

INSIDE ITALY: COOKING THE ROMAN WAY

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AUGUST 2011

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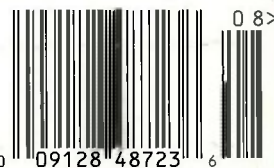
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# Cooking the ROMAN WAY

**Roman Cooking: Daniela del Balzo Style**

[ By Susan Van Allen ]

The divine smell of peppers cooking in olive oil and garlic fills Daniela del Balzo's cucina. Six of us American travelers in Rome are hovering around her stove, sipping prosecco, nibbling bruschetta, stirring and chopping, under Daniela's cheery guidance. Her one-day cooking class is a lovely respite from the tourist treadmill of the bustling Eternal City. Today we've slowed down from visiting monuments and museums, and are immersing ourselves into the heart and soul of the culinary traditions of Rome.

Daniela is an extraordinarily welcoming woman, who sets up her class so she's taking us along with her for her typical Roman day: shopping at the local market and cooking in her apartment. Her passion for cooking is boundless. She learned the traditional

way—from her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, during her childhood in Naples. Then, after a 20-year career working for Alitalia, she decided to go back to school to focus on her love for cooking. She studied at Italy's renowned Gambero Rosso Cooking School, the French Culinary Arts School & Le Cordon Bleu, and the International Cooking School of Naples. Now she teaches and runs a catering and personal chef business from her home on Rome's Aventine hill. She's married to a Roman, has two teen-age boys, and a mother-in-law who lives two floors above her. Putting all these work and life experiences together, Daniela's created a program where she teaches Roman classics with professional flair, always adding a Neapolitan touch from her ancestors.

The class begins just outside the bustling Testaccio market. The Testaccio neighborhood is basically ignored in guidebooks, so even though it's not far from the historic center, it's a place where you can go elbow-to-elbow with the natives and get a hint of authentic Roman life. Rome's slaughterhouse was once located here, and Testaccio became famous for its restaurants that featured quality meat dishes and Roman specialties called the quinto quarto (fifth quarter), meaning what's left of the animal after major butchering—oxtails, tripe, pajata (calf intestines), etc. Restaurants that serve the quinto quarto (once reserved for poor slaughterhouse workers and now a delicacy) thrive in Testaccio. And even though the neighborhood has recently become, as the Italians say, “trendy,” with clubs and hot spots, you can still sense the core of its traditional roots.

Discovering Testaccio with Daniela is the ideal way to get to the neighborhood's roots. She's been shopping here for years, and everywhere we go it feels like we're tagging along with her on a family visit. I can't help but compare my Los Angeles supermarket shopping style—which involves rushing about, loading up the cart without speaking to anyone—to Daniela's. With this signora, every encounter is leisurely and personal. She talks to the vendors about her family, she tells them her cooking plans for the day, and then there's serious teamwork to pick out the best peppers, or focused discussions with the butcher about the right amount of veal for lunch. I see these interactions going on all over the sprawling Testaccio market—at dazzling stalls overflowing with deep green chicory, glistening anchovies, or the first ripe strawberries of spring.

We walk under the shade of chestnut trees up to Daniela's apartment on the Aventine Hill. It's a sophisticated, bright, spacious place, with the fun beginning in the kitchen where we tie on aprons and get to work. Daniela's teaching style is free-flowing—we learn as we move along. Her recipes are simple, but by watching her we learn subtle techniques for bringing out the best flavors of the market's wonderful ingredients. There's the way she jiggles the pan to cook up saltimbocca, which trans-

lates to “jump in your mouth,” because the taste of the veal/prosciutto/sage combination is so lively. There's an extra step in her peperonata recipe, covering the pan with a domed lid after sautéing, that she does just before baking, so the result is a perfectly soft and creamy dish.

“It's how my grandmother taught me,” Daniela says, smiling as she shares this dear memory. And so each of us slips into the long line of Italian tradition—learning the secrets behind the country's delicious dishes thanks to the abundant, generous spirit of its cooks. For Daniela del Balzo Cooking In Rome class info: [www.context-travel.com](http://www.context-travel.com).

## Tiramisu

- 1 pound mascarpone cheese
- 3 egg yolks
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 egg whites
- 1 pound lady fingers
- 1 cup strong coffee
- 4 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder

With an electric mixer, beat the mascarpone until it becomes soft. In another bowl, beat egg yolks and sugar for 3 minutes. With a wooden spoon, add the mascarpone to the egg mixture, stirring from the bottom up until the mixture is foamy.

In another bowl, beat the egg whites until frothy, then fold into the mascarpone mixture with the wooden spoon.

Spread a thin layer of the mascarpone mixture into a 9x13 inch baking pan. Dip half the lady fingers in the coffee and arrange them in a layer over the mascarpone mixture in the baking pan. Spread half the mascarpone mixture over the lady fingers. Sift half the cocoa over this layer. Make another layer of coffee-dipped lady fingers, cover with the rest of the mascarpone mixture, and sift the remaining cocoa powder over it all. Chill for at least three hours before serving.

Makes 6 servings.

## Peperonata

- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 medium clove garlic
- 4 yellow peppers, sliced into 1/2-inch strips
- 6 anchovy filets, cut in thirds
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 2 tablespoons sliced black olives
- Salt
- 3 tablespoons bread crumbs

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a large sauté pan, heat the olive oil and garlic over medium heat, until the garlic becomes golden. Add the peppers and cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Cover the pan (preferably with a domed lid), and cook for another 10 minutes.

Arrange the anchovy pieces evenly on the bottom of a 9x13 inch baking pan. Transfer half of the peppers to the pan, layering the peppers over the anchovies. Sprinkle with capers, olives, salt and half the bread crumbs. Layer on the remaining peppers and sprinkle the top with the remaining bread crumbs. Bake in the oven for 30 minutes, adding oil if the mixture dries out.

Remove from the oven and allow to cool to room temperature before serving.

Makes 6 servings.

## Saltimbocca alla Romana

### Salt and pepper

- 1 pound veal (sliced thin, 6 to 8 slices)
- ¼ pound prosciutto slices
- 6 to 8 fresh sage leaves
- 3 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup white wine

Sprinkle salt and pepper on slices of veal. Layer each veal slice with one slice of prosciutto and one sage leaf. Roll up loosely and secure with a toothpick.

Melt the butter in a pan over medium heat. Place the rolled veal in the pan and cook, jiggling the pan so all sides will be cooked, for a few minutes. Add white wine and cook until it evaporates. The saltimbocca is done when the veal becomes golden.

Makes 4 servings.