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MARY ANN ESPOSITO/ITALIAN WINE & CHOCOLATE WHIZ

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Pizza Pumped Up

The owner of a Naples B&B shares her recipes for the city's best known dishes

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN



HOSPITABLE HOST
Maria Esposito



IN WAITING
Dough rises in
Maria's kitchen.

The moment I land in Naples, I feel at home. Like many Italian Americans, my roots are in Southern Italy, and everywhere I turn, broad, expressive faces and hands flying through the air bring back memories of my maternal grandparents, aunts, cousins, and neighbors I grew up with on the Jersey shore.

And ah, the food! Naples is the home of legendary Pizza Margherita—thin crusted with crisp-bubbled edges, made with tomatoes grown on the fertile slopes of Mount Vesuvius, fresh Mozzarella di Buffalo from the surrounding farmlands, and a sprinkling of basil leaves.

Bakeries display to-die-for pastries such as seashell-shaped sfogliatelle and rum-soaked baba. Gelaterias beckon with tempting tubs of myriad flavors. There's a great blend of fun and dead-serious respect that Neapolitans have for their signature dishes. Every day I'm pulled into the vibrant street scene that revolves around mealtimes—from the morning bustle of the Pignaseca outdoor market, to the eager crowds in the evening who gather in Naples' top pizzerias.

Peeling back another layer of the Naples food scene, I'm welcomed into the home kitchen of Maria Esposito, who, with her husband Enzo, runs the enchanting Maria Mari B&B. It's tucked into the edge of the Spanish Quarter, my favorite place to stay in Naples. Here home cooks like Maria traditionally leave the pizza-pastry-gelato-making to the pros. "We make a pizza," Maria tells me, "but it's not the pizzeria pizza."

Rather than just talk about it, one evening Maria decides to cook a traditional Neapolitan cena for me and two women travelers from London. I arrive after a full day of sightseeing to find her pulling a focaccia Napoletana out of the oven, steaming and fragrant with the smell of perfectly cooked tomatoes and melted mozzarella. Enzo slices it into triangles, while their son Giovanni joins in, opening a bottle of wine.

The table is abundant with great flavors—a platter of prosciutto, olives, sautéed escarole and eggplant. It's a cozy scene, and through the open windows come bursts of boisterous cheers from the neighborhood apartments, as there's a soccer game going on—and (Hoorah!) Napoli is scoring! By the time the table is cleared and a bowl of grapes is passed around, Gianni is already out the door for our dolce—gelato from the shop downstairs. He's back in two minutes with a creamy tub of chocolate-walnut-pistachio mix, and we all sigh over the deliciousness of it.

For the delightful ending, Maria pulls a bottle of her homemade limoncello out of the fridge, and we clink our tiny glasses to toast—immersed in the warm, welcoming spirit and extraordinary flavors of Napoli.

Following are recipes that can transport us back to that homey comfort of a traditional Neapolitan kitchen. For more information on Maria Mari B&B, see Bbnapolimaria.com.

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

The Recipes

Pizza Maria Mari

For the dough:

- 2 teaspoons of yeast
- 1 cup warm (110°F) water
- 3½ cups bread flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil, plus more for oiling the rising bowl and cooking pan

For the topping:

- Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling over focaccia
- 6 ripe plum tomatoes
- 8 ounces Mozzarella di Buffalo
- ¼ cup fresh shredded basil leaves

To make the dough, first mix the yeast into the warm water. Combine the flour, salt, and olive oil in a bowl, then add the water/yeast mixture until combined and sticky. Knead together by hand for about 5 minutes, or in a standing mixer for 3 minutes.

Shape the dough into a ball and place it into a bowl that has been lightly oiled. Cover the bowl with a light towel and place it in a warm place for it to rise and double in size, for about an hour.

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Punch the dough down and stretch it onto a lightly oiled 9 x 13-inch baking sheet, making it uniform in thickness. Cover the dough loosely with a towel and let it rise for another half hour.

Drizzle olive oil over the dough and evenly distribute tomatoes on top. Bake about 15 minutes, until slightly browned. Evenly distribute the cheese, sprinkle with the chopped basil leaves, and bake for about 5 more minutes, until the cheese melts.

Cut into squares and serve immediately, though it also tastes great the next morning for breakfast.

Makes 6 servings.

Sautéed Escarole

- 1 pound escarole
- Salt, to taste
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed
- Pinch of hot red pepper flakes

To prepare the escarole, tear leaves off from head and soak them in a pot or large bowl of cold water. Drain leaves in colander, then change the water, going through this soaking and draining process two or three times, until all the grit has been removed from the leaves.

In the meantime, boil a large pot of water. Add salt to the boiling water and then escarole leaves, cooking for about five minutes, until wilted. Drain escarole and allow to cool a bit. Then squeeze out excess water with a towel, and chop escarole into 2-inch pieces.

In a pan, sauté the smashed garlic in olive

oil over medium heat until the clove is slightly golden and the oil is fragrant with garlic. Add hot pepper flakes if desired. Add the chopped escarole and sauté for a few minutes, mixing in the leaves so they become coated with the olive oil. Remove the garlic cloves. Add salt to taste. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

Limoncello

- 12 organic lemons
- 4 cups grain alcohol or vodka
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 cups water

Wash the lemons and pat them dry. Peel them with a vegetable peeler, so you create swirls of peels, without any white pith. Fill a bottle with the alcohol or vodka, add the peels, and mix.

Seal the jar tightly and store it for 3 weeks. The liquid will become lemon colored.

Combine the sugar and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Cook until thickened, about five minutes.

Cool the syrup, then stir it into the lemon peel-alcohol mixture. Strain the mixture into a bottle, separating the peels from the liquid. Discard the peels. Keep the limoncello in the freezer or refrigerator until ready to serve.

Makes about 24 servings.



SAUTEED ESCAROLE
An easy summer dish.



PIZZA MARIA MARI

Fresh basil adds a flavor punch.