

Special Issue: The Home Cook's Backyard Guide

THE ITALIAN GRILL

Tastes of Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

AUGUST 2017

**SUMMER
TRAVEL**

*The Road
to Capri*



**Grilled Shrimp
with Lemon
Parsley Butter**

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ENCHANTED *in* PORTOFINO

A GLISTENING GEM ALONG THE ITALIAN RIVIERA, THIS COASTAL VILLAGE SOUTHEAST OF GENOA OFFERS TEMPTING RESTAURANTS, DESIGNER SHOPS, AND MORE.

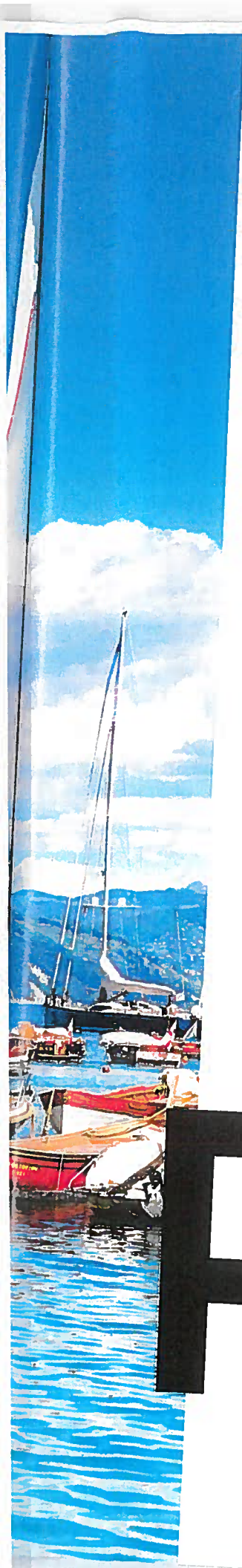
BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

Portofino is the gem of the Italian Riviera, tucked into the curvy coast of Italy's northwest region of Liguria. Its harbor of vibrant stone buildings, backdropped by lush forested hills, is probably the most photographed in all the world.

I arrive with a group of women I'm hosting, via a crowded ferry from nearby Santa Margherita. Yachts fill the harbor, and stepping ashore, we're swept up by dazzling glamour: tempting restaurants and loads of designer shops—Gucci, Dior, Armani, Ferragamo. In contrast to this modern jet-set atmosphere, Portofino's

origins are humble. The Romans named it "Port of Dolphins," as the bay was once full of those sea creatures. It was too small a landing spot for commercial use, so a tight community of fishermen and farmers had this paradise to themselves until it was "discovered" by the British in the early 20th century.

Inspiration for more tourism came with the 1922 publication of Elizabeth von Arnim's novel, *Enchanted April*—the story of four women who escape dreary London for a sunny, transformative holiday at Castello Brown, which



NATIVE INTEL

sits above the harbor.

We women, visiting Portofino decades later, take a short walk, leaving crowds behind, to arrive at a chic converted factory that is now headquarters of the Niasca Portofino organization. About 10 years ago, locals got together on a mission to reclaim farmland that had been neglected as the village turned its focus towards tourism. They terraced the hillsides, planted citrus trees, olive groves, vineyards, vegetable and herb gardens. They set up a production facility nearby to make olive oil, wine, marmalades, sauces and fruit flavored drinks. The Niasca project has been a big success—Eataly now carries their delicious products.

Laura Costaro, a lithe and sophisticated signora, welcomes us to a cooking class in Niasca's airy kitchen. We're here to learn the region's most famous culinary tradition: pesto making. Piles of the just-picked herb fill the counters, and the fragrance is a knockout. Basil that grows on the fertile hillsides of Liguria is prized, with smaller leaves and a more concentrated, less minty flavor than what we get back home. And as we're going "authentic," there are no blenders in sight, but a marble mortar and wooden pestle for each of us, to make this sauce as it's been made here for centuries. *Pestare* is the Italian word to pound or grind, and that's what we do, joking and laughing as we put muscle into our task, with Chef Rocco enthusiastically coaching us along the way. We move on to making trenette, similar to fettuccine, pesto's perfect matching pasta.

Soon our wooden work table is transformed for dining. Sunlight streams through a big window that opens to a panoramic view of the harbor. We clink our wine glasses over steaming bowls of trenette al pesto, and as we take our first tastes, there is finally a full moment of silence, each of us savoring the fresh, delicious experience that's come from this beautiful land. Looking around at the happy faces, I see we've become "enchanted," just as the women who came to Portofino in Anrim's novel did. Her words best describe the feeling I had: "It was as though she could hardly stay inside herself, it was as though she were too small to hold so much joy, it was as though she were washed through with light."

For more information, see niascaportofino.com

Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*; *Letters from Italy: Confessions, Adventures, and Advice*; *50 Places in Rome, Florence, and Venice 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.



Delicious pesto starts with fresh ingredients.

Portofino Pesto Sauce

In Portofino, we prepared pesto the old-fashioned way using a large marble mortar and a wooden pestle.

- 2 cups fresh basil leaves (smaller leaves are preferred)
- ½ clove garlic
- ¼ cup pine nuts
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 pound of pasta, such as fettuccine

Clean the basil leaves. This is traditionally done without water, but with a clean towel to remove any dirt from the leaves. If it is necessary to wash the basil, dry the leaves thoroughly before proceeding.

Put the pine nuts and garlic in the mortar and using a circular motion against the sides of the mortar, grind the ingredients into a paste. Gradually add the basil leaves, continuing to grind with a circular motion until the mixture is well blended. Gradually add the grated Parmesan, continuing to grind, then the olive oil.

Mix into a pound of just-cooked pasta, preferably fettuccine, and serve.

Makes 8 servings.

Note: If you desire the pesto to be creamier, add a tablespoon of ricotta and more olive oil.

Apricot Crostata

- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup softened butter, diced
- ⅓ cup granulated sugar
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 large egg
- Butter for the tart pan
- 1 cup apricot jam

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Put the flour in a large mixing bowl and make a well in the center. Into the well, add the butter, sugar, salt, baking powder, vanilla, and egg. Mix together with your hands, until well combined and you have a compact, buttery ball. Wrap the ball in plastic and rest the dough in the refrigerator for 30 minutes.

Butter a 10-inch tart pan. Press three-fourths of the dough into the pan, spreading it evenly with the palm of your hand. Cover the dough with the apricot jam. Roll out the remaining dough and slice into ½-inch strips to make a netted cross-stitch pattern over the jam.

Bake about 25 minutes, until crust is golden. Cool and serve at room temperature.

Makes 8 servings.



Stuffed Vegetables, Ligurian Style

- 4 medium zucchini
- 2 medium bell peppers (red or green)
- 1 large onion
- 1 tablespoon salt
- Olive oil for the baking sheet

For the filling:

- ⅔ cup Parmesan cheese
- 1 cup ricotta
- ¼ teaspoon dried marjoram
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

Preheat the oven to 425°F. In a large sauce pot, bring 8 cups of water to a boil.

To prepare the vegetables: Slice the ends off the zucchini, then slice lengthwise and then in half. Slice the tops off the peppers, then slice in half lengthwise, and remove the stem and seeds. Cut pepper, following its natural curves, creating 4 or 6 slices per pepper. Remove the skin from the onion and slice in half.

When the water is boiling, add the salt and

boil the vegetables separately for 4 to 5 minutes each. First the zucchini, then the peppers, finally the onion. Drain the vegetables and thoroughly pat them dry.

With a small spoon or vegetable peeler, scoop out the inside of the zucchini, leaving about ¼-inch shell. Set aside what was scooped. Take the small, inner parts of the onion (about ¼ cup), chop finely, and add it to the zucchini that was set aside. Coat a baking sheet with olive oil and place the zucchini, pepper, and onion slices on the sheet, skin side down.

For the filling: In a large bowl, mix together the reserved zucchini and onion, Parmesan cheese, ricotta, marjoram, and eggs. With a small spoon, fill each of the vegetables on the baking sheet with the filling. Sprinkle bread crumbs evenly over the vegetables, then drizzle each with olive oil.

Bake 10 minutes, until tops are golden. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 6 servings.