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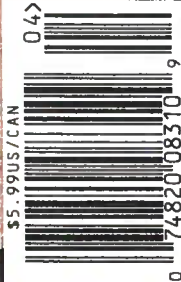
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To
make *carciofi
alla Giudia*,
follow the recipe
at [afar.com/
artichokes](http://afar.com/artichokes).

Rome's Artichoke Obsession

Every spring, *carciofi alla Giudia* set off a feeding frenzy.

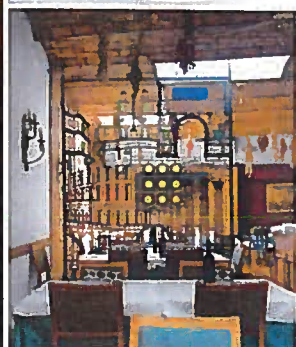
by SUSAN VAN ALLEN photographs by ANDREA WYNER

IT'S A COZY MONDAY night at Ristorante La Torricella in Rome's Testaccio neighborhood. As I peruse the menu, Augusto D'Alfonsi, the restaurant's owner for 40 years, approaches my table, holding up the pride of Rome's spring season: an artichoke. "This is a gift from God," D'Alfonsi says, stroking the artichoke's stem as though it's the thigh of a lovely *signorina*. "*Carciofi, carciofi...*," he sighs: car-CHO-fee, car-CHO-fee. Inspired, I order an antipasto of *carciofi alla Giudia*, an artichoke that has been flattened and deep-fried, transformed into a crisp, golden flower.

My dinner companion and cooking teacher, Daniela del Balzo, smiles with approval when the antipasto arrives, and we tear into its crunchy leaves, relishing the earthy, nutty flavor. "Romans have had a love affair with artichokes for thousands of years," says Daniela. She explains that back in toga-wearing days, the leafy thistles were believed to be powerful aphrodisiacs. Women were long forbidden to eat them, but Catherine de' Medici, infamous for her insatiable appetites, took some with her to France in the mid-16th century when she married Henry II, and her artichoke gorging caused quite the scandal.

In Daniela's cooking class, I learned the *carciofi alla Giudia* essentials. The lesson began at the Testaccio market, where, from late February to early May, stalls overflow with *carciofi Romaneschi*, a small, round, purple-tinged artichoke that happens to be the best variety for making *carciofi alla Giudia*. Though traditional eateries all over the city prepare them well, every Roman (including Daniela) believes that to have the most authentic experience of this specialty, you must go to its place of origin—Rome's Jewish ghetto.

Later in the week, I make my way there. From 1555 to 1870, this four-block stretch in the *centro storico*, the old city center, next to the flood-prone Tiber River, was a gated labyrinth of cramped quarters where, by papal decree, Rome's Jews were ordered to live. The ghetto was liberated during Italy's 19th-century unification, its hovels destroyed and the area gradually rebuilt. The neighborhood



today supports a strong and active Jewish community. It is also home to *cucina Ebraico-Romanesca*, a delicious, distinctive culinary tradition. “It’s *cucina povera*” (poor people’s cuisine), Daniela had explained to me, “created by housewives who used what was available and cheap, including artichokes.”

On my visit to the ghetto (or ex-ghetto, as some prefer), I walk past new places hawking kosher meals and head for an old-school classic, Hostaria da Giggetto, run by the Ceccarelli family since 1923. A tower of carciofi stands at the doorway to honor the season. I’m greeted by Mamma Lidia, a *signora* with finely coiffed hair. “Carciofi are the pride of our kitchen,” she says, seating me at an outside table, where I’m surrounded by Roman families out for a leisurely lunch. Out the trattoria door comes the tantalizing aroma of freshly fried artichokes, and two exuberant waiters in immaculate black vests emerge to plunk down plates of carciofi alla Giudia at every table. In imperial days, so much artichoke eating would have been the start of a night of sensual pleasures. Today, Rome’s appetites might be more temperate, but the annual gorging on carciofi remains a delectable celebration. **A**

WHERE TO EAT CARCIOFI ALLA GIUDIA IN ROME

1 BA" GHETTO

The best new restaurant in the Jewish ghetto is run by brothers Amit and Ilan Dabush, from Israel. Their kosher kitchen follows Roman tradition with its preparation of *carciofi alla Giudia* and also serves Middle Eastern specialties such as couscous, falafel, and baba ghanoush. *Via del Portico d'Ottavia 57, 39/06-68-89-28-68, baghetto.com*

2 HOSTARIA DA GIGGETTO

The location—smack up against the ruins of the Portico d'Ottavia, crumbling columns that framed a temple complex built by Emperor Augustus in the first century B.C.—is an inspiring setting for indulging in carciofi as well as familiar Roman pastas and entrees. Call ahead to reserve an outside table. *Via del Portico d'Ottavia 21/A-22, 39/06-68-61-105, giggetto.it*

3 RISTORANTE LA TORRICELLA

A beloved institution of the Testaccio neighborhood, La Torricella

serves Roman classics, including carciofi alla Giudia, carciofi *alla Romana*, and pasta *cacio e pepe*, at moderate prices in a simple dining room. *Via Evangelista Torricelli 2/12, 39/06-57-46-311, la-torricella.com*

4 DANIELA'S COOKING SCHOOL

Chef Daniela del Balzo takes students along on a typical Roman day: shopping at Testaccio market, cooking in her elegant home on the Aventine hill, and sitting down to a family-style lunch, the dishes paired with local wines. *Reserve in advance: danielascookingschool.com*