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Tastes of Italia

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DECEMBER 2008

Divine Desserts

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for family get togethers

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and savor a land
where little changes

SECRETS OF
MAKING STONE
GROUND POLENTA

Christmas
in Sardinia

Make A Succulent
Turkey Dinner

Christmas
Eve treat

Puff pastry with
chocolate sauce
and ice cream

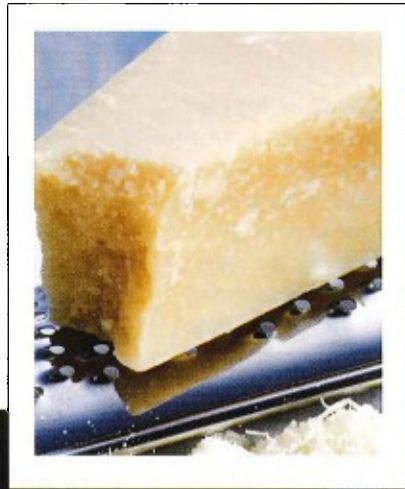
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PECORINO CHEESE and gnocchi are traditional components of the holiday menu on Sardinia, Italy's second largest island.



Christmas in Sardinia

Residents celebrate with gnocchi, almond pastries and myrtle liqueur. **By Susan Van Allen**

I'm imagining my friend Enrico's house at Christmas. He told me he'd be with his family in Cagliari, feasting on the menu his mother's made all his life. They'd start with platters of salami, sausages, pecorino cheeses, and *burridda* – a stew made with a small shark that's common in the surrounding waters. There'd be gnocchi in a ragu of tomatoes and ground sausage, spiced with saffron. Then roast pork, and braised lamb drizzled with a thick lemon sauce. For dessert, they'd pass around *sebadas* (fried pastries stuffed with cheese) and *gueffus*, almond sweets wrapped in brightly colored tissue paper.

Of course they'd be accompanying it all with full-bodied Cannonau red wine and finishing up with Mirto, the island's famous liqueur, made from the myrtle bushes that grow wild all over Sardinia. My mouth is watering and I'm wishing those rocket belts from the cartoons of my childhood would finally become a reality, so I could shoot over to Enrico's table and join this delicious tradition.

I visited Sardinia last spring, just in time for the Feast of

Sant' Efiso (May 1), when the southern capital of Cagliari puts on a spectacular parade to honor their patron who saved them from the plague in the 17th century. Dark-eyed natives of all ages in elaborate lace, brocade and velvet costumes rode by in carts pulled by oxen. The path was strewn with rose petals and after four hours the procession ended with a golden cart carrying the statue of Sant' Efiso. It was a lavish display of the care Sardinians take to preserve their traditions.

I found a simpler, but just as powerful, display of tradition when I headed into Sardinia's rugged interior. The small towns there, cut off from modern development, offer travelers a chance to step back in time and enjoy the earthy, rich flavors of the island's pastoral customs that haven't changed for centuries.

In Orroli, Chef Antonia prepared a feast in her family home, Omuaxiu, that's been around since 1500. It happened to be her 79th birthday, but I suspect the perpetually smiling, energetic woman would have gone all out no matter what the occasion. Here's where I tasted the best pecorino cheese I've ever had (smooth and so fresh) and homemade *lorighitas* (a hoop-

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shaped pasta, that resembles big earrings). And there was *fregola*, similar to couscous, but plumper, which Antonia and her helpers created in huge earthenware bowls, calling me over to give a twirl to the dough to make the magic happen. As in most of the restaurants, succulent goat, lamb and pork roasted on a spit was the main course, and desserts featured cookies and pastries made with almonds from the trees that dot the landscape. At 79, Antonia is a youngster in this small town, where 35 locals are over the age of 100. Scientists have studied the natives of Sardinia, and attribute their longevity to pure air, healthy diet, and a stress-free lifestyle that's completely natural to those who live in places like Orroli.

I got to sit and talk with 101-year old Antonio Argiolas, a winery owner, at another inland town, Sardinia.

"California, California!" Antonio said, squeezing my hand, when I told him I was from Los Angeles. He'd visited the Napa Valley in the 1970s to introduce his wines to the wider marketplace. Now they are internationally acclaimed and can be picked up at your local BevMo.

It was amazing to be in the presence of the man who started it all back in the thirties. At his side and leading a tasting was Valentina, his glamorous granddaughter, who runs the business along with the rest of the big Argiolas family.

In Gennargentu Park, outside Gallura, I rode in a jeep up a rocky path above a gorge to reach a shepherd's hut. There, Giovanni, who's been tending his flocks for 50 of his 67 years, roasted meats, spooned fresh ricotta out of a big metal pot onto thin, crisp Sardinian bread, called *carasau*, and topped it off with a drizzle of honey from hives kept near the spring below. I sat on a picnic bench, luxuriating with friends over the rustic banquet, listening to bird songs backed up by natives speaking Sardinian, a language that's closer to Latin than Italian, with heavy Spanish influences.

I know at Enrico's Christmas table, they'll be toasting in that language, saying, "*Bonu nadale e prosperu annu nou,*" connecting with their island's rich and unique legacy. For info about lunch with a shepherd: www.barbagiansolita.it

Braised Lamb Shanks with Lemon Sauce

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 pounds lamb shanks
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 4 eggs
- Juice of 1 lemon

Heat the olive oil at medium-high in a pan that can accommodate the lamb shanks. Season the lamb shanks with salt and pepper, add to the pan, and brown on all sides. Remove the lamb and set aside.

Sauté the onion in the pan until wilted. Return the lamb to the pan, and pour the wine over it. Lower the heat, cover the pan and cook for 30 minutes, then turn the lamb and cook for another 30 minutes, until the lamb is tender. Add water, if necessary, during the braising process.

When the lamb is done, keep it covered as you make the sauce. In a double boiler, over very low heat, whisk together the eggs and lemon juice until thickened. Be sure to keep the heat low enough so the mixture doesn't curdle.

Place the shanks on a warm platter, pour the sauce over them. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Gnocchi With Tomato-Saffron Sauce

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 cup chopped onions
- 1/4 pound ground or minced lamb or pork sausage
- 28 ounces (1 can) crushed tomatoes
- Pinch of saffron
- Salt to taste
- 1 pound gnocchi
- 1/4 pound aged pecorino cheese, grated

Sauté onions in olive oil over medium-low heat until they soften, about 10 minutes. Add lamb or ground sausage and cook until all traces of red are gone. Add tomatoes, saffron and salt to taste. Lower the heat to a simmer and cook for about an hour, until the sauce thickens, stirring occasionally.

Cook the gnocchi according to the directions on the package.

When gnocchi is done, drain and mix it into the sauce and add the pecorino cheese. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.



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