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PASQUETTA/GREAT FLAVORS OF FLORENCE/ROMAN MEMORIES

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Exotic Flavors of Sicily

Wild herbs, olives, almonds, lemons and oranges fill Sicilian kitchens.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

Big bunches of wild herbs fill vases on the kitchen table. One by one I inhale: bay, sage, fennel, thyme, rosemary, lemon balm, and peperoncino. “And this is Nepitella,” my teacher Tinuccia says, waving minty leaves under my nose. Like every visitor to Sicily, I’m overwhelmed by the varieties of deliciousness that grow in abundance on this island. Besides these herbs that sprout up magically in the hills that surround Tinuccia’s villa, out the kitchen window are olive groves, almond, lemon, and orange trees. Beyond that

spread fertile fields where vineyards and vegetables (eggplant, tomatoes, and fennel) thrive. From the villa’s terrace is a view of the sparkling Ionian Sea—where fishing boats have been hauling in tuna, swordfish, and sardines for thousands of years.

I’ve landed in a choice spot, the Val di Noto, in southeastern Sicily which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The area is unique not only for its beautiful landscapes but also for its architecture. A massive earthquake in 1693 leveled these parts

and for the next 50 years, an amazing recovery took place. Artists who had been to Rome and seen such masterpieces as Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers in the Piazza Navona, became inspired to rebuild the valley's villages in flamboyant Baroque style. They designed churches, palazzos, and government buildings with curvy adornments, archways and ornate balconies. It was a grand ha-ha-ha to the earthquake—grinning in the face of disaster.

Of all the Val di Noto's towns, Noto is the most impressive. Here is where Sicilian-American Renée Restivo has based Soul of Sicily, a cooking program that gives travelers like me the chance to connect with locals in their home kitchens and discover secrets of how to turn Sicily's natural bounty into delicious dishes.

Restivo's passion for Sicily's cuisine was born in Astoria, Queens. Her pretty eyes sparkle as she reminisces: "There were big Sunday dinners at my Aunt Sadie's house, where the whole family would gather for homemade pasta and pastries." Renée worked as an assistant at top culinary schools in New York and Italy, learning from award-winning cookbook authors, including Micol Negrin, Anne Bianchi, and Anna Tasca Lanza. Then while visiting her Sicilian cousins, she became enchanted with Noto and decided to set up her company here. She's expertly gathered a team of locals who work as instructors in her group programs that open doors to the culture, art, literature, and food of the area.

Tinuccia and her husband Paolo, a charming couple in their early 60s, are part of Renée's Soul of Sicily team. "I come from many, many generations of home cooks," Tinuccia says. "Then in the 1960s, just like in America, things changed for women. I was the first to go to university and work outside the home." Having recently retired from her teaching job, Tinuccia has time to share her passion for cooking. Besides the cooking lessons, she also joins forces with Paolo and Renée to promote sustainable farming and keep out commercial development that would damage the beauty of the area.

It's a joy to follow Tinuccia around the bright, airy kitchen. She has a delicate style, handling each herb with care as she teaches me how fennel and mint ease digestion, that sage and oregano are most often used dried in Sicilian cooking, and how sensible it is to wrap up bunches of parsley in plastic and keep them in the freezer, so it's always on hand. I join in

making our lunch with the mezzaluna, a curved knife, to finely chop herbs and garlic.

This is completely different from the Sicilian cooking I grew up around in New Jersey, where immigrant nonnas adapted their homeland traditions to turn out thick pizzas and heavy, spicy pasta sauces. Here in Tinuccia's class and all over Sicily I discover dishes that are light and subtly flavored. It's a cuisine that evolved from the mix of many civilizations who laid claim to Sicily over its complex history: Arabs, Turks, Normans, Spanish, and French. The result is a delicate blend of flavors, at times exotic (chocolate and beef!), and often balancing sweet and sour tastes, such as in Pasta a la Norma, where sugar offsets the bitterness of the tomato sauce.

Just as we're about to sit down for lunch, Paolo enters the kitchen with a surprise: three miniature just-picked apples. Tinuccia takes them in her hands: "Acceruoli! This is the first time this tree has borne fruit—they start out tart and they get sweeter every year." There's a silence, bordering on reverence as Renée, Paolo, Tinuccia and I take crunchy bites, marveling over another delicious wonder this abundant island so generously provides.

For more information about Soul of Sicily's Spring and Fall Group Cooking Programs: www.soulofsicily.com



Rigatoni with Pine Nuts, Raisins and Olives

- ½ pound rigatoni, cooked according to package directions
- ½ cup pine nuts
- 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- Pinch of red chile flakes
- ½ cup black Italian olives, pitted and chopped
- ½ cup raisins
- 1 15-oz. can chopped tomatoes, drained
- Zest of 1 orange
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Chopped fresh parsley for garnish
- Shredded Parmesan cheese

In a large skillet, combine pine nuts and olive oil and cook on medium for 2 to 3 minutes or until nuts are golden brown. Add garlic and chile flakes and cook for 3 minutes. Add olives and raisins and cook for 3 minutes. Add tomatoes and zest and taste for salt and pepper. Cook for 10 minutes.

When pasta is almost done, remove 1/2 cup cooking water and add to sauce. Drain cooked pasta and add to skillet, stirring well to combine. Cook until water is almost absorbed. Add parsley and cheese and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

Swordfish, Mariner's Style



- 4 slices fresh swordfish, about 1/2-inch thick
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 cup diced onion
- 3 garlic cloves, diced (divided)
- 2 pounds fresh tomatoes, or 1 (28-oz.) can chopped tomatoes, drained
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons green capers
- 1 cup fresh basil leaves (or 1 teaspoon dried), divided
- 1 cup fresh mint leaves, divided
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a large skillet combine olive oil, onion and half the garlic and cook on medium for 5 minutes. Add the fish and top with tomatoes, wine, capers and 1/2 cup each basil leaves and mint leaves. Add salt and pepper and remaining diced garlic. Partially cover and cook on medium for 15 minutes. Chop remaining basil and mint leaves and sprinkle over the swordfish and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

Almond Cake with Orange Glaze

Cake:

- 4 eggs, yolks and whites separated
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup powdered sugar
- 1 cup chopped almonds, toasted
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 2 tablespoons orange zest, grated
- 1 tablespoon fresh orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Frosting:

- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 2 1/2 tablespoons fresh orange juice
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 1/2 cup chopped almonds

To make cake: Preheat oven to 350°F.

In a large bowl, beat together egg yolks and both sugars until well combined and almost foamy. Add almonds, flour, baking powder and orange zest.

In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites with the orange juice and vanilla until stiff peaks form. Gently fold into egg yolk mixture.

Spray a 10-inch cake pan or springform pan



with nonstick cooking spray and dust with flour. Pour in batter and bake for about 35 to 40 minutes, until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove cake from oven and let cool for 10 minutes, then turn out onto wire rack.

To make frosting: Combine ingredients and frost top of cake. There should be enough frosting to drizzle down sides of cake.

Makes 8 servings.

Radicchio Salad with Oranges and Feta Cheese

- 3 medium navel oranges
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1/3 cup olive oil

- 1 head radicchio, halved and shredded
- 1 bag mixed greens
- 1 cup red onion, thinly sliced
- 4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled
- Salt and pepper to taste

Peel the oranges and cut between membranes to release slices. Reserve juice and whisk together with vinegar and olive oil. In a large bowl combine remaining ingredients and toss well to mix. Taste for salt and pepper and serve.

Makes 6 servings.