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# Tastes of Italia

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AUGUST 2010

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**Plus**  
Almond Cream Tart  
The Easiest, Best Dessert Ever!

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**Inside Italy's Food Science College**



AUGUST 2010

U.S. \$5.95

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FRUITS OF SUMMER/PASTA SALADS/PASTA SALADS/CLASSIC OUTDOOR MENUS

tastesofitalia



**FRESH**



## *Tuscany: La Materia Prima!*

The secret to superb food is to make sure you always have the finest quality ingredients.

TEXT **SUSAN VAN ALLEN** PHOTOGRAPHY **DARIO NEGRONI**

**M**y mantra is: Spend more time shopping and less time cooking," says Judy Witts-Francini. "After over 25 years living in Tuscany, I've learned that it's not the recipe, or the time you spend preparing food which makes it taste good. It's the quality of the ingredients which you work with. In Italian, they say: *la materia prima*."

It's fitting that the cooking class I took with Judy began at The Mercato Centrale di San Lorenzo in Florence, where the quality of the ingredients is superb. This huge food market is one of Italy's many masterpieces. It's a place so revered by the Florentines that it's overseen by the same art commission that looks after the Uffizi



CHOCOLATE SALAMI:  
From Tuscany

galleries. Inside the vast glass and cast-iron structure built in 1865 are two floors of mouth-watering temptations: wheels of fragrant pecorino cheese, tubs of grapes, shelves glowing with bottles of olive oil, stuffed pig heads.

Visiting this market can be an overwhelming experience, unless you have Judy by your side. She's been shopping here since 1984. That was the year she left her job as a pastry chef in San Francisco and moved to Florence. She arrived not knowing a soul and didn't speak a word of Italian. It was at the Mercato Centrale where she learned the language—talking to the vendors, hearing their recipes, eavesdropping on conversations.

These days, Judy is part of the Mercato Centrale family. When you travel through this wonder-





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## FRESH

### Tuscan Cooking

ous place with her, you're welcomed at every step. Judy's been leading the curious like me on tours through here for more than a decade, teaching cooking classes, and leading culinary vacationers through Tuscany and other parts of Italy she's come to know and love. She's taken on Italy like an enterprising pioneer, becoming a culinary expert and creating a company called Divina Cucina (Divine Kitchen). Its logo is an angel holding a wooden spoon that you'll see in restaurant and shop windows all around Florence. They're places this woman-in-the-know recommends.

"Taste this," she says, as we stand in front of the counter of one of her friends' shops. It's twelve-year-old balsamic vinegar that wakes up every taste bud. That's just the opener to a morning of one refined taste after another: pecorino cheese with truffle honey, olive oil fresh from the press. There's also red pepper jelly—Judy's recipe that's now bottled and sold here.

Judy's style is entertaining and relaxing—perfect for summer. "In July and August, life is very casual. I like to set up a buffet and everybody helps themselves," she says.

With so many delicious things growing in the Tuscan countryside, there's much to choose from to put on that buffet. The recipes below are a few from Judy's excellent cookbook, "Secrets From My Tuscan Kitchen." Like all the recipes in the book, her directions are simple, and rely on using only the best ingredients.

So find what's freshest this season and what local farmer cultivates it best. Recreate the Divina Cucina experience in your own backyard. That way you'll be following Judy's other mantra, that's the motto of her company: "Everyone should try being Italian at least once a year!" For more information, see [www.divinacucina.com](http://www.divinacucina.com).

### Chocolate Salami

- 6 ounces cookie crumbs  
(best are small rectangular cookies called "Marie" in Italy, "Petite Beurre" in the U.S.)
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 5 ounces melted butter
- 2 egg yolks
- 1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

Melt the butter and let it cool. Beat the egg yolks with the sugar until the mixture resembles cake batter. Add the melted butter and cocoa powder. (And more cocoa powder if you want it really dark).

Crush the cookies in a food processor or with a rolling pin, leaving some pieces a little larger than others so they resemble the fat in salami. Form a salami-like shape and roll it in aluminum foil.

Place in the freezer for 30 minutes or until firm. To serve, remove from freezer and let sit for 10 minutes at room temperature. Unwrap and slice. Serve with soft whipped cream and fresh berries

Makes 6 to 8 servings.



### Fake Fish (Pesce Finto)

- 1 pound potatoes
- 7 ounces tuna, drained  
Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons capers packed in  
white wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons vinegar  
(I use the vinegar from the capers)
- Salt
- 2 cucumbers, peeled

Boil unpeeled potatoes in salted water until tender, as for making mashed potatoes. Peel potatoes while hot and mash with a fork. Add drained tuna and mix into potatoes. Add whole capers to taste and a good splash of the vinegar that they are packed in. Stir to combine. Add enough extra virgin olive oil to form a smooth, soft consistency. Taste to correct seasoning, for a nice tart finish.

Give the "pesce finto" a fish shape on a serving dish and make scales out of a peeled cucumber sliced paper-thin, with a caper for an eye.

Before adding the "scales" cover with a thin layer of mayonnaise.

Serve as an antipasto with crackers or bread or as a light second course.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.