

DISCOVERY: Divine Tastes of Parma

Tastes *of* Italia

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FABULOUS LEMON TART/DIVINE TASTES OF PARMA/SPECIAL EASTER DINNER

ITALY UP CLOSE THIS PROVINCE OF EMIGLIA-ROMAGNA SHINES IN THE KITCHEN

DIVINE FLAVORS OF PARMA

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

Piedi di Dio (God's feet) is how an Italian friend of mine describes the smell of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. When Micaela, my cooking teacher, unwraps a giant chunk, I bow my head and inhale. Divine! Out next comes the prosciutto—salty, rich, woodsy. Here I am, with Parma's culinary stars—the *delizioso* products that turned this place into a gourmet mecca. Parma's specialty foods are so revered that on the outskirts of town are three *Musei del Cibo* (Food Museums): a Museo del Prosciutto di Parma, Museo del Parmigiano Reggiano, and Museo del Salame. You can visit each to get a bit of culinary history, learn about how these tasty foods are made, and of course, have a taste. The town is also home to Barilla, the world's leading pasta producer, so you can sign up for a cooking course at Parma's Academia Barilla Culinary Center, to get the experience of studying at one of Italy's most prestigious academics. Or, you can follow my lead and enter into Parma's rich culinary scene by taking a class in the tiny apartment kitchen of Micaela Sini Scarpato. Micaela's



Emiglia Romagna

Situated in the northern part of Italy, the region of Emiglia-Romagna brings together two distinct areas that more or less meet in Bologna. Locales in the western part of the region include Modena, Reggio, Parma, Fidenza, Fiorenzuola, as far as Piacenza on the Po. Those east of Bologna in the Romagna area include Faenza, Forlì, Cesena, Ferrara, Ravenna and the Adriatic resort of Rimini. If you visit, sample foods in both areas—there's no shortage of satisfying cuisine, built with ingredients that come from the land. Fresh cured meats like prosciutto, mortadella, and coppa piacentina, are often paired with savory cheeses like Provolone Val Padana. A semi-hard cow's milk cheese, it has a smooth rind and takes on various shapes. Versatile, the cheesemaker can tweak the taste depending on the rennet used, resulting in a cheese that is either sweet or sharp. Veal rennet creates a sweeter cheese, while lamb rennet gives a sharper flavor. Other top cheeses are grana and Parmigiano-Reggiano, staples used in recipes or served on platters. Both are hard cheeses with rich flavor. A little goes a long way, so grating over a finished dish is usually a good way to enjoy them.



Tastes of Parma

a young, energetic signorina, whom I found through The International Kitchen, a Chicago-based company that offers classes all over Italy.

Her apartment lies on the edge of Parma's historic center. The town itself, located between Bologna and Milan, is one of Italy's most elegant gems. There's luxurious shopping, fancy coffees, and lively evening wine bar action that spills out into cobblestoned vias. These vias open to grand piazzas, such as the Piazza del Duomo, where a massive Romanesque cathedral holds an amazing fresco in its cupola: Correggio's *Assumption of The Virgin Mary*. The image is a dramatic Renaissance wonder—done up in rose, emerald, indigo, and gold tones, with the Blessed Virgin Mary surrounded by angels and apostles in frothy, swirling flight.

Cooking teacher Micaela fits right in with Parma's elegance, in a welcoming, simple way. The mood for our class is pleasantly set when she opens the door, appearing in a classic skirt and sweater ensemble, accented by a pearl necklace and

matching earrings. Right behind her I see her round dining table, set for the two of us with an ivory damask cloth and candlesticks.

Our focus, of course, is the kitchen. A charming touch there is an old-fashioned table Micaela found at a used furniture shop that came with a built-in slim shelf under its top, custom-made to hold a pasta board. Micaela's passion for cooking goes back to her childhood days when she (the daughter of two working parents) would come home from school and join her nonna in the kitchen, helping to make the family's dinner.

Now, though she's only in her early thirties, Micaela exudes a patient, grandmotherly-like manner as she teaches. She passes along her nonna's tradition to me as she stands over my shoulder, coaching me as I stretch and knead pasta dough to make Parma's signature stuffed pasta (tortellini), showing me just the right point on my lower palm to use to apply the perfect dough rolling pressure.

We snip rosemary from Micaela's balcony herb garden and add it to a tied-up beef tenderloin, which we braise in wine, so it becomes Rosa di Parma, a traditional town dish. It all feels very Old World, until Micaela turns on the food processor to grate the Parmigiano. "It's the



DYNAMIC DUO:
Parma's tangy cheese
and smooth wine

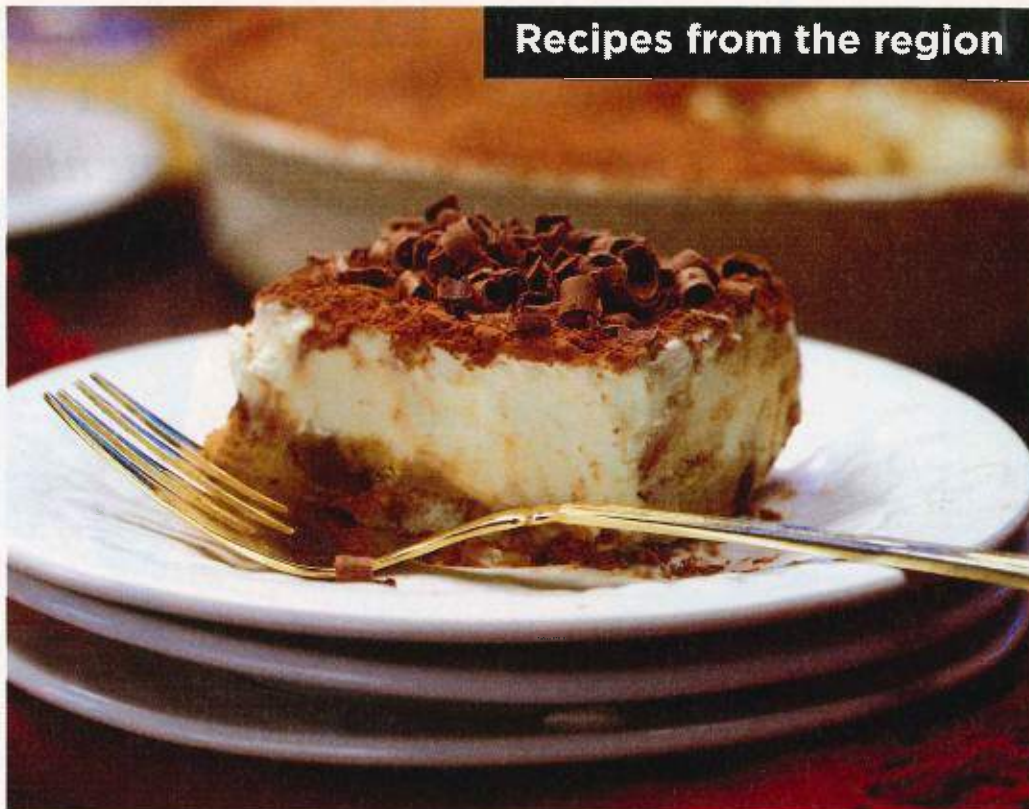
Tastes of Parma

best way," she tells me, over the roar of the machine.

I have to shake myself out of my Italian fantasy. I so often think of this country as a place where time stands still, where every citizen cooks the traditional way, born with a wooden spoon in their hand. In fact, Micaela tells me, she's about the only one among her 30-something-year-old friends who really cooks. Most of her generation grew up like us Americans, with working mothers and culinary traditions from previous generations slipping away.

But Micaela's friends still recognize and appreciate good food. She has them over for Sunday dinners, and keeps her special tiramisu on hand in the freezer, so she can serve it if a friend stops by unexpectedly. "Such lucky friends," I say, and Micaela laughs, modestly. "Lucky me," I say, as we sit down at her pretty table to enjoy what we've spent hours preparing: the divine flavors of Parma.

For more info: The International Kitchen, www.internationalkitchen.com.



Recipes from the region

COOKING IN EMIGLIA-ROMAGNA COMBINES THE FOODS FROM THE REGION TO CREATE CLASSIC RECIPES ENJOYED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

Tiramisu

- 5 fresh eggs
- 6 tablespoons sugar
- 1 pound mascarpone cheese
- 24 ladyfingers
- 2 cups strong coffee, sweetened with 2 teaspoons sugar
- Dark cocoa powder, as needed

Separate eggs. Whisk the yolks with sugar until they are lemon colored. Add mascarpone and mix well. In another bowl, beat egg whites until they form soft peaks. Then fold the egg whites into the yolk mixture.

Quickly dunk ladyfingers in the coffee and place 3 in each dessert bowl, to line the bottom. Cover the ladyfingers with the mascarpone mixture, about 1 inch thick. Sprinkle each bowl with dark cocoa powder.

Refrigerate for at least one hour

before serving. Serve chilled.
Makes 8 servings.

Rosa di Parma

- 1/2 cup, plus 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- Beef tenderloin - 2 pounds, filleted and pounded flat
- 4 ounces sliced prosciutto di Parma
- 6 ounces grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (should be aged at least 2 years, and can be grated in a food processor)
- 2 cups steamed baby spinach
- 2 sprigs of rosemary, chopped
- 4 cups Lambrusco (red wine)
- Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

Stir together 1/2 cup olive oil and

garlic. Brush the mixture on both sides of the flattened beef fillet. Then sprinkle both sides with freshly ground pepper.

On one side of the fillet, arrange the prosciutto slices evenly. Then evenly sprinkle the grated cheese, then an even layer of the spinach.

Roll the meat lengthwise into a long, slender roll. Using kitchen twine, tie up the roll to secure.

Rub salt and chopped rosemary onto the beef roll. In a Dutch oven or heavy deep skillet, pour 2 tablespoons of olive oil and turn the heat to medium. When the oil is heated, add the beef and brown it on all sides.

Add the wine to the pan. Continue to cook, turning the beef and basting with pan juices, about 30 minutes for rare, or longer if you like it well done. Turn off the heat and let the beef stand for 10 minutes. Remove kitchen twine, slice, and serve immediately.

Makes 8 servings.



Tagliatelle with Bolognese Ragu

- 1** pound dried tagliatelle pasta,
cooked according to package
directions, or fresh dough
(recipe follows)

Sauce:

- 1/3** cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1** medium onion, finely chopped
- 1** medium carrot, diced
- 1** medium celery stalk, diced
- 4** ounces pancetta, finely diced
- 3/4** pound ground pork loin
- 3/4** pound ground beef chuck
- 1** cup medium red wine
- 1/3** cup tomato paste
- 3** cups beef broth, divided
- Salt and pepper to taste**
- 1/2** cup light cream
- 3** tablespoons butter

1/4 to **1/2** cup water

In a large pot, combine olive oil, onion, carrot, celery and pancetta. Cook on medium for about 5 minutes. Add pork and beef and cook about 15 minutes, until meat is brown and crumbly. Add the wine, tomato paste, 1 cup broth, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat, cover and simmer for 2 hours. Add remaining broth, 1/2 cup at a time, at regular intervals during the 2 hours to keep liquid. At the end of 2 hours the sauce should be quite thick. Add cream and butter and stir well. Season with additional salt and pepper, if desired.

Drain the cooked pasta and add to sauce pot along with water. Toss well and serve.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Fresh Pasta

2 2/3 cups all-purpose flour, plus extra
for dusting

1/4 teaspoon salt
4 large eggs

Sprinkle the flour on a wooden board and make a well. Sprinkle with salt. Add the eggs to the well. Using a fork, whisk flour into eggs. When most of the flour has been incorporated, start kneading the dough by hand until it is smooth and firm. Shape dough into a ball, wrap in plastic and let rest at room temperature for 30 minutes.

Break the dough into thirds and roll out thinly. Cut into narrow strips and dust with additional flour. Place on cookie sheet and set aside (you may also use a pasta machine for this step).

When ready to cook, bring a large pot of water with 1 teaspoon salt to a boil. Add pasta strips and stir well when first submerged. Cook until al dente, usually 5 to 6 minutes. Remove, drain and add to sauce with 1/2 cup of pasta water.