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## Flavors of Viareggio

A Tuscan beach resort stays true to traditional cuisine

*By Susan Van Allen*

**M**y nonna, whom we called Nana, was a round, petite woman with long salt and pepper hair that was always pinned up in a bun. My memories of her are in the kitchen, with an apron that was supposed to be tied at the waist, which she habitually tied higher, around her enormous breasts. She is the image that forever comes to mind when anyone mentions “nonna” to me. So when Tuscan Travel Concierge Serena Giovannoni told me she was bringing two nonnas—her mother and mother-in-law—to teach a pasta-

making class in a villa south of Florence for a group of ladies I was hosting, I expected Nana doubles to arrive.

Instead, out of the car glided two glamorous signoras, Marisa and Piera. Their hair was stylishly cut, they wore pearls and leopard print coats. Even though they didn't fit my traditional image, when they put their manicured hands in the pasta dough, they proved to be expert cooks, and the lesson became a party for us all.

“You must come visit us in Viareggio,” Serena and the nonnas said, as we double-cheek kissed goodbye. Viareggio is where



Serena was born and where her company, WishVersilia, is based. Italians know it as a famous beach resort on Tuscany's northern coast, part of the Versilia area, which also includes the Apuan Alps.

"Versilia is not as heavily touristed as other parts of Tuscany, such as Chianti or Val d'Orcia," says Serena. "It has amazing things to see, such as the marble quarry where Michelangelo chose the stone for his sculptures, the posh town of Forte dei Marmi where celebrities summer, villas in the hills built by the Spanish Bourbons, and beautiful Lake Massaciuccoli where there is a summer Puccini Music Festival."

Serena's passion for her homeland

## Along with the beach club tradition come traditional foods of the season

inspires her to create customized itineraries that give travelers insider's experiences of Versilia—from visiting artist studios in the village of Pietrasanta, to trekking in the hills, and, of course, cooking classes with the locals to experience delicious flavors.

"The history of Viareggio is recent," says Serena. "Until the mid-18th-century it was marshland, full of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, so people lived in the nearby mountains. That's why much of the cuisine is from those older traditions—cured meats and vegetables. When the marshes were cleared, tourism began to flourish, and during the post World War II boom, fishing activities expanded and beach clubs were built," she says.

May 1 is the official opening of the season, and Serena and her family head to the same beach club she has been going to for 40 years. These clubs are a sunlover's dreams come true with restaurants, pools, and umbrella placements that have been kept in families for generations. "We have the first row," Serena tells me. "It's a very special placement, so we are loyal to this club. Though the management has changed over the years, the local families stay the same, keeping their choice spots."

Along with the beach club tradition come traditional foods of the season. The specialty seafood of Viareggio are arselle,

little clams found in the sand, and the coltelacci (which translates to bad knives) that we know as razor clams.

And, of course, what would an Italian beach town be without gelato? In Viareggio there are lots of artisanal gelaterias, and many feature special desserts, such as the Versilia, an elegant rum-soaked cake topped with gelato.

You can bring tastes of Versilia to your kitchen, welcoming warmer, sunnier days, with these recipes Serena kindly shares with us.

For more information, please visit [www.wishversilia.com](http://www.wishversilia.com).

### Spaghetti with Arselle (Tiny Clams)

- 3 pounds fresh arselle (tiny clams)
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, finely minced
- ½ teaspoon hot red pepper flakes, or more if desired
- 5 to 6 ripe tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 1 handful of chopped parsley
- Salt to taste
- 1 pound spaghetti

Immerse the clams in a bowl of salt water (if available clean sea water), for about 4 hours.

Sauté garlic with hot red pepper in a large pan. Add the tomatoes. Cook on medium heat for about 10 minutes, stirring now and then.

Add the clams and cover the pan with a lid. Cook till they are all open, 3 to 5 minutes. (Tip: The best thing to do at this point is pull out the clam from the shell. However, this is a long process and you will need lots of patience. The result is better because you can eat your pasta without having to take shells away while you're eating.)

Sprinkle with chopped parsley. Salt if needed.

Cook spaghetti in boiling salted water, as directed on package, until al dente. When done, drain and toss with cooked clam sauce. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

### Dessert Versilia

- 1 cup vanilla gelato
- 1 (8-inch round) sponge cake
- ½ cup dark rum
- ½ cup cold heavy cream
- ¼ cup sugar
- 8 ounces mascarpone cheese
- 1 large egg
- 6 ounces unsweetened dark chocolate
- 1 8-inch springform pan

Leave the gelato out of the freezer until it reaches a spreadable consistency. Line an 8-inch round pan with plastic wrap, so that

some of the wrap overlaps over the sides.

Place the sponge cake on the bottom of the pan and brush with rum. Note: If you don't have an 8-inch round sponge cake, just cut sponge cake pieces to line the bottom of the pan to create a level layer. Since the cake is chilled and molded it will hold together.

In a chilled metal bowl, using a handheld or electric mixer, whip the heavy cream with the sugar until it becomes stiff. Mix in the mascarpone and the egg. Spread the mixture over the cake.

In a double boiler, melt the chocolate. Allow it to cool slightly and then spread it over the mascarpone mixture to make another layer. Spread the vanilla gelato on top of the chocolate.

Wrap the cake tightly with plastic wrap and freeze for at least one hour.

Fifteen minutes before serving, remove from the freezer. Unwrap the cake, remove from springform pan to a serving plate.

Of course, you are free to use any gelato flavors you like, but this is the traditional recipe.

Makes 8 servings.

### Zucchini Pie

- ¼ cup melted butter, plus butter for greasing the pan
- ⅔ cup flour
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 2 large eggs
- ⅛ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup warm milk
- 4 cups zucchini, thinly sliced rounds

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 10-inch springform pan with butter.

Combine all the ingredients together except the zucchini. Mix well. Then mix in the zucchini slices. Pour the mixture into the pan. Bake for one hour, until golden. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 6 servings.



Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go* and the Golden Days in Italy blog. She travels frequently to Italy, the native land of her grandparents, and lives in Los Angeles. [susanvanallen.com](http://susanvanallen.com)