

Traditions of an Italian Holiday Season

# Tastes of Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

DECEMBER 2010

## Holiday Desserts

Praline Mousse Cake  
Cassata Cream Cake  
Pine Nut Cookies  
Rum Bread Pudding  
Lemon Cream  
Almond Cookies  
Date Nut Bars  
Wine Biscuits  
and more!

## Winter Basics

Roasted Vegetable Soup  
Baked Eggplant  
Roast Chicken  
Stuffed Calamari  
Linguine  
with Seafood



Chocolate  
Espresso  
Almond Torte  
Page 57

# Buon Natale!

New ideas for holiday gatherings

DECEMBER 2010



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HOLIDAY DESSERTS/BUON NATALE/WINTER BASICS

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## *Cooking in Terracina*

Blending the Bounty of Land and Sea.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

**W**e start with moscato," Teresa says, as she pours chilled, pale golden wine into my glass. Here in the Lazio region (where Rome sits center stage), Moscato di Terracina is one of the area's most beloved wines. And lucky me, I happen to be sitting exactly where it's produced: Terracina, an idyllic seaside village.

Teresa and I toast: "Cin-cin!" The moscato is delightfully dry with a lively kick to it, and luscious, fruity finish. We're in her villa garden, where blossoms from lemon and orange trees perfume the air. What a wonderful way to start a cooking school day.

I've come to Terracina as part of an In Italy Tours program, to enjoy and learn about the culinary delights that abound along this coastal stretch south of Rome, called the Ulysses Riviera. According to Homer's *Odyssey*, the enchantress Circe once

lived nearby, and seduced Odysseus and his crew to her shores. At first Circe pulled one of her notorious tricks on the men, turning them into pigs. But Odysseus got her to reverse the curse, and thus our hero and his comrades luxuriated here for a whole year, drinking wine and feasting.

How divine to be in a spot that's been revered for its enchantments and food since the ancient Greeks! To this day, the waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea yield loads of fish—from squid to prawns, mussels, clams, etc. Majestic mountains tower over the area's fertile plain, creating a mild climate where olive and citrus groves, vineyards, and fields of vegetables flourish.

To make the dream complete, there's Signora Teresa, a native of Rome, who teaches in this Terracina villa that's been in her family for generations. Teresa has dark, sparkling movie star eyes and a vivacious manner that overflows with *La dolce vita* (the sweet life) spirit. The kitchen, that opens up to her dream-of-a-garden is a warm, homey



spot. Colorful painted pottery lines the shelves. A kitty cat wanders about, pleased as her bowl gets filled with pieces of fish as we cook.

To begin, Teresa has prepared an antipasto spread, so I can sample local flavors. From the pastures are cheeses: a sharp aged pecorino (sheep's cheese) drizzled with honey, creamy goat cheese covered in dried thyme, and fresh mozzarella di bufala. From the forests are mushrooms, from the fields, baby artichokes. And there are generous bowls of shiny Gaeta olives, as Gaeta is another seaside town just down the coast, where these world-famous tasty treats are cultivated and cured.

Our hands-on class focuses on seafood. "My father and my grandfather were fisherman," Teresa tells me, which explains where she gets her expertise from. The most challenging task is preparing calamari for it to be stuffed. This is not for the squeamish. It stirs hilarious memories inside of me from the days of dissecting slimy animals in high school biology class. Teresa and I have laughs over the sink, as she directs me through the process of removing the calamari head, cutting away the beak cartilage and eyes, peeling away a thin outer membrane of skin. Sade's "Smooth Operator" comes on her iPod shuffle and I follow along with her as she sways her hips, giving a sexy roll to the "r" in "Operator" as we stuff the calamari.

Our pasta course comes together quickly: Linguine allo Scoglio—which means linguine from the reef, as the linguine is accompanied by shellfish that's been captured from the nearby sea rocks. We carry it steaming to the lunch table, that's set outside under a pergola.

Dappled light streams over us as we dig into this bounty from the sea. I think of the poet Homer's words, describing Odysseus's experience in this very spot: "And there we sat at ease, day in, day out, till a year had run its course, feasting..."

On Christmas Eve, Teresa will be here feasting with her friends and family. In keeping with Italian tradition they'll have a Cenone della Vigilia Natale—Big Christmas Eve dinner, where fresh fish, such as the dishes below, will be featured.

Teresa also gave me her recipe for sweets she makes every holiday time: Ciambelle al Vino. You'll see lots of versions of Ciambelle and the smaller ciambelline in Roman bakeries. They're simple, doughnut shaped cookies, perfect for a snack or to enjoy with moscato after a big dinner. Teresa's anise-flavored recipe perfectly reflects her persona: an enticing mix of spice and sweetness.

For more information about Cooking in Terracina: [www.initalytours.com](http://www.initalytours.com)

## Ciambelle al Vino

- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup white wine or moscato
- 1½ cups granulated sugar, plus extra for sprinkling over shaped ciambelle
- 1 tablespoon anise seeds
- 7 ounces anise seed liqueur
- 9 cups cake flour, plus extra for sprinkling over resting dough

Preheat oven to 350°F. Put all ingredients into a large bowl and knead well until the dough is firm and smooth. You will need to work the dough for at least 10 minutes. Sprinkle the dough with a little flour and set aside, covered, for another 10 minutes. Cover a rectangular baking tray with parchment paper and sprinkle with olive oil. Divide the dough in half. Roll each half into a rope about one foot long. Cut each rope in half, so you have four ropes. Shape each rope into a ring, so it resembles a large doughnut. Press the ends together slightly. Sprinkle each with granulated sugar before placing on the baking tray. You should dip your fingers in olive oil while working with the dough to keep it from sticking. You may wish to engrave designs on your ciambelle with a sharp knife before baking. Bake for 45 minutes.

Makes 16 servings.

## Stuffed Calamari

- 8 fresh whole calamari

### For Stuffing:

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons parsley, minced
- 3 tablespoons capers
- 4 small cherry tomatoes, chopped
- 1 cup grated pecorino cheese
- 1 tablespoon bread crumbs
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Black pepper, to taste
- 8 black pitted olives, and a few for garnish
- ½ cup white wine, if needed during cooking

Preheat oven to 350°F. Clean the calamari, so you are left with a hollow tube for stuffing. To do this, gently pull the head and tentacles from the body, and pull out the interior bone and intestines. Peel the thin outer membrane from the calamari tube. Wash and leave the calamari tubes to dry for a few minutes.

Note: It may be best to watch an online video to learn details of calamari cleaning or ask your fishmonger to clean it for you.

### For Stuffing:

Finely chop the tentacles of the calamari. Mix the chopped tentacles well with the remaining stuffing ingredients. The stuffing should be lightly moist so it sticks together. If it's too dry add more chopped tomatoes and/or olive oil.

Fill the calamari with the stuffing mix. Bind the open ends with a tooth pick. Place stuffed calamari in an oiled baking dish, garnish with a few black olives, and drizzle olive oil on top. Cook for 20 minutes and serve. If the calamari dries out during cooking time, add a half cup of white wine.

Makes 4 servings.

## Linguine allo Scoglio

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 dried chili pepper, optional
- 2 pounds fresh seafood divided into equal parts. Use a mix of what is freshest, with equal parts of each. For example, clams, mussels, shrimp, scallops, and calamari
- ½ cup prosecco or dry white bubbly wine
- 1 pound linguine
- Salt
- 2 tablespoons roughly chopped parsley

Carefully clean the fish, scrubbing the clams and mussels, peeling and deveining the shrimp.

Put olive oil into a large pan and sauté the garlic over medium heat. Add the chili pepper and fish (except for the mussels and clams) and let them cook for 5 minutes. Add the wine and let it cook for a few minutes. Then add the clams and mussels and stir with a wooden spoon. When the shells of the clams and mussels have opened, turn off the heat and cover the pan. Note: The time to cook the seafood shouldn't be more than 13-15 minutes in total.

Meanwhile, put water in a large pot to boil for the linguine, adding salt. When the water comes to a boil, add the linguine and cook according to the package directions, until al dente.

Add the cooked linguine to the warm seafood in the pan and stir it in well with a wooden spoon. Remove from the stove, add chopped fresh parsley, and serve.

Makes 4 servings.