek – like all Italians do.

His love for his family was immense. Not only was he our winemaker, travel partner, gardener and *consigliere* – he was our hero. Even though his leather recliner is empty, he is always in our hearts. *Grazie papà, sei sempre con me*, thank you, Daddy, you're always with me.

## My Story

When my weeks and weekends started to melt into one, and my thirtysomething was becoming fortysomething, I decided to put my public relations agency on hold, pack my bags and head to Italy. After all, *bella Napoli* with its pizza and pasta, and sunny Positano with its natural beauty, had been pulling at my heartstrings forever.

And even though I had visited Italy many times before to see my family, I wanted to unplug this time. I wanted to live in a whitewashed villa with a *cupola* roof in Positano and feel like a local. I wanted to open my windows onto the sea. I wanted to read a book from cover to cover, slowly sip a cappuccino and not have to think about clients and deadlines. Having to read five newspapers and check out the gossip and sports columns before even starting my day had become old. I didn't want to think about anything anymore, at least for right now. I had to come up with a way to change my life, and I wanted to start by moving to Italy. Shortly thereafter, my metamorphosis began.

It happened naturally at my friend Andrea's villa in Sorrento when I was visiting him with my parents. While my mom was preparing *taralli*, savory breadsticks, in his outdoor kitchen, she drew a crowd of villa guests. Germans, Irishmen and Australians had abandoned their lounge chairs and were following my mom, curious to see what she was making. Meanwhile, Andrea, who had just inherited his *nonna's* villa, wanted me to use my fancy public relations skills to fill his property. In that moment, I had a brain sparkle and wrote my first-ever cooking tour for his villa. Later that week, my mom hosted informal cooking classes for all the guests. Together, we cooked *gnocchi* and ravioli and desserts served with homemade wine. Everyone enjoyed the food under blue Italian skies with great conversation, even though everyone didn't speak the same language. Other cooking tours followed.

I began using my writing and photography skills to create Italian cooking and cultural experiences throughout all of Italy. Then, like a gift from the culinary gods, Elizabeth Berg, the award-winning New York Times bestselling author, came to Positano undercover and wrote about me in National Geographic Traveler. The story made the front page of the iconic magazine, and it went all around the world. In public relations, we call it a halo. The surge of business sent me back to Italy and Positano often, and my company instantly grew.

Then, on one of the hottest days in July, I called a driver to take me from the Villa Margherita to the San Pietro Hotel. A handsome Italian named Rino picked me up. Rino, whose real name is Gennaro after the patron saint of Naples, was a former race car driver. Today, his company, Italy Car Drivers, drives tourists along the Amalfi Coast, and I was in the back seat of his Mercedes getting chauffeured to my appointment. We exchanged business cards in the hopes that we could send each other business. Later that day, he sent me a text saying, "It was nice to meet you, and the scent of your perfume stayed in my car, making my day." Shortly thereafter, we passed each other in the *piazza*, and he invited me for a pizza. A year later, he asked me to marry him in the Madre Assunta Church in Positano. I wore an Italian wedding gown made by Le Spose di Giò from Bologna. As we left the church after the ceremony, our family and friends tossed *confetti*, sugar-covered almonds, and white rice into the air. I call it a halo.



## Confetti



It was love at first sight. I had fallen for Positano and made a quick decision to move there. My love affair started when I first visited the Amalfi Coast with my Italo-American friend, Roseanna Ansaldi. We were two young, inseparable friends building our businesses and living in Boston's Back Bay in the 90s. Single and free, we booked our tickets to Naples for a one-week getaway during the Memorial Day holiday.

We flew over on Alitalia and landed in *bella Napoli* after a lengthy eight-hour overnight flight. Soon, we were driving along the Amalfi Coast without a road map in a sporty Fiat 500. As we whirled around yet another curve, I caught my first glimpse of Positano from a distance. It looked like someone had scattered confetti all over the mountainside. The little specks of color on the vertical slopes were actually *monazeni*, the fishermen's pastel-colored houses, painted in butter yellow and faded pink. I will never forget that first image of Positano. It cast a spell upon me.

We parked our car in Mandara Garage in Positano's center and walked along the pedestrian footpath to the Spiaggia Grande, the main beach, just in time for *pranzo*, lunch, at Le Tre Sorelle. We were welcomed to the beachfront *trattoria* by a trio of handsome, flirtatious Italian waiters – Gaetano, Paolo and Salvatore. Smiling, they poured us Prosecco, handed us menus in Italian and asked if we had any questions. Another tall Italian named Luigi, the owner, greeted us like we were old friends. We ordered the specialty, squash flowers stuffed with mozzarella and *ricotta*, and *paccheri con zucchini e provola*, tube-shaped pasta with zucchini and provolone cheese. It was a long lunch with lots of conversation and chilled white wine, just like any gathering around an Italian table. Then, Pasquale, the local artist, strolled over from his easel on the beach and joined us for a *caffè*. He took a seat, and the conversation continued. Pasquale gave us each a small painting, and Luigi gave us a *sconto*, the local discount. Roseanna and I returned to Tre Sorelle often during our stay.

When the Fourth of July came that year, Roseanna and I were off to sunny Positano for yet another *giro*, spin, of summer fun and food. We never wanted our vacation to end.

Winter came, and I returned again in February, alone this time. Even though Positano is like a monastery in the dead of winter, the moody blue feel with no one in sight was beautiful. It was mild that year. Winter ended with an early spring, and white almond blossoms were everywhere.

As I came to know the locals, I felt even more comfortable and safe here. I met Signora Raimonda Gaetani, a noble *contessa* who lives in a villa on Via Cristoforo Colombo. She owns several properties in Positano, including the Villa Margherita, which she rents to foreigners for long-term stays. She loves expats, and when she discovered I was looking for an apartment, she invited me over to see one that would soon be available. She couldn't show me the entire apartment because the American woman who was still living there was away, but she said I could pop my head in the entryway for a peek. More than a little frightened by my own impetuosity, I soon signed on the dotted line. I knew I would return to Positano at least a few times that year, and having my own place would cost less than sojourning at one of the fancy hotels in high season. My plan was to try it out for one year.

The Villa Margherita soon became a part of my soul. The 15-foot pearly ceilings with a sparkling Murano chandelier, the *maiolica* bench hand-painted with lemons on the terrace facing the sea, and the tall shuttered windows overlooking the rooftops of Positano became my world. I couldn't wait to spring open the shutters every time I returned from Boston after a long international flight.

My terrace hung over Positano like a royal box at the theater. I spent Easter there with Anna, the housekeeper, who



Michelin-Star Chef Andrea Migliaccio, Executive Culinary Chef, Capri Palace  
Photo courtesy of Capri Palace Jumeirah

## *A Note from Chef Andrea Migliaccio*

It has been many years since dear Lauren proposed the idea of this book to me.

Since its first inception, I was sure it would have been an authentic book, expressing the truest aspects of what cooking is for me: hard work, evolution, conviviality, hospitality, tradition.

Now, the book is finally ready for you to read, representing an important part of my journey, which continues to this day.

Many things have changed, many haven't, both for me and for Capri Palace.

I started working at this beautiful hotel in 2005, and now I am its Executive Culinary Chef, as well as the Executive Chef at Burj Al Arab in Dubai. Furthermore, Il Riccio became an international phenomenon, L'Olivo is the only Two-Michelin starred restaurant in Capri and this year we opened Zuma Capri on our wonderful rooftop, creating one of the most impressive and most varied culinary line-ups in all the Campania Region.

On the other hand, what has not changed are the dreams, the passion, and the love for what we do here, which are difficult to explain, but they are spontaneous, and they have allowed us to achieve great results. Personally, I've always looked for perfection in everything I do. I'm also very self-critical and I like to always put myself out there. With the ingredients I like to use flair and imagination, but I have a sacred respect for the seasonal cycles, and I give a lot of value to tradition.

Through all these years, my team and I have participated in ambitious challenges, perfecting our beautiful craft more and more.

With hindsight, I would say that teamwork is essential to reach high levels, and it is important to transmit your knowledge and vision to the entire group. Of course, you also need a bit of luck in finding someone who shares your vision, but it is also up to us Chefs to communicate with our collaborators and colleagues and listen to them properly.

This book you are about to read represents a crucial chapter of our lives and our work. I hope you will enjoy it. Nevertheless, many other chapters are waiting to be written, and I hope another book will tell those too in the future.

Andrea Migliaccio

July 2023

## È Una Bella Cosa

Capri's magic and mystique continue to cast a spell upon me every time I visit. Strolling the narrow streets of this island always makes me dreamy. Even the air smells different. It's a world where everything is white.

Let's start with a walk to the Piazzetta overlooking the Bay of Naples and delve into the history of the island. Then, I'll head to Anacapri to interview Michelin-star Chef Andrea Migliaccio, who is cooking up international attention at L'Olivo Restaurant at the Capri Palace.

Cuddled between the Bay of Naples and the Tyrrhenian Sea, Capri spans four square miles and reaches 1,932 feet above sea level at its highest point in Anacapri. Historians say the island was once attached to the Sorrentine Peninsula and broke away during the Phlegraean volcanic eruption thousands of years ago. Due to its strategic position in the Tyrrhenian Sea and its two highest points at Villa Jovis and Monte Solaro, Capri was a desirable place to rule from throughout time.

First came the Greeks, who built La Scala Fenicia, the famous stairway with over 900 steps chiseled in stone. The stairway begins at the port in Marina Grande and continues upward to Villa San Michele in Anacapri. Then came the Phoenicians led by Khair-ad-din, the Turkish pirate nicknamed *Barbarossa*, meaning red beard. They invaded and pillaged the island around 1535. The French and British also came and went. But the most famous invader of all was the first Roman Emperor, Giulio Cesare Ottaviano Augusto, who loved Capri so much he traded the larger island of Ischia for Capri in 29 A.D. Tiberius Caesar Augustus, also known as the Roman Emperor Tiberio, followed and ruled from Villa Jovis, Jupiter's Villa. Hailed as Rome's most powerful general, Tiberio spent the last 10 years of his life on Capri and built 12 elaborate villas during his reign.

Through time, Capri evolved into an international playground attracting travelers, movie stars and globe-trotting jet setters from Jackie Onassis to Princess Grace. Great writers came too, including Graham Greene, Axel Munthe, Oscar Wilde and Norman Douglas – to name but a few. Lavish garden parties, dining *al fresco* and feting in the Piazzetta became regular entertainments, with everyone adoring the local cuisine – from *pizza fritta*, fried dough, to *torta caprese*, flourless chocolate cake.

Capri's cuisine is simple, starting with the *insalata caprese*, milky mozzarella layered between slices of *pomodori di Sorrento* and garnished with hand-torn basil and extra virgin olive oil. Next are the *ravioli capresi*, pockets of handmade pasta stuffed with virgin *ricotta* and a pinch of marjoram. And finally, the ambrosial *torta caprese*, an almond flour cake, created on the island by mistake.

Although tradition and simplicity are what you'll find here, if you want to experience Michelin-star magic, hop into one of the convertible taxis that wind their way up to Anacapri. The ride is less than 10 minutes and hugs a narrow road that curls along a vertical cliff. You'll arrive at the Piazza Vittoria, where Capri Palace is hidden behind bougainvillea and swaying palm trees. The majestic hotel is adorned with white arches and private courtyards. I meet Chef Andrea in the kitchen, and he greets me with a hug as if we've been friends forever. I am spending the day with him, both to marvel at his culinary skills and to learn more about his story.

I look into his smiling blue eyes and say, "Tell me how it all started."

"My passion for cooking began when I was a little boy in my *Nonna* Constantina Spanú's kitchen. I called her *Nonna* Tina. I learned to cook by her side making *pasta*, *pesce* and *coniglio Ischitano*, Ischian rabbit – there was nothing she couldn't



Signature dish of L'Olivo - Lemon-scented tagliolini with burrata cheese, red prawns and sea asparagus  
Photo courtesy of Capri Palace Jumeirah



## Pasta al Forno con Ragù Napoletano

- Baked Pasta with Neapolitan Ragù

Courtesy of Michelin-Star Chef Andrea Migliaccio at Capri Palace Jumeirah

*Pasta informata* or *pasta 'mpurnàta* means baked pasta in Neapolitan dialect. The protagonists in this recipe are the *ragù* and meatballs – which Neapolitans make with ground pork because they like big flavors. Italian actor and playwright Eduardo De Filippo immortalized *ragù* in the comedy “Saturday, Sunday, Monday” when he said, “*O rraù ca me piace a me m’ò ffàceva sulo mammà,*” translating to, “I like *ragù* so much, but only the one made by my mother.”

Serves 8

### Ingredients

#### For the Pasta:

700 g (5¾ cups) flour  
10 eggs  
Sea salt, to taste

#### For the Ragù:

400 g (14 oz) lean pork meat, chopped fine  
100 ml (scant ½ cup) extra virgin olive oil  
80 g (3 oz) onion, brunoised\*  
1 red chili pepper, broken into small pieces  
3 garlic cloves, minced  
25 g (1½ tablespoons) tomato concentrate  
150 ml (⅔ cup) red wine  
2 liters (2 quarts) tomato pulp  
1 bouquet parsley, tied  
1 bouquet basil, tied  
3 bay leaves

#### For the Meatballs:

440 g (1 lb) ground pork  
100 g (3½ oz) white or whole wheat bread, crusts removed, cut in small pieces  
40 g (1½ oz) cream of garlic (boil garlic cloves for 10 minutes then mash)  
1 teaspoon finely chopped parsley  
Sea salt and pepper, to taste  
Flour for dusting (optional)  
Extra virgin olive oil, for frying

#### Other Ingredients:

250 g (1 cup) *ricotta* cheese  
200 g (7 oz) salami, chopped  
4 eggs, hard boiled, chopped  
100 g (⅔ cup) cooked peas  
100 g (1 cup) Parmesan cheese, grated  
300 g (10 oz) mozzarella cheese, chopped  
20 basil leaves, torn by hand



## *Babà con Crema Pasticcera e Zuppetta di Fragole*

*- Babà with Pastry Cream and Strawberry Sauce*

*Courtesy of Michelin-Star Chef Andrea Migliaccio at Capri Palace Jumeirah*

*Babà al rum*, although an undisputed Neapolitan favorite, is not Italian at all. Food historians trace its origins to the small town of Luneville and credit Stanislaw Leszczynski, a Polish man and the father-in-law to Louis XV of France, as its creator. Leszczynski baked a Polish cake, soaked it in Madeira wine and the *babà* was born. In the 18th century, the French ruled Naples and brought the recipe with them, but the Neapolitan bakers perfected it by replacing wine with rum. Chef Andrea shares his classic recipe and adds chocolate.

Serves 20

### **Ingredients**

#### **For the Babà:**

1 kg (8 cups) of Manitoba '0' flour or unbleached flour  
 1 liter of eggs (17 to 18 eggs)  
 90 g (½ cup) sugar  
 20 g (3 teaspoons) fine sea salt  
 40 g (1½ oz) fresh yeast  
 250 g (1 cup, plus 1½ tablespoons)  
 unsalted butter, at room temperature

#### **For the Babà Syrup:**

2 liters (8½ cups) water  
 1 kg (5 cups) granulated sugar  
 200 g (¾ cup plus 1 tablespoon) Stroh rum

#### **For the Strawberry Sauce:**

500 g (1 quart) strawberries  
 Simple syrup made with 1 liter (4¼ cups) water  
 and 500 g (2½ cups) sugar  
 2 cloves  
 1 cinnamon stick  
 1 vanilla bean  
 Seeds from 4 cardamom pods

#### **For the Pastry Cream:**

2 egg yolks  
 3 tablespoons sugar  
 2 tablespoons flour  
 500 ml (2 cups plus 2 tablespoons) milk  
 Peel of ⅓ organic lemon, cut in wide strips  
 1 vanilla pod

#### **For the Garnish:**

20 small sprigs of fresh mint

## Preparation

### For the *Babà*:

Place the flour and 6 eggs in a standing mixer and knead briefly. Then, add another 6 eggs and knead again. Leave the remaining eggs out for now. Let the dough rest at room temperature for 30 minutes, then add the sugar and salt. Continue the kneading process. Crumble the yeast into very small pieces with your hands and add it to the dough along with the butter. The dough should be elastic, but if it is too dry, add eggs one by one until a pliable dough forms. When the dough stops sticking to the sides of the bowl, turn off the mixer and let the dough rest in the mixer for 20 minutes. After 20 minutes, knead again for another 2 to 3 minutes. Divide the dough into 20 pieces and place them in tall, buttered, floured *babà* molds. You can either do this by hand or use a piping bag. Place in a preheated oven set at 30°C (85°F) to rise. Once the dough has risen above the edge of the molds, bake at 200°C (400°F) for about 25 minutes. Keep your eye on the *babà* while they are baking, and once they turn a deep golden brown, remove them from the oven, tip them out of their molds and place on a wire rack to cool.

### For the *Babà* Syrup:

Mix all the ingredients together in a saucepan, stir well and bring to a boil. Take the pan off the heat and let cool. While the syrup is still tepid, place the *babà* in the syrup with a perforated spoon, turning them around so they soak evenly. Once the *babà* are well soaked with the syrup, remove and place them on a wire rack to drain.

### For the Strawberry Sauce:

Cut the strawberries into small pieces. Dissolve the sugar in the water and add the spices, stirring continuously. Bring to a boil, then take the pan off the heat and allow to cool a little. When the syrup reaches 55°C (130°F), filter it to remove the spices, then add the strawberry pieces and let the syrup cool completely.

### For the Pastry Cream:

Beat the egg yolks with the sugar until pale. Next, add the flour and beat until mixed well. Place the milk and lemon peel in a saucepan. Slice the vanilla pod, open lengthwise and scrape the seeds into the milk. Bring the milk to a boil. Slowly add the milk to the sugar and egg mixture, whisking constantly. Pour the mixture back into the saucepan. Continue to cook over low heat for another 10 minutes, whisking well to prevent lumps from forming. Let cool, whisking often to prevent a film from forming. Once completely cooled, remove the lemon peel.

### Plating:

To serve, arrange a few strawberries and a little syrup at the bottom of each serving dish. Cut each *babà* in half and place over the bed of strawberries. Decorate with a swirl of pastry cream and garnish with a small sprig of mint.



Photo courtesy of Capri Palace Jumeirah



Lauren A. Birmingham grew up in an Italian American family and spent a lot of time in the kitchen with her Neapolitan mom and grandmothers learning how to cook. At an early age, she traveled to Switzerland, France, Austria and Italy with her high school hockey team and cheerleading squad, and fell in love with Europe. After college, she lived in Paris and worked for Hasbro Toys in the marketing and public relations department. Following Paris, she returned to Boston and opened a public relations agency where she managed press campaigns for Boston professional athletes, theatre and special events. Her love for Europe continued, and after returning to Italy uncountable times and dreaming of living there, she followed her dream. She took an apartment in Positano while creating Cooking Vacations Italy and began writing this book. In Italy, she met Gennaro Piscitelli, whose nickname is Rino, an Italian former race car driver, and they married in Positano. Together, they continue to create new cooking experiences as they travel throughout Italy, interviewing chefs, food artisans and wine makers. Lauren also writes for Tastes of Italia Magazine sharing her experiences and recipes. The couple live between Boston and Praiano on the Amalfi Coast with their two Italian kitties, Dolce and Piccolo.

## *Rino and Lauren*



*Buongiorno.* My name is Lauren. I am a writer, food lover and creator of Cooking Vacations Italy – a culinary tour company. I married Rino, an Italian race car driver, and we live in sunny Italy where we welcome guests to our Italian kitchen - and share our way of living on the Amalfi Coast. We live on a vertical cliff 100 stairs down overlooking Positano and the Tyrrhenian Sea. We are surrounded by olive and lemon trees - and grapevines grow everywhere. From our terrace we can almost reach out and touch Capri. Follow me in the garden where we grow Mediterranean fruits and vegetables in the rhythm of the seasons. We use our farm-to-table ingredients including our own olive oil in local cuisine. Join us as we travel, cook and experience life in Italy.



*Cooking Vacations*<sup>®</sup>  
*Celebrating the food, art & music of Italy*

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*“È una bella cosa.”* He calls it *bella*. Italians use *bella* to describe everything that is beautiful.