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# The Secrets of Mamma Agata

When Jackie Kennedy, Anita Ekberg, Humphrey Bogart, and Fred Astaire visited the Amalfi Coast, it was Agata who kept them fed with her delicious creations. Now you can learn a few of her secrets.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

**I**n Italy I often find myself gushing “Life is beautiful!” But in Ravello, high above the Amalfi Coast, the gushing gets elevated to “Life is more beautiful!” The sky is more blue. The sea more sparkly. The horizon more hypnotic. The tomatoes more delicious.

It’s fitting that in such a divine spot there lives a Goddess of Amalfi Coast Cooking: Mamma Agata. She’s an irresistibly adorable woman—pleasingly plump, with twinkling, almond shaped-eyes. Her smile warms my heart. She’s been cooking for most of her 74 years, and to watch her move around a stove is simply marvelous.

I got a chance to do just that last fall, when I took a one day cooking class at her home: an 18th-century villa, surrounded by terraced gardens, perched on a cliff with a to-die-for view of the sea.

Mamma Agata began her cooking career in Ravello when she was

13, working in the villa of a wealthy American woman who entertained star visitors. “Baby Agata” was what Humphrey Bogart called her, and he wasn’t the only one among the *glitterati* who was wowed by her cooking. Agata has great stories about making pasta e fagioli for Anita Ekberg, spaghetti alla puttanesca for Fred Astaire, and insalata caprese for Jacqueline Kennedy.

“Jackie was Mamma’s favorite,” Chiara, her daughter, tells me. “Mamma always talks about how Jackie was a real lady, so kind she’d even insist on washing her own coffee cup.”

Mamma’s class is mostly demonstration. Twelve of us students gather in her tiny kitchen, with Agata at the stove and Chiara narrating. Practically everything Mamma Agata makes uses what’s grown right here in her gardens.

We get tastes of fresh tomato sauce, sniffs of just-picked basil, as Chiara tells us Mamma’s “secret techniques.” This is simple cooking—it’s the details that make it divine. “Listen to the sound of that sizzle, that’s when you know the garlic is ready, now is when you put in the tomatoes for the sauce” says Chiara. She’s printed out all the recipes for us in a glossy hand-out and CD, so we don’t even have to



take notes. We can just sip wine and watch the master at work.

It's delicious fun. We take breaks to walk around the gardens with all of us oohing and aahing over the paradise we are in. After three hours, we take our places at a long, wooden table on the terrace. Lovely signorine magically appear with platters and pans of everything we've watched Mamma have her hands in. The sun streams through the pergola. More than one of us says, "This is the best lunch I've ever had."

So at Christmas time, I'm thinking of that villa and what Mamma Agata will be making. Of course, it will be traditional southern Italian fare—which on Christmas Eve means fish. Also, her daughter Chiara tells me, Mamma Agata will be making zepolle, a fried sweet we Italian Americans associate with Saint Joseph's Day, March 19.

But since it's so delicious, in Mamma Agata's Christmas world zepolle belongs on the desert table. It's what I call a Christmas Blessing! For class information see [www.mammaagata.com](http://www.mammaagata.com).

## Mamma Agata's Zepolle (Doughnuts)

- 1 7/8 pounds potatoes
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup whole milk
- 10 1/2 tablespoons butter
- 3 1/2 tablespoons cake yeast
- 2 1/4 pounds flour
- 2 tablespoons baking powder
- 2/3 cup sugar
- Zest of 1 lemon, finely grated
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 3 teaspoons cinnamon
- 6 eggs
- 1 quart oil for frying

Boil the potatoes with a pinch of salt. Let them cool to the touch and then mash them with a potato masher. (Mamma Agata's Secret: Boil the potatoes leaving the skin intact. Let the potatoes cool before peeling them to preserve the flavor of the potatoes.)

Combine the milk and butter in a pan and heat over low heat until the butter is melted, then dissolve the cake yeast into the milk and butter mixture.

On your work station, spread the flour in a circle, leaving a hole in the center of the flour. Add the baking powder, sugar and lemon zest to the flour, along with the vanilla and cinnamon and mix all the ingredients together using your hands. Next add the mashed potatoes to the mixture and work the potatoes into the dough.

Add the melted butter, milk and cake yeast mixture, along with eggs into the dough mixture and knead the dough for at least 5 minutes, adding a little more flour, if the dough is too wet. Lift the dough and let it fall onto the worktop a couple of times to get a nice soft consistency.

Break off a small amount of dough at a time and roll it into long sausage like shapes.

Now take the sausage-shaped dough and make them into circles by marrying both ends of the dough. Place the circles of dough onto a floured tray. Set aside and let the dough rise for 1 1/2 hours. (Mamma Agata's Secret: Place the dough in a nice, warm location to assist the yeast with rising.)

Mamma Agata's Frying Instructions: Fry the doughnuts in hot oil until they are golden brown. While the dough is frying, combine extra sugar and cinnamon in a bowl. Once the doughnuts are fried, dip them into the bowl immediately so that they will absorb the cinnamon-sugar mixture. If you let them cool, they will not absorb the sugar and cinnamon flavor. Serve hot.

Makes 30 to 36 servings.

## Stuffed Squid

- 2 large squid
- 1 bunch of parsley, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon capers
- 2 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 10 whole black olives, pitted and chopped
- 3 to 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/4 cup Italian bread crumbs
- 1/4 cup Parmigiano cheese, grated
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- Sea salt
- A pinch of dried oregano to garnish
- Toothpicks

Wash and clean the squid. Remove a few of the tentacles from the squid and chop into small cubed pieces. Add the finely chopped parsley, garlic, capers and black olives.

Drizzle the bottom of a large pan or skillet with a small amount of olive oil and add all the ingredients from the chopping board into the pan. Cook for 5 minutes on medium to low heat.

Add the bread crumbs and Parmigiano cheese. Stuff the rest of the squid with the ingredients from the pan until it is stuffed full. Insert a toothpick or two through the squid to close the top and hold the ingredients.

Now place the stuffed squid and the rest of the tentacles into the pan with some additional chopped parsley and garlic.

Cover the stuffed squid with fresh tomato sauce and simmer for 30 minutes. Add a pinch of sea salt and sprinkle the top with dried

oregano.

Serve hot.

Any remaining tomato sauce can also be used with a pasta dish.

Makes 6 servings.

## Mamma Agata's Tomato Sauce

- 1 quart vine-ripened cherry tomato puree
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves fresh garlic
- Fresh basil, 4 to 6 leaves

Mamma Agata's Secret: The cherry tomatoes used to make the puree should be vine-ripened so they are sweet. If the tomatoes are not ripe and sweet, it is okay to add a spoonful of sugar to sweeten the tomato sauce.

Put the olive oil in a saucepan and over high heat, with the garlic and basil. The high flame will release the oils in the garlic and basil to enhance the flavors of the sauce.

Add the tomato puree and cook for 15 minutes, first over a high flame until the sauce begins to boil, then cover the pan and lower the flame to simmer for several minutes. Use as a topping for Stuffed Squid, if desired.

Makes 8 to 10 servings.

