

*In the*  
*Footsteps of Nonna*

Recipes and Ramblings in Southern Italy and Sicily



Bill Abruzzo



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**By Bill Abruzzo**



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## *Acknowledgments*

To my wife, Jennifer Abruzzo:

*“Tesoro, . . . primo, ho provato, . . . per tanti anni, ho perseverato . . . finalmente, ho vinto . . . ma sempre, con mia moglie al fianco!”*

Words cannot express the love and gratitude that I give to you. The several years that I spent writing this cookbook were an incredible journey for both of us. You inspired me, encouraged me, and stood by my side the entire time. For this and so much more, I dedicate this cookbook to you. I cannot imagine having a better partner in life to ramble through Italy with, to enjoy good food with, and to love.

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To my brother Joseph Abruzzo:

I may be twenty years your senior, but your intelligence and skills never cease to amaze me. You spent countless hours building my website, [recipessandrblings.com](http://recipessandrblings.com), and teaching me all of all the “techy” stuff that I needed to know in order to run it smoothly. For this, I will be forever grateful. We are two brothers born of the same parents who did not grow up together and have never lived in the same state, yet the years and distance between us have never diminished our brotherly love.

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# *Southern Italy*

*Abruzzo*

*Lazio*

*Molise*

*Campania*

*Basilicata*

*Sicily*

*Adriatic Sea*

*Apulia*

*Tyrrhenian Sea*

*Calabria*

*Ionian Sea*

## ***Introduction***

*Benvenuto!* Welcome to *In the Footsteps of Nonna: Recipes and Ramblings in Southern Italy and Sicily!* In this cookbook, part of my culinary travel series Recipes and Ramblings, we will explore many wonderful places from the tranquil vineyards of Frascati near Rome to the bustling city of Palermo with its Byzantine and Arab influenced architecture. I will take you to energetic cities, charming seaside villages, and idyllic places in the countryside. Along the way, I will introduce you to the foods and culinary traditions that make each region so unique. By the end of the journey, you will share my passion for all that Italy has to offer: the people, food, culture, and history.

As we ramble from region to region, I will introduce you to a few locals who are just as passionate about Italian food and culture as I am. Here in the US, you will meet my two proud grandmothers, one Sicilian and the other Campanese. Over the years, I have incorporated their distinct regional recipes and culinary techniques into my own personal cooking style. In Italy, there are my dear friends Anna and Salvatore, who live in the heart of Palermo and run a bakery with their children, Gemma and Lorenzo. They have a beautiful seaside villa in Calabria, where I have been fortunate to spend many wonderful summer days. Finally, there are my friends Rita and Salvo, who live in Bagheria, Sicily. Rita is retired, but Salvo still sells fresh vegetables on the street each day. We will meet many other people too. Perhaps we will chat with a woman selling olive oil in a small hilltop town in Apulia or ask a young man at the beach in Basilicata to share some of the sea urchins he just plucked from the sea. By the end of our journey it will be clear that food nourishes not only the body but the soul. It is an expression of our personality, passion, and desire to live life to its fullest.

## ***A Few Words About Me***

Before we begin, let me tell you a little more about myself! Surely you want to know what drives my passion. For me, *In the Footsteps of Nonna* is a culinary journey that has been thirty-five years in the making. My love of Italy and Italian food started when I was a child, growing up in an Italian American family in New Jersey. Food was a big part of what defined us. Our Sunday dinners and holiday meals were always an extravaganza. My mother and grandmothers would cook for hours, and then we would all gather at the table and eat for hours. There was a certain order in which the courses of our meal were served, and often we enjoyed a rest, or *spada*, in between.

There were particular foods that we ate on certain holidays. We made pasta with sardines for St. Joseph's Day, roasted lamb for Easter, and salted cod on Christmas Eve. These were the sorts of things that set us apart as Italian Americans. These were the things that drew me into the kitchen at a young age and enticed me to stir a pot of sauce or watch my grandmother fry holiday pastries. Today, I keep these traditions alive and prepare many of the cherished recipes that have been handed down in my family for generations.

While my passion for Italian food is innate, my love of Italy was acquired. It was a gift given to me by my grandparents. I grew up in a cookie cutter suburb. There were no majestic mountains or amber fields of grain in sight, just rows of houses. Oftentimes I escaped by spending time with my Sicilian grandmother, who told me stories about Italy. Her words conjured up images of an exotic place that fascinated me. On my twelfth birthday, she and my grandfather took me there. We meandered our way down the boot from Rome to Sicily. We explored ancient ruins, climbed Mount Etna, and walked through the villages of my ancestors. I returned home with the unquenchable desire to see more. That Christmas, when most kids wanted an Atari computer game, all I wanted was a map of Italy. I told my parents that I needed one to trace my journey. "Someday, I will go back to every single place," I said. I still have that map. It is faded, torn, and held together by tape in many places. Over the years, I have used it to keep track of my ramblings. As you can imagine, it is crisscrossed with ink! Today, there is no corner of Italy that I haven't visited and there is more ink on that map than I could have ever dreamed possible.

Along with my map, whenever I travelled to Italy I brought a journal to document my adventures. Soon, I realized that I was writing mostly about food. It seemed that each time I travelled to a different region, I came across a tasty new dish or a unique style of cooking, and I just had to write it down! I also learned many recipes from my friends who live in Sicily. Anna and Salvatore, in particular, are masterful chefs who love to cook up a seafood feast! I promise to take you to their apartment for a Sunday dinner. And nobody prepares vegetables better than Rita, as Salvo's produce is always the freshest! We will certainly prod her for a recipe. After I returned from each trip, I would recreate the wonderful new dishes that I enjoyed. And, of course, I would add a few touches of my own. It was only a matter of time before I had a pile of recipes and the beginnings of what would eventually become this cookbook. But how did it all come together? Well, for starters, I could not think of a reason why I should not share my passion for Italy and Italian food with others. Perhaps I might ignite a passion in someone, just as I was impassioned as a child when my grandparents took me to Italy for the first time.

I then spent seven years researching, writing, and testing recipes. Of course, there were many calls to my mother, grandmother, and friends in Italy. It sometimes took four or five attempts before I truly nailed down a recipe and made it my own. During this grand endeavor, I became fascinated by the history of Italian regional cuisine. There were many things that I wanted to understand. How did salted cod from the North Atlantic become so popular in Italy? Why do Sicilians incorporate raisins and pine nuts into so many recipes? Why do the people from Piedmont prefer *risotto* over pasta? Soon, food became the focus and highlight of my trips to Italy. In fact, I once drove many hours to a small town in the central Apennines just to sample the local wild boar sausage. Whether I was attending a food festival, touring an olive oil

factory, or simply watching an old woman make tomato paste beside the street, I was captivated. I wanted to see and learn more, and I wanted to pass my knowledge and enthusiasm on to others.

In 2008, *In the Footsteps of Nonna* was more than a vision; it was becoming a reality. That was also the year I married my wife, Jen. We traveled to Italy together and her passion for all things Italian was ignited too. Soon, I had a partner in the kitchen who shared my love of Italian food and helped me recreate the wonderful dishes we experienced while rambling through the Italian countryside. In 2009, Jen and I purchased a small farm in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Here rows of grapevines grow alongside tranquil country roads, and cows and sheep graze on grassy slopes. It is as close to Tuscany as you can get on the east coast of the United States and a world away from the cookie cutter suburbs of New Jersey where I grew up. Living here was the ultimate inspiration that turned this book into a reality. What setting in the United States could inspire you to cook Italian food more than this? The rolling hills, grapevines, and a garden bursting with fresh vegetables and herbs make my little slice of Tuscany every cook's dream! I promise, at the end of our journey I will take you for a stroll through my vegetable garden and let you peek into my kitchen pantry. These are the places from which every great Italian meal begins.

### ***Setting the Stage for Our Ramblings in Southern Italy and Sicily***

Before our journey begins, allow me to set the stage. On the Italian mainland, we will visit the regions of Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Apulia, and Calabria. Then we are off to the mysterious island of Sicily. These are places of varied geography and climate zones that bear the footprints of many civilizations. They have marked the crossroads of the Mediterranean for countless centuries and served as a link between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards, and many others have occupied parts of these regions at one time or another. They cleared the land, cultivated the soil, established thriving colonies, and built iconic monuments that still stand today. Traces of these ancient peoples can still be seen in the local traditions, customs, dialects, and cuisines. What does this mean? Well, in Sicily, Spanish-style turnovers called *'mpanate* are a favorite snack, and in Calabria a flat, round loaf called *pita* is a traditional bread. Although cultural influences help shape a region's cuisine, geography and climate ultimately dictate what foods are available. Beyond that, economics dictates who eats those foods and how they are prepared. The regions we will visit have experienced periods of economic prosperity and instability throughout history. In modern times, oppression and corruption have kept many people impoverished, creating a dichotomy between the opulent cuisine of the rich and the simple cuisine of the poor. That being said, understanding the interplay of all these factors against the backdrop of history is the key to understanding the foods of these fascinating regions that are steeped in beauty, culture, and tradition.

Heading south down the Italian peninsula, we reach Lazio and Abruzzo first. Here, the peaks of the Apennine Mountains rise to heights approaching ten thousand feet. They form a nearly impenetrable boundary between the Mediterranean side of

Italy to the west and the Adriatic side to the east. The verdant pine forests, grassy hillsides, and glaciers are reminiscent of the Swiss Alps. This is where we will find one of Italy's largest nature preserves, the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo. Wild boar, game, trout, mushrooms, and other bounties from the mountains are incorporated into the simple cuisine of this region's shepherds. On the high plateau of L'Aquila, cows and wild horses graze on alpine grasses that sway in the mountain breezes. The cool climate here is also perfect for growing lentils and crocuses, which produce the fine saffron that is used to flavor the local dishes. Where the high peaks give way to rolling hills, we will find the fabled provinces of Viterbo, in Lazio, and Teramo, in Abruzzo. Here, cypress trees stand like soldiers alongside quiet roads leading to medieval hilltop towns reminiscent of nearby Tuscany and Umbria. The orchards in these regions overflow with cherries, plums, hazelnuts, chestnuts, and walnuts, making these provinces the fruit and nut basket of Southern Italy.

Sheep are the preferred livestock in Lazio, Abruzzo, and the rest of Southern Italy. In Abruzzo, pasta or potato dumplings are sure to be topped with a thick lamb *ragù*. However, in Lazio, lamb is typically grilled with fresh sage and other herbs gathered alongside the ancient Appian Way. They say that all roads lead to Rome—in Lazio, this is true! Ancient Roman tombs, temples, and palaces dot the landscape. As you approach the eternal city, they stand as sentinels in the countryside pointing the way. The warm, coastal areas of both regions produce a cornucopia of vegetables, including artichokes, zucchini, peppers, and legumes of every kind, including chickpeas and fava. The coastlines of Lazio and Abruzzo are both fringed by long, sandy beaches and are well-equipped for tourism. Roman holidaymakers prefer the nearby beaches of Lazio, but it is the Northern Italians who flock to Abruzzo's sunny shores. Unlike Lazio, which has a broad coastal plain, Abruzzo's olive- and vine-covered hills stretch all the way to the Adriatic Sea, which always produces a bountiful catch for the commercial fisherman of Pescara and Ortona. Here, seafood is sure to be prepared in a grand stew flavored with plenty of saffron from L'Aquila.

South of Rome, the land and climate are less forgiving and sometimes harsh. Here, we find the semi-arid Appennino Meridionale, or Southern Apennine Mountains, which cover most of the regions of Campania, Basilicata, and Molise. Earthquakes are common here, and serious ones strike at least once every twenty years. Nonetheless, the rugged beauty and tranquility of these endless mountains are beyond compare. Remote towns sit perched on hilltops overlooking deep valleys filled with olive groves. In the summer, rivers are sure to run dry, and from the towns above, the dry river beds look like ancient Roman highways built of stone. This region has been nicknamed Mezzogiorno, or "midday," because of the intense heat of the midday summer sun, which inhabitants traditionally avoid by taking a *siesta*, or nap. At the turn of the twentieth century, poor economic conditions forced waves of immigrants to leave these mountains in search of a better life. Today, Mezzogiorno has come to symbolize a place that is economically disadvantaged and plagued by corruption. In many places, it seems that time stands still, but in a good way. In the oldest towns, such as Matera, primitive, cave-like houses built into the side of the mountain are still inhabited. They are a pleasant reminder of much simpler times.

The rustic cuisine of the Southern Apennines is uncomplicated, but the flavors are bold. Dishes are typically made with only a few ingredients, and pasta is a mainstay. Here, eggplants, peppers, artichokes, tomatoes, legumes, and olives grow well in the

hot, dry climate, and dishes are typically flavored with plenty of garlic, oregano, basil, and flakes of dried hot chilies. In the rolling, grassy hills, near Campobasso, you are sure to see shepherds tending flocks that are sometimes several hundred head strong! Lamb and pork are more widely consumed than beef in this area, and less desirable cuts of meat, such as tripe and sweetbreads, are never wasted. Wild and cultivated greens—such as broccoli rabe, escarole, spinach, Swiss chard, and kale—are stewed with cannellini beans for a nourishing meal, and day-old bread is used to make bread soup or stuffed into vegetables and meat roulades as a filler. In the heart of Basilicata lies a rugged region called the Piccole Dolomiti Lucane, or the “little Dolomites.” The jagged peaks resemble the famous Dolomite Mountains of Northern Italy. In these wild and remote regions, cured hams, dried sausage called *soppresata*, salted cod, preserved anchovies, and aged cheeses such as pecorino and provolone were a mainstay before the advent of refrigeration. Today, even the most rural areas of Basilicata have electricity and enjoy modern conveniences, but cured meats and cheeses are still prepared the traditional way.

By far, the most iconic place in Southern Italy is the Bay of Naples. This area was favored by the ancient Romans, who built elaborate villas along the bay’s alluring shores. Unfortunately, today this is one of Italy’s most densely populated areas and the beauty of the bay has been compromised by Naples’ urban sprawl. Despite the area’s reputation for pickpockets and petty thieves, a walk through one of Naples’ working class neighborhoods should not be missed. With clotheslines crisscrossed over the streets, sidewalk vendors peddling their goods, and a constant crowd, it is sure to be an atmospheric, albeit chaotic, place. Italy’s finest tomatoes are grown in the countryside south of Naples and they have become the backbone of Neapolitan cooking. The tomatoes are used to make sauce for braising meats and spooning over pasta. This area is also famous for its creamy mozzarella, which is made with milk from water buffalo that graze on the coastal plain of Sele. It is perfect for baking in a hearty pasta casserole or spreading atop Naples’ signature dish: pizza. Also, south of Naples lies the rocky Sorrentine Peninsula, which juts into a crystalline Mediterranean Sea. Here you will find the fabled Amalfi Coast, which for good reason has become Italy’s premier tourist destination. The dramatic scenery and charming fishing villages are beyond compare. Today, Amalfi, Positano, and other towns on the peninsula have been transformed into chic resorts for the Italian elite.

The Italian peninsula eventually splits into two smaller peninsulas, which form the “heel” and “foot” of Italy’s boot. Apulia occupies the “heel” and lies between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. Calabria occupies the “foot” and lies between the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas. Most of Northern Apulia is a tableland where the best wheat in Southern Italy is grown. Needless to say, pastas, breads, biscuits, and rustic dishes made with cooked whole grain and *farro* are prominent in the local cuisine. In central Apulia, you will find *trulli*, which are cone-shaped stone houses that resemble beehives. This quirky style of architecture is unique only to the area around Alberobello. With clusters of *trulli* farmsteads set amidst a green sea of olive groves and vineyards, this area has the look and feel of a fairyland. Artichokes, eggplants, zucchini, peppers, legumes, and greens such as chicory and dandelion are cultivated by farmers who have been working their family plots for generations. Along Apulia’s Adriatic Coast, whitewashed fishing ports, such as Mola and Monopoli, have the look and feel of nearby Greece. The deep sea fishing fleets bring in an abundance of seafood, which

is the mainstay of Apulia's coastal cuisine. Today, the shallow bays and lagoons of Apulia's Ionian coast are also home to a thriving aquaculture industry where oysters, mussels, and clams are farmed commercially.

The Calabrese Peninsula is an extension of the rugged Apennine Mountains, which become even more arid and unforgiving as they march southward. Hearty plants, such as almonds, cactus pears, capers, and figs, thrive in the dry climate, which is also perfect for growing citrus. Along the Tyrrhenian coast, groves of oranges, lemons, and citrons stretch for miles. This part of Calabria is also famous for its lovely beaches. The seaside towns from Praia a Mare to Pizzo are quickly developing into "second home" communities for Neapolitans and city dwellers from Reggio in search of a weekend retreat. As with any beautiful place, overdevelopment is now a concern. Chili peppers thrive in Calabria's unrelenting summer heat. In quaint hilltop villages where the buildings are donned with terracotta-tiled roofs, chilies are hung to dry from the eaves or outside the windows of every home. They are added to many dishes along with garlic, olive oil, and lemon. In the center of the peninsula is the high Sila plateau. Here, the temperatures are cooler than along the coast, and the forested mountain slopes reach down to the shores of several beautiful lakes. Calabria was once home to numerous ancient Greek colonies, and the Scilla promontory, which stands guard over the Strait of Messina, is rumored to be the home of the sea monster Scylla of Homer's *Odyssey*. Today, passenger ferries and cargo ships traverse the swirling waters between Reggio and Messina, but subtle remnants of ancient Greece are still evident in the culture and traditions of the region.

Finally, we come to Italy's largest island, Sicily. Corruption keeps Sicily's economy depressed, but drought, earthquakes, and the sporadic eruptions of Mount Etna also take their toll. The barren hills of the Sicilian interior produce wheat in the spring, but they are parched in the summer. Here, durum wheat is used to make pasta, semolina bread, and couscous, which was brought to the island by the Arabs centuries ago. The old quarter of Palermo is rich with Byzantine and Arab architecture, and the city's chaotic marketplace with its crowded, narrow streets has the look and feel of a Middle Eastern bazaar. In Palermo, dishes of Arab origin are prepared in a sweet and sour sauce and sprinkled with pine nuts, raisins, capers, and olives. Outstanding Greek temples can be found across the island, the best preserved of which are located in the Valley of the Temples near Agrigento. In Trapani, there is a thriving tuna and swordfish industry; however, along the southern coast, anchovies and sardines are the prized catch. Almonds, pistachios, cactus fruit, and citrus grow in the shadow of Mount Etna and eventually make their way into irresistible confections. The volcanic Aeolian Islands, which lie just offshore, are like a string of black pearls in the blue Mediterranean Sea. Once lonely outposts, they are now popular with tourists who travel there to see the active lava flows on Stromboli. Farther afield is the tiny island of Pantelleria, which has the look and feel of North Africa. Here, the arid climate and salty sea breezes create the perfect environment for growing the best capers in the entire Mediterranean.

### ***My Thoughts on Rambling in Southern Italy and Sicily***

For me, the start of any great trip to Southern Italy usually begins in Rome, which

is the transportation hub through which all international flights arrive and from which emanates a reliable network of regional flights, trains, and autostradas that link the city to Southern Italy's Apennine and coastal regions. The nearby port of Civitavecchia is also a hopping on or off point for those travelling by cruise ship or ferry. Within a few hours' drive of Rome, you can be basking in the sun at a chic seaside resort on the Amalfi Coast or skiing on the slopes of the Gran Sasso in Abruzzo. If you wander farther you can be in the wild heart of mountainous Basilicata or a whitewashed seaside town on Apulia's Gargano coast. For me, the perfect two week vacation in Southern Italy starts with a few days in a bustling, energetic city such as Rome, Naples, or Palermo followed by five days in the countryside and then five days by the sea. When I want to experience *la dolce vita*, I head to the countryside of northern Lazio, which has the feel of Tuscany, or to the chic seaside resorts of the Amalfi Coast. When I prefer simple pleasures, I may choose to get lost in the endless olive groves of Apulia or stroll on a black sand beach in the Aeolian Islands. The possibilities for a unique and diverse travel experience are truly endless!

Whenever I travel, I like to feel the heartbeat of the land. Whether I am in the rugged interior of Sicily or a vibrant Adriatic fishing port, such as Pescara, I want to experience the rhythm of daily life. Travelling should be more than just snapping photos of historic buildings and churches. You must step out of the tour bus! Take a few minutes to chat with the shopkeepers, the locals sitting beside you at the café, and the old women selling fruit at the outdoor market. Walk into a crowded butcher shop or stroll through a fish market to see how the locals do their daily food shopping. Attend a small town festival, head to a winery to see how grapes are pressed into wine, or watch an artist hand paint a ceramic vase in his workshop. And if you do not speak the language, fear not! Sometimes trying to communicate makes your experience all the more fun. It is sure to bring out a smile on everyone's face.

The best way to feel the heartbeat of the land is to stay with locals. I prefer to stay at guest houses and bed and breakfasts rather than large hotels. The owners are sure to be friendly and helpful, and living like a local is always such fun. An even better option is to stay at an *agriturismo*, where you can experience rural life. *Agriturismi* are working farms, usually family run, that also operate as bed and breakfasts. Why not spend a few days on an olive plantation in Apulia or a vineyard in Lazio? The experience is sure to be memorable and rewarding! Oftentimes *agriturismi* are housed in traditional structures, historic farmsteads, or old castles. They are charming and intimate places where the owners take the time to teach you about their trades. As a guest, you may be asked to participate in the harvest, assist with cheese-making, or press olives into oil. Most *agriturismi* also operate a small restaurant or offer home-cooked meals to their guests. They are sure to serve traditional regional dishes made with the freshest ingredients. If you head to a family run *agriturismo* in Campania, no doubt there will be a grandmother in the kitchen rolling fresh pasta dough or pulling curds into fresh mozzarella cheese!

Wherever I chose to stay, I always make sure that kitchen facilities are available so that I can cook. I will either rent an apartment or check with the owners of a bed and breakfast beforehand to see if they will allow me to use their kitchen. For me, there is no greater joy than shopping in the open air markets and then preparing a meal with regional products. To ensure that I am using the highest quality ingredients, I always purchase products certified with a "Protected Designation of Origin" (PDO) label.

By European Union law, only traditional products originating in a particular region are allowed to be marketed as such. This protects against inferior products in the marketplace. PDO laws protect the names of hams, cheese, olives, vegetables, fruits, wines, and much more. For example, a cheese can only be labeled as “Parmigiano-Reggiano” if it is produced in the designated Parma region following the traditional cheese-making methods. Other similar cheeses must be called something else. By using ingredients with a PDO label, you can be certain that any dish you prepare while rambling through Southern Italy and Sicily is truly authentic and delicious.

Another great way to sample the foods of a region is to attend a food festival. Italians love a celebration, and what could be better to celebrate than a bountiful catch or harvest? Nearly every town from Abruzzo to Sicily holds an annual food festival, or *sagra*, to celebrate whatever food or product the town is famous for. Along the coast of Sicily, it may be a sardine festival in a town that has a fishing fleet, whereas in Calabria it may be an onion festival in a town that is famous for growing onions. That being said, there is sure to be a food festival somewhere in Southern Italy or Sicily on any given day. Be sure to search them out—or better yet, plan your next trip so that it coincides with a celebration of your favorite food! It is guaranteed to be a memorable and tasty experience.

### *Let the Journey Begin!*

I hope this brief introduction to Southern Italy and Sicily has enticed you. Now it is time to ignite your passion for the culture and foods of these regions. Welcome to *In the Footsteps of Nonna: Recipes and Ramblings in Southern Italy and Sicily*.



*Laundry hanging to dry in Naples*



*Fishing boats pulled ashore at the end of a sunny day in Sorrento*



*The fortified town of Lipari in the Aeolian Islands with the dazzling blue Tyrrhenian Sea as a backdrop*



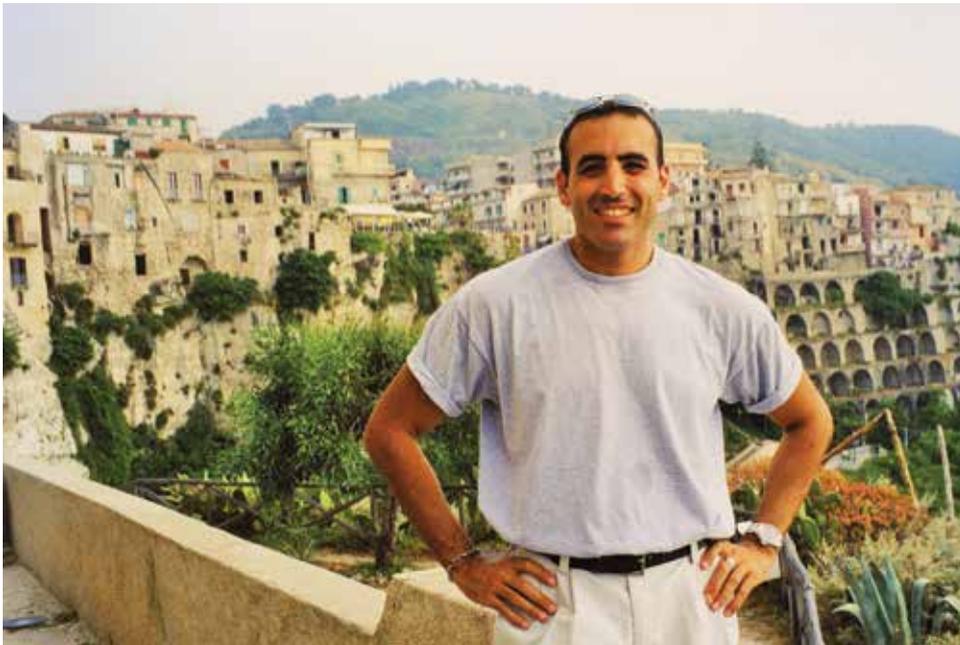
*The ancient tuna fishing port of Castellammare del Golfo on Sicily's rugged northwestern coast*



*Apennine pastures and wooded hills along the border of Lazio and Abruzzo*



*The ancient town of San Giovanni Piro, Campania*



*The author in the enchanting town of Tropea, Calabria, perched above the sea*

## *Antipasti e Spuntini (Appetizers and Savory Snacks)*

### Fine Food and Misbehaving Children in Marineo

#### A Rambling in Sicily

Several years ago, I was invited to attend the wedding of Rita and Salvo's daughter, Caterina, in Bagheria, Sicily. I was travelling to Sicily that summer with my close friend Jeff, whom they had never met. I explained that Jeff did not speak Italian and would sightsee on his own for a few days while I celebrated with them, but Rita and Salvo insisted that he attend all the festivities too. As soon as we arrived, the first order of business was a pre-wedding dinner hosted by Salvo at a popular restaurant in the small town of Marineo, which is located in Madonie Mountains high above Bagheria. The dinner was attended by the families of the bride and groom and the wedding party. We were honored to attend. As Jeff will tell you, it was an experience that neither one of us will ever forget!

We drove for nearly an hour on a road that snaked its way deep into the countryside past olive groves and grassy pastures. We ascended higher and higher into the mountains until we reached the restaurant, which sat at the edge of a ridge with glorious views of the agricultural valley below. The sign in front of the restaurant proudly announced "Rocca Bianca." We were amazed by the tranquil setting, which was caressed by a cool breeze even though it was summer and the rest of the island was sweltering. According to Rita and Salvo's other daughter, Paola, this is the best restaurant in Sicily and a favorite day trip for Palermitani who want to escape the city and enjoy authentic Sicilian cuisine. Before we left that morning, Paola explained that Rocca Bianca is a family style restaurant with no menu. Instead, families go there and sit for hours laughing and drinking wine as a parade of food is brought to the table. Jeff and I were very excited and forewent breakfast to save room for a grand feast.

Our group that day was thirty strong with just under a dozen young, unruly children. The restaurant had prepared one long table for our party. As we all sat down there was plenty of confusion. Some people were meeting for the first time, others were greeting each other with hugs and kisses, and the children were playing games and running around the table. Rita pulled me in one direction to meet a cousin and then Salvo pulled me in the other direction to meet someone else. Then, suddenly, everyone settled into a seat. But somehow during all the confusion, I lost track of Jeff! I wound up sitting at one end of the table next to Paola and he was all the way down at the other end. How terrible, I thought. He cannot speak Italian! Who will he talk to? Then I realized something even worse; he was sitting at the children's end of the table right in the middle of a rambunctious group of five to twelve year olds! How did this happen?

Paola and I walked over to speak with Jeff about the unfortunate situation. We all agreed that it would be best for him to remain where he was seated, rather than

move people around. We would then visit him between courses. Just as Paola and I returned to our seats, the parade of food began. First came platters of sliced cured ham, dried *salumi*, fresh caciocavallo cheese, olives, *caponata*, and turnovers filled with fresh ricotta. Next was an assortment of cold seafood *antipasti*, which included several seafood salads and sweet and sour tuna smothered in onions. It was already a feast beyond compare and the pasta had not yet arrived. And there were many more courses still to come! I craned my neck to see Jeff at the other end of the table. There he was, sitting amongst a cacophony of screaming children with nobody to talk to. Then, the boy sitting next to Jeff stood up on his chair and threw a piece of bread at another child across the table. That was when Paola and I decided to go keep him company for a while.

We walked over and Paola asked, "Are the children misbehaving?"

Jeff rolled his eyes. "The chubby girl is crying because little Antonio punched her in the face, and there are two children under the table touching my feet. But they are not bothering me," he explained.

We pushed the tablecloth back and looked down to see the giggling offenders, Paola's nephews, Roberto and Silvio, ages six and seven. She immediately shooed them away and apologized.

Jeff then said, "There is no reason to apologize; I have died and gone to heaven! These kids aren't eating a thing! Look, there is a whole tray of octopus, and nobody is eating it but me."

We glanced down at the table. There were platters full of food lined up in front of Jeff. He appeared to be blissfully content despite the chaos going on all around him and underneath the table. The children were apparently more interested in playing than eating, which meant more food for him.

"I guess they don't do happy meals for kids here, or chicken fingers and fries, but I am not complaining," he said. "Now please, go back to the other end of the table. I have lots to eat before the next course arrives!"

The parade of food continued. Next came bowls of homemade pasta with different sauces, trays of baked *cannelloni*, grilled swordfish and tuna, stuffed squid, roasted lamb and pork, eggplant casseroles, and tender artichokes cooked over a flame until slightly charred. We continued to check up on Jeff between courses, and each time he remained blissfully content with platters full of food lined up in front of him and no children challenging him for a morsel. At some point, Roberto and Silvio went back under the table, and a few pieces of bread were thrown in Jeff's direction. But nothing could distract him from this extraordinary feast! He proceeded to eat and savor each bite. Despite all of the commotion, he truly enjoyed the meal. When the dinner finally ended we were all stuffed. Jeff and I agreed that it was the best meal we had ever eaten.

Before we headed back to Bagheria, everyone stood outside the restaurant to chat and enjoy the view. Rita and Salvo told Jeff, "Next time you will have a better seat!" Paola introduced him to the adults that he did not have a chance to meet. One woman even thanked him for watching over her two children. Paola then explained to her that Jeff was not put there to watch the children. The woman was embarrassed for assuming that he was the babysitter and apologized for not checking up on them. She asked Jeff if they were well behaved, but he refrained from mentioning that her son threw the bread and that her daughter punched another little girl in the face.

The bride and groom's families then gathered for a photo, and Jeff and I were included. It was a wonderful day of family, friends, and fine food. And if you ask, Jeff will tell you that he had the best seat in the house, despite the misbehaving children.



*The sun-drenched hills of the Val di Salso, Sicily*



*The town of Rivello, perched atop a mountain in the heart of Basilicata*



*A street festival in the cheerful town of Lipari, Sicily*



*A friendly face in Pisticci, Basilicata*

## *Bruschetta (Grilled Country-Style Italian Bread)*

### ABRUZZO/MOLISE

The word bruschetta is derived from the Italian word bruscare, which means “to grill something over hot coals.” In the hills of Abruzzo and Molise, bruschetta is made by brushing thick slices of a round loaf of country-style bread with olive oil, grilling them until crisp and golden, and then rubbing them with cloves of fresh garlic. This wonderful, rustic preparation is also a favorite in Lazio, Tuscany, and Umbria. Today, bruschetta is a popular menu item at Italian American restaurants, where it is typically served with a topping of fresh chopped tomatoes and herbs. However, in Abruzzo and Molise, bruschetta is also topped with sautéed wild mushrooms, mashed beans, roasted peppers, and much, much more! The possibilities for topping bruschetta are truly endless, and modern Italian chefs are quite inventive. If you don’t have a grill or weather does not permit, simply toast the bread in the oven. When toasted in the oven, bruschetta is referred to as crostini.

1 loaf country-style Italian bread

Olive oil, for brushing

6 cloves garlic

Slice the Italian bread into ½ inch thick slices and lightly brush them on both sides with olive oil.

Grill the sliced bread over a low flame until crisp and golden. Alternatively, preheat an oven to 425 degrees and toast the bread for 5 minutes.

Slice the cloves of garlic in half, rub the cut sides over the hot, crisp bread, and then discard the garlic. Top with your favorite spread or topping. Serve warm. Serves 6 adults.



*Bruschetta con Ceci in Mortaio (Bruschetta Topped with Chickpea and Garlic Mash Made in a Mortar)*

**ABRUZZO/MOLISE**

Ceci, or chickpeas, are an essential ingredient of Southern Italian and Sicilian cooking. A staple in all rural kitchens, they are traditionally dried for storage and then used throughout the year. Once dried, chickpeas must be soaked overnight before they can be used. Then they must be boiled to become tender and delicious. Today, chickpeas are available canned, which eliminates the need for soaking and makes them convenient and easy to use. They are a great item to keep stocked in your pantry. Toss them in soups, stems, risotto, and pasta dishes or mash them up for a great bruschetta or crostini topping!

No kitchen in rural Molise would be complete without a mortaio e pestelo, or mortar and pestle. They are the perfect implements for mashing and grinding all sorts of things. In Basilicata and Calabria, the mortar and pestle are used to crush dried chilies into flakes that can be sprinkled over soups and pastas. In Sicily, they are used to grind almonds into a paste for confections such as marzipan. In Molise, a simple mash of chickpeas, black peppercorns, and garlic in the mortaio is topped with the finest extra virgin olive oil and a pinch or two of sea salt. Spooned on top of bruschetta or crostini, it is a simple and tasty antipasto that captures the flavor of Molise's pastoral countryside. Serve it with a glass of red Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine for a truly authentic regional treat.

2 cans (15 oz. each) chickpeas  
 ½ tsp. black peppercorns  
 1 clove garlic  
 1 tsp. Sicilian sea salt  
 ¾ cup extra virgin olive oil, divided

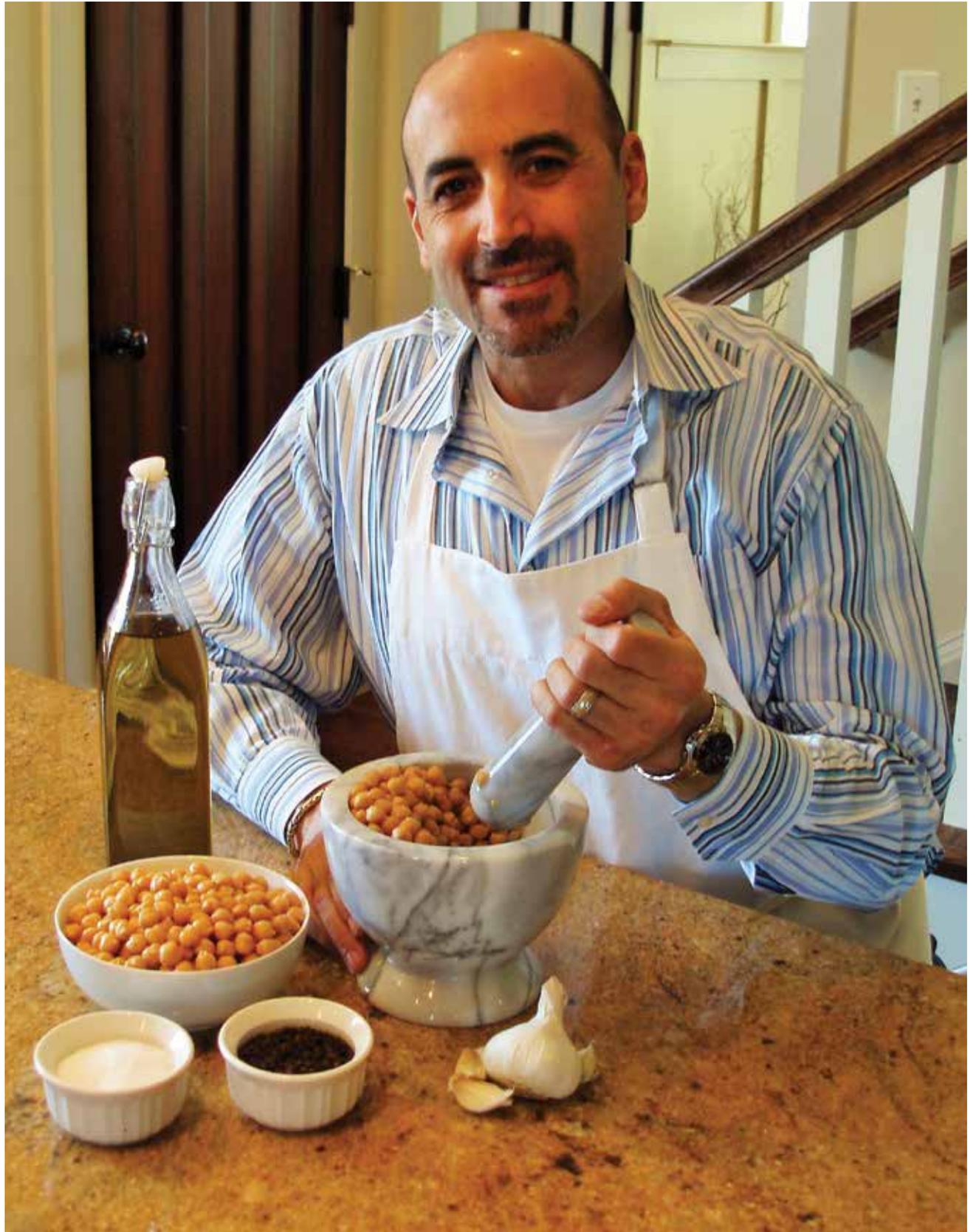
2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed  
 Italian flat leaf parsley  
*Bruschetta*, enough for 4 to 6 adults  
 (see page 23)

Drain the chickpeas. Mash the peppercorns in a large mortar. (If you do not have a mortar and pestle, prepare the spread using a food processor.) In the same mortar, mash the garlic along with the sea salt. Stir in ¼ cup of olive oil and then add the chickpeas. Mash the chickpeas into a thick, chunky spread, adding the rest of the olive oil, ¼ cup at a time, as you mash. If you prefer, mash the chickpeas until smooth and creamy.

Season with additional salt, if needed. Top the chickpea spread with a final drizzle of olive oil, and sprinkle with the chopped parsley.

Serve at room temperature with *bruschetta*. Serves 4 to 6 adults.





*Bruschetta con Purea di Peperoni e Pomodori Secchi (Bruschetta Topped with Roasted Red Bell Pepper and Sundried Tomato Spread)*

CAMPANIA

I once drove south from Naples to the bustling port of Salerno. The autostrada took me out of the city and ran alongside the bay, passing ancient towns such as Torre del Greco and Ercolano, which sit beneath Mount Vesuvius. It is a region shrouded in mystery that is still haunted by the ghosts of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It has been centuries since mighty Vesuvius last roared, but the people living in its shadow keep a watchful eye! With the richest volcanic soil in all of the Mediterranean, it is no wonder that this region is famous for growing a cornucopia of fine vegetables, including tomatoes, peppers, onions, zucchini, broccoli, greens, and legumes of all kinds. On the terraced slopes of Vesuvius, grapes grow plump and flavorful and are pressed into the local wine, la Crema Christi, which means “cream of Christ.” In a place where a volcanic eruption could occur at any time, the name given to the local wine certainly says it all!

Here is a recipe from the cornucopia of Vesuvius. Red bell peppers are roasted with sweet onions and garlic and then pureed into a spread made flavorful with the finest sundried tomatoes. The concentrated, tangy flavor of the sundried tomatoes is a true taste of the Bay of Naples, or la Baia di Napoli, as it is called. There, tomatoes are set to dry on the rooftops. They are then stored sott'olio, or “under olive oil,” and used throughout the year in many dishes. They are certainly the star of this wonderful spread that is perfect for smearing atop bruschetta or crostini. I also served it alongside polpette, or meatballs that are pulled piping hot from the frying pan.

6 large red bell peppers	$\frac{3}{4}$ tbsp. red wine vinegar
1 medium Spanish or Vidalia onion	1 rounded tsp. sweet paprika
Olive oil, for brushing and drizzling	Black pepper to taste
5 cloves garlic	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely ground dry bread crumbs,
Salt to taste	if needed
$\frac{3}{4}$ cup chopped, firmly packed jarred sundried tomatoes preserved in olive oil	<i>Bruschetta</i> , enough for 4 to 6 adults (see page 23)

Preheat the oven to 415 degrees. Quarter the peppers, removing and discarding the seeds. Quarter the onion. Place the peppers and onions in a baking dish that has been brushed with olive oil and toss in the whole garlic cloves. Drizzle lightly with olive oil and season with salt.



Cover the baking dish with aluminum foil and place it in the oven for 45 to 50 minutes or until everything is soft. Transfer the roasted vegetables to a food processor using a slotted spoon to strain off all of the residual cooking liquid. Add the sundried tomatoes, vinegar, paprika, and black pepper and process until smooth and creamy. If necessary, re-season with salt and spices and adjust the acidity level by adding another splash of vinegar. If the spread is too thin, add some bread crumbs.

Serve at room temperature with *bruschetta* or as a condiment for grilled meats. Serves 4 to 6 adults.

*Bruschetta con Insalata Tropeana (Bruschetta Topped with Cherry Tomatoes, Mixed Olives, Capers, and Red Onions)*

CALABRIA

The Aeolian Islands lie off the coast of Western Calabria. On a clear day, they can be seen from the charming seaside town of Tropea. If you wish, hop on a hydrofoil at Tropea's harbor and head to Stromboli for the day! In Greek mythology, the Aeolian Islands were the home of Aeolus, god of the winds. Once a lonely outpost, today they have been discovered by tourists in search of an authentic Italian vacation spot. If you want to get away from it all, there are six islands to choose from, and each one is more tranquil than the next. On the island of Stromboli, you can rent a villa on a black sand beach and take an excursion to see an active lava flow. Don't worry—it is safe! Villagers have lived on Stromboli since the days of the ancient Greeks and violent eruptions are rare. If you prefer, stay in Tropea at a cliffside hotel overlooking the sea. From there you can watch the smoke rising from Stromboli's crater as the sun sets over the Mediterranean.

Aeolian islanders have harvested the bounties of the sea and tilled the rich volcanic soil for centuries. Sweet cherry tomatoes, briny capers, green olives, oregano, and basil are common ingredients in Aeolian cuisine. They are also popular in the cuisine of coastal Calabria and make their way into many of the dishes served at Tropea's restaurants. In Tropea, they also grow sweet red onions, which are a perfect match for the bright flavors of Aeolian ingredients. Here is my version of a simple chopped salad that captures all of wonderful flavors of the region. Dressed with extra virgin olive oil and lemon, it is the perfect topping for bruschetta with a Calabrese flair. The bright, bold flavors will transport you to Tropea, the Aeolian Islands, and beyond!

½ cup Sicilian capers preserved in salt	½ cup pitted, halved Kalamata olives
½ medium red onion, diced	½ cup pitted, halved Sicilian green olives
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped	Salt and black pepper to taste
1½ tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed oregano	Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling
1½ tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed basil	Juice of 2 large lemons, divided
1 dry quart cherry tomatoes, halved	<i>Bruschetta</i> , enough for 6 to 8 adults
	(see page 23)

Remove the salt from the capers by soaking them in warm water for 10 minutes. Rinse them under cool running water and pat them dry.

Combine the capers, red onion, garlic, oregano, basil, cherry tomatoes, Kalamata olives, and green olives in a mixing bowl and season with salt and black pepper.

Squeeze the juice of one lemon over the mixture, drizzle generously with extra virgin olive oil, and toss well. If you prefer more acidity, add the juice of the second lemon. Serve with *bruschetta*. Serves 6 to 8 adults.



*Bruschetta con Rucola, Purea di Fave, e Pecorino (Bruschetta Topped with Field Greens, Fava Bean Spread, and Shaved Pecorino Cheese)*

APULIA

*It is said that favas are the favorite bean of the Pugliese people. To understand why, head to the town of Giovinazzo in August and attend the annual Sagra delle Fave. It is a festive evening of bonfires and fava beans! The bonfires are lit to celebrate the harvest of Apulia's most beloved legume. There is sure to be music, dancing, and plenty of dishes made with fava beans. Grab a snack at a food stall, take a stroll, and admire the Romanesque cathedral and fine limestone buildings that seem to glow in the firelight.*

*Food festivals such as this are common in Italy. In fact, it seems that every town has a sagra to celebrate its gastronomic specialty. Whether it is an onion festival in Calabria or a chestnut festival in Lazio, more likely than not there is a food celebration happening somewhere in Italy on any given day. Most large towns in Italy now have a website that is sure to provide the dates and details of their annual sagra.*

*Here is a simple fava bean bruschetta that you are sure to find at Giovinazzo's Sagra delle Fave. The fava beans are boiled until tender and then mashed into a puree with garlic and olive oil. In Apulia, the puree is traditionally made with dried favas and served with stewed bitter greens, but I like fresh favas and fresh greens best.*

2½ lbs. fava beans in the pods (yields 2 cups beans)	1 splash red wine vinegar (optional)
2 cloves garlic	<i>Bruschetta</i> , enough for 4 to 6 adults (see page 23)
¾ cup extra virgin olive oil, divided, plus additional for drizzling	Shaved Pecorino Romano cheese, for topping
Sea salt and black pepper to taste	3 eggs, hard-boiled and sliced into rounds
1 bunch arugula or dandelion greens	

Shell 2 cups of fava beans. Fill a 4½ quart pot ¾ of the way with water and add 2½ teaspoons of salt. Boil the beans for 20 minutes or until tender. Allow the beans to cool, remove the skins, and place them in a food processor along with the garlic. Add ¼ cup of olive oil, season with sea salt and black pepper, and process. Continue processing, adding as much of the remaining ½ cup of oil as needed to achieve a smooth, creamy consistency.

Finely chop the arugula or dandelion greens and toss with a drizzle of olive oil and an optional splash of vinegar. Place some chopped arugula on each slice of bruschetta and sprinkle generously with cheese.

Add a dollop of fava spread and a slice of egg on each piece of *bruschetta*. Drizzle with additional olive oil and sprinkle lightly with salt and black pepper. Serves 6 adults.



### *Bruschetta con Fegato di Lepre (Bruschetta Topped with Rabbit Liver Pate and Fig Preserves)*

#### LAZIO

If you are making whole rabbit, do not discard the liver and heart. Do as they would in the hills of Northern Lazio near the enchanting medieval town of Vitorchiano—prepare a creamy, luxurious pate! In this part of rural Lazio, which lies nestled between Tuscany to the west and Umbria to the north, nothing goes to waste when an animal is slaughtered. With a little ingenuity, even the least desirable cuts and organs are transformed into something delicious. This pate is one of them. Smear atop crisp bruschetta made with country-style Roman bread, it is the perfect antipasto or prelude to a rustic dinner of rabbit stew and roasted vegetables. It also makes a delectable spuntino, or late-afternoon snack, after a day of rambling around Vitorchiano and other enchanting hillside towns. For a merenda, a light lunch that is typically eaten at midday, serve the bruschetta with wedges of sharp, nutty Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and fig preserves. This is the type of antipasto or spuntino that you are sure see on the menu at family-run trattorias in Northern Lazio.

2 young rabbits (2½ to 3 lbs. each)  
 4 tbsp. butter, divided  
 Salt and black pepper to taste  
 ½ small Spanish or Vidalia onion,  
 chopped  
 1 clove garlic, chopped

2 eggs  
 1 splash cream or milk, if needed  
*Bruschetta*, enough for 4 to 6 adults  
 (see page 23)  
 Fig preserves

Remove the livers and hearts from the rabbits. Remove the scrap meat (flaps of meat over the rib cage and strip of meat that extends from the top of the neck down the spine). Set the rabbits to the side. Slice the livers, hearts, and scrap meat into strips.

Add two tablespoons of butter to a frying pan over medium-low heat. When the butter has melted, add the livers, hearts, and scrap meat, season with salt and black pepper, sauté the meat until fully cooked, and then transfer it to a food processor.

Add another tablespoon of butter to the frying pan and sauté the onions over low heat until soft. Add the garlic, sauté for another minute, and then transfer the sautéed onions and garlic to the food processor.

Add the last tablespoon of butter to the frying pan and fry the eggs over easy. Transfer them to the food processor.

Process until smooth and creamy, and add additional salt and black pepper to taste. If the pate is too thick, add a splash or two of cream or milk.

Serve room temperature atop *bruschetta* that has been smeared with fig preserves. Serves 4 adults.



*Caponata (Sweet and Sour Eggplant with Cherry Tomatoes, Green Olives, Pine Nuts, and Capers)*

SICILY

*Caponata is the bold and flavorful signature dish of Palermo. It is an eggplant salad flavored with a tangy Sicilian sweet and sour sauce called agrodolce. Of Arab origin, it can be traced back to the time when Palermo was the site of a great mosque and a sultan's palace. Today, remnants of Palermo's Arabic past can be seen in the architecture, dialect, and cuisine. Just take a walk down the narrow, crowded streets of the Vucciria market, which has the feel of a Middle Eastern bazaar, or stroll past the red domes of the church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, which was once a mosque! Palermo has a feel like no other city in Italy. It is a place where the sights, smells, and tastes are truly exotic and intriguing.*

*Although the flavors in caponata are complex, it is rather simple to prepare. A splash of vinegar and a sprinkle of sugar add a sweet and sour component, capers and olives add saltiness, and tomatoes add plenty of bright tang. It is a delectable combination that elevates the mild flavor of eggplant. Your taste buds will certainly agree! While the traditional caponata recipe starts by frying the eggplant in olive oil, I like to roast mine instead. Roasting caramelizes the eggplant, enhances its pleasant flavor, and prevents it from absorbing too much oil. I also cut back on the tomato paste and throw in a handful of sliced cherry tomatoes. The result is a caponata that is light and flavorful, not oily and overpowering. I prepare it as an antipasto for holiday meals and serve it with wedges of hard-boiled eggs.*

3 lbs. eggplants (preferably large, plump purple variety)	$\frac{2}{3}$ cup red wine vinegar
Olive oil, for brushing and sautéing	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup water
Salt and black pepper to taste	1½ tbsp. sugar
2 tbsp. pine nuts	2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed oregano
1 large Spanish or Vidalia onion, sliced	2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed basil
2 large stalks celery, sliced on the bias into $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick pieces	1 cup pitted, halved Sicilian green olives
4 large cloves garlic, sliced	2 tbsp. capers in brine
4 rounded tbsp. tomato paste	2 cups halved cherry tomatoes

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Slice the eggplants into  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick rounds, brush them with olive oil, and season them with salt and black pepper. Place the slices on baking trays that have been lightly brushed with olive oil. Bake for 12 minutes, flip the slices, and continue baking for another 10 to 15 minutes or until soft and golden on both sides.

Meanwhile, toast the pine nuts in a small frying pan over low heat until golden. When the eggplant is done, remove it from the oven and slice it into bite-sized pieces. Set aside.

Coat the bottom of a 5½ quart frying pan generously with olive oil and set it over medium-low heat. Add the onions, season with salt and black pepper, and sauté until

soft. Add the celery and continue sautéing for another 2 minutes or until the celery is tender but still firm. Add the garlic and sauté for another minute.

Push the sautéed items to one side of the frying pan, tilt the frying pan so that the oil pools to the other side, and fry the tomato paste in the oil for 1 minute. Combine the tomato paste with the sautéed items and stir in the vinegar, water, and sugar.

Add the oregano, basil, pine nuts, olives, capers, and cherry tomatoes and re-season with salt and black pepper. Continue sautéing for another 2 minutes or until the cherry tomatoes soften and their skins begin to pucker. Stir in the roasted eggplant and continue sautéing for another 3 minutes or until the eggplant has absorbed the sauce.

If necessary, adjust the seasoning and the ratio of sweet to sour by adding more sugar or vinegar. Serve at room temperature. Serves 6 to 8 adults.



*Melanzane Rollitini (Eggplant Roulades Stuffed with Chickpeas, Sundried Tomatoes, Capers, and Fresh Herbs)*

APULIA

*Fresh vegetables, beans, and olive oil are the foundation of Apulia's simple, rustic cuisine, and the Pugliese people know how to combine them in creative and delicious ways. In central and southern Apulia, the flat countryside is a patchwork of fields and olive groves. Should you ramble through this region, no doubt you will stumble upon a frantoio or olive oil mill. Today, there are many modern mills to process Apulia's olives into oil. However, at an antico frantoio, or ancient olive oil mill, the oil is sure to be made using traditional methods. Before the advent of modern machinery, olives were pressed under the weight of massive stone wheels that were usually turned by a donkey. The stone press method ensures that extra virgin oil from an antico frantoio is always the very best!*

*In Apulia, the best extra virgin olive oil is always reserved for drizzling over salads, fresh vegetables, pasta, and bread. A true Pugliese would never use it to fry because that would destroy its fine flavor. Here is the perfect antipasto from the countryside of Apulia that is always best when served with a generous drizzle of fine extra virgin olive oil from an antico frantoio. Plump, purple eggplants from the fields of Salentino are sliced, roasted in the oven, and then rolled up with a simple filling of mashed chickpeas, sundried tomatoes, and garlic. It is the perfect summertime antipasto from the heart of Apulia. Be sure to serve it at room temperature with crusty bread to mop up the olive oil!*

4 large, plump purple eggplants	½ small red onion, diced
Olive oil, for brushing and drizzling	1 large clove garlic, minced
Salt and black pepper to taste	1½ tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed basil
Dried oregano to taste	1 rounded tbsp. capers in brine
2 cans (15 oz. each) chickpeas	1 tbsp. red wine vinegar
¾ cup chopped, firmly packed jarred sundried tomatoes preserved in olive oil	Extra virgin olive oil for drizzling

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Slice the eggplants lengthwise into slices that are just under ½ inch thick, brush them with olive oil, and season them with salt, black pepper, and dried oregano. Place the slices on baking trays that have been lightly brushed with olive oil. Roast for 12 minutes and then flip the slices and continue roasting for another 10 to 15 minutes or until soft and golden on both sides. Allow the slices to cool.

Meanwhile, prepare the filling: Drain and coarsely chop the chickpeas by pulsing them in a food processor. Add the chickpeas to a mixing bowl with the sundried tomatoes, onion, garlic, basil, capers, and vinegar. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, season with salt and black pepper, and combine thoroughly to form a thick, chunky spread. If necessary, adjust the acidity by adding a splash of additional vinegar.

Spread some filling on each slice of eggplant and then roll up. Place the eggplant rolls on a serving platter and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil. Serve at room temperature. Serves 6 to 8 adults.



*Verdure Sott'acetto (Pickled Mixed Vegetables)*

## CAMPANIA

Pickled vegetables are popular throughout Italy. Vegetables jarred with vinegar are referred to as sott'acetto or “under vinegar,” whereas vegetables jarred with olive oil are referred to as sott'olio. In Naples, they prepare *Insalata Rinforzo* at Christmas time. It is a hearty mix of cauliflower, carrots, red bell peppers, and mixed olives marinated in a vinaigrette dressing. In the United States, Italian-style jarred vegetables are called *giardiniera*, which means “from the garden.” It is a nickname that is distinctively Italian American. So when you are in Naples, if you ask the grocery store clerk for *giardiniera*, his likely response will be, “Che cosa?”

In Sicily, my dear friend Anna jars pickled baby artichokes and mushrooms the old fashioned way, by sealing the jars and boiling them in an enormous pot of water for fifteen minutes. Her husband, Salvatore, does the same with sundried tomatoes, which he skillfully packs in small jars with a slice of garlic and basil between them. Whenever I return from a visit to Sicily, I always find a few jars of both packed in my bags! No doubt, Anna snuck them in when I wasn't looking. Here is my recipe for mixed pickled vegetables. I prepare it two ways—with a simple vinegar brine or, as in this recipe, by adding sugar to create an *agrodolce*, or sweet and sour flavor. I add my own unique blend of spices and sometimes stick a small hot pepper in the jar to add some zing. My friends Anna and Salvatore would certainly approve!

3 small cloves garlic	Mixed sliced vegetables, enough to fill a 1 quart jar
1 fresh bay leaf	1 cup white distilled vinegar (5% acidity)
1 tsp. mustard seeds	1 cup water
1 tsp. celery seeds	1 tsp. kosher salt
1 tsp. black peppercorns	¼ cup dark brown sugar
1 tsp. coriander seeds	
1 small Cayenne pepper (optional)	

Use any of the following vegetables: zucchini, onion, red bell pepper, carrots, cauliflower, green tomatoes, and green cherry tomatoes.

Sterilize the jar in the dishwasher using the sanitize cycle. Place the garlic, bay leaf, mustard seeds, celery seeds, peppercorns, coriander seeds, and Cayenne pepper in the jar. Add the vegetables to the jar, packing them in snugly.

In a saucepan, bring the vinegar, water, salt, and brown sugar to a boil and then remove the saucepan from the burner. Pour the hot brine over the vegetables, covering them completely and leaving ½ inch headspace from the top of the jar. Seal the jar and shake it gently so that any trapped air bubbles will rise to the top. Unseal the jar to release any air bubbles, and if necessary, add more brine. Then reseal the jar tightly and process it in a boiling water bath for 13 minutes. Store the jar in a cool, dark place for 3 weeks before eating. Makes 1 quart.



*Carpaccio di Tonno con Insalata di Finocchio (Tuna Carpaccio  
with Fennel Slaw, Grapes, and Pistachios)*

**SICILY**

*Ancient tuna fisheries called tonnara can be found along Sicily's western coast. A traditional tonnara is sure to be located on a protected bay, where the fishing boats would be safe from rough seas. Inside the perimeter walls of an ancient tonnara you will find vaulted, stone buildings for processing tuna, houses where the fishermen lived, and a central courtyard for storing nets and building boats. Today, most of Sicily's ancient tonnara have been abandoned as the tuna industry has moved to modern ports such as Trapani and Mazara del Vallo. A few, however, have been converted to wonderful bed and breakfasts. They are charming places to stay that are full of Sicilian character. My favorite is located in Scopello, on a picturesque cove that is the perfect place for an afternoon swim!*

*There are many traditional methods for preparing and preserving tuna in Sicily. In fact, this region produces Italy's finest jarred tuna and dried tuna roe. Whenever I am in Sicily, I buy plenty to take home! Tuna has always been a favorite seafood that Sicilians enjoy eating crudo, or raw. Today, modern chefs in Palermo and Catania use fresh, locally caught tuna raw in delicious dishes such as this. This recipe was inspired by a wonderful tuna carpaccio that I enjoyed while vacationing in Taormina. Here, the distinctively Sicilian combination of fennel and orange compliments the freshness of raw tuna, making this dish a perfect summertime antipasto. The added crunch and burst of flavor from the grapes and pistachios add interest and intrigue that is sure to please today's foodies.*

1 large California navel orange	1½ lbs. fresh tuna steak, sliced very thin
½ cup olive oil	
1 tbsp. white vinegar	1 small handful pistachios, roasted
Salt and black pepper to taste	
1 bulb fennel with fronds	
1 cup halved small, seedless red grapes	

Finely zest the orange and extract 3 tablespoons of juice. Whisk together the olive oil, orange zest, orange juice, and vinegar and season with salt and black pepper. Set aside.

Shave the fennel as thinly as possible using a mandolin and coarsely chop a small handful of fronds. Place the fennel, fronds, and grapes in a mixing bowl and toss with enough dressing to moisten.

Arrange the sliced tuna on a serving platter and place some fennel slaw on top of each slice. Coarsely chop the pistachios, sprinkle them over top, and then drizzle with the remaining dressing. Serve lightly chilled. Serves 6 adults.



*Pomodorini con Alici Crudi (Cherry Tomatoes Wrapped with Marinated Anchovy Fillets)*

CALABRIA

*In recent years, fresh anchovies have become widely available in the United States, especially in ethnic markets. If fresh anchovies are available to you, be sure to give them a try! They are absolutely delicious and taste nothing like their salty brown cousins that come in the small pull-top tins. Try fresh anchovies dredged in flour and deep fried with a squeeze of lemon. Or better yet, marinate them in lemon juice. It is a quick and easy preparation. The acid in the lemon juice will cook the anchovies, and they will become firm, white, and full of lemony flavor. They are wonderful eaten alone or with other assorted antipasti. This is a simple dish that I enjoyed in Scilla, which is perched on a cliff above a crescent-shaped beach of golden sand. It was no doubt made with fresh lemons grown on the nearby plains of Santa Eufemia and anchovies plucked straight from the azure sea. The lemony flavor of the anchovies contrasts nicely with the sweetness of the cherry tomatoes. A good drizzle of extra virgin olive oil and a sprinkle of fresh herbs add even more freshness. It is the perfect antipasto for al fresco dining in the summer by the sea.*

2 dozen fresh anchovies (3 or 4 inches in length)  
Salt to taste  
Juice of 6 lemons  
3 cloves garlic, chopped  
Olive oil, for drizzling

2 dozen cherry tomatoes  
Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling  
Black pepper to taste  
3 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed Italian flat leaf parsley

Dress the anchovies by removing the scales, heads, fins, innards, and backbone. Rinse the fillets under running water and pat them dry.

Place the fillets, skin side down, in a shallow 10 by 13 inch ceramic or glass baking dish. Season them lightly with salt and squeeze over enough lemon juice to completely cover them. Cover the dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 24 hours. The lemon juice will cook the fillets, turning them firm and white.

Pat the fillets dry and discard the juice. Place the fillets in a jar with the garlic and then pour over enough olive oil to cover them. The anchovies can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Wrap each cherry tomato with an anchovy fillet and secure it with a toothpick. Arrange them on serving platter, drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, season with salt and black pepper, and sprinkle with parsley. Serve at room temperature or lightly chilled. Serves 4 to 6 adults.



*Peperoni Ripieni con Mollica, Pomodori Secchi, e Alici (Hot Cherry Peppers Stuffed with Bread Crumbs, Sundried Tomatoes, and Anchovies)*

CALABRIA

Hot peppers are a favorite in Southern Italian cuisine. There are many varieties of hot peppers in Southern Italy, and some are hotter than others. The long, red chilies are the most common, but beware of the smaller ones that are about one inch long. They may look innocent, but they are sure to deliver a punch! In Calabria, Abruzzo, and Basilicata, hot peppers are sautéed with olive oil and eaten alongside roasted and grilled meats, stuffed with bread crumbs and preserved under olive oil, and sewn into long strands that are hung out to dry in the sun. If you really enjoy the heat of hot peppers in your food, then head to Calabria! This region is said to have the spiciest cuisine in all of Italy. And it is quite delicious, too.

Hot cherry peppers grow plentifully in my vegetable garden. Unfortunately, they all ripen at the same time. At some point in late July, I always find myself with a few baskets full of bright red cherry peppers sitting on the kitchen counter. My wife says the same thing every year: "Why did you plant so many?" Plump, round cherry peppers are perfect for stuffing. They can be pickled and then stuffed with cheese and salami or stuffed with bread crumbs and then jarred in olive oil. Either way, they are the perfect finger food! I stuff mine Calabresi style with a flavorful bread crumb mixture. I then roast them in the oven until tender and golden on top. It is a delicious treat from the sun-drenched hills of Calabria.

½ loaf country-style Italian bread	Black pepper to taste
½ cup chopped, firmly packed jarred sundried tomatoes preserved in olive oil	Olive oil, for moistening (about ¼ cup) and brushing
8 fillets Italian jarred anchovies in olive oil	2 dozen hot cherry peppers
2 cloves garlic	Salt to taste
2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed oregano	

Grate enough bread in a food processor for 2 cups of firmly pressed crumbs and set them to the side in a bowl.

Next, grind the sundried tomatoes, anchovies, garlic, and oregano in the food processor. Return the bread crumbs to the food processor and season with black pepper. Pulse while adding a steady stream of olive oil until you achieve a moist, fluffy filling.



Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Remove and discard the tops and seeds from the peppers and stuff them with the filling. Place the peppers on a baking tray that has been brushed with olive oil, and then tent it with aluminum foil. Roast the peppers for 30 minutes. Then remove the foil and bake for another 5 to 10 minutes to crisp the tops. Serve at room temperature. Serves 6 adults.

*Mozzarella in Carozza (Pan Fried Mozzarella Pockets)*

## CAMPANIA

*Mozzarella is the signature cheese of Naples. The best mozzarella is said to be produced in the Salerno province, near the town of Battipaglia. Here, ancient cheesemakers have mastered the art of pulling, stretching, and cutting the curds into a semi-soft cheese that is truly divine. The tradition was passed down over the centuries and eventually spread to Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, and Basilicata, which have all incorporated mozzarella into regional cuisines. Today, almost one hundred years after the massive migration of Southern Italians to the United States, mozzarella is the number one ingredient associated with Italian American food. However, high demand from a society obsessed with shortcuts has now caused our supermarket shelves to be stocked with low quality, manufactured mozzarella that comes pre-shredded in a re-sealable bag. What a shame!*

*In Neapolitan dialect, this simple peasant dish is called “mozzarella in a carriage.” It is one of my favorite comfort foods. When I was a child, my mother would make it for lunch on cold, snowy days when my siblings and I were off of school. It was a tasty, satisfying treat that filled our stomachs and warmed us up after a few hours of playing in the snow. The preparation is quick and easy. A mound of shredded mozzarella is enclosed in a pocket of fresh country-style Italian bread that is then soaked in beaten egg and pan fried in butter. The bread, or “carriage,” holds the melted cheese, and when sliced the cheese is released with all of the wonderful gooeyness one would expect from mozzarella. Children and adults alike find it irresistible! After all, who doesn’t like mozzarella that stretches from the plate to your mouth as you eat?*

- 2 round loaves country-style Italian bread
- 8 extra-large eggs
- 1 lb. mozzarella cheese (low moisture), shredded
- 2 sticks butter
- Salt and black pepper to taste

Cut the bread into slices just under  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick and remove the crust. Use a 5 inch round cookie cutter to press twelve rounds out of the white part of the bread.

Beat the eggs with a splash of water. Place some cheese in the center of a bread round, cover it with another round, and seal it by pressing firmly around the edges. Repeat to make five more cheese pockets.

Melt the butter in a  $5\frac{1}{2}$  quart frying pan over medium-low heat. Dip each cheese pocket into the beaten eggs, and allow the egg to thoroughly soak into the bread. Fry the pockets until golden brown on each side and sprinkle with salt and black pepper. Serve hot. Serves 6 adults.



## *Crocchette di Patate e Zafferano (Pan Fried Saffron Potato Croquettes)*

### ABRUZZO/MOLISE

*If there is any one ingredient of Italian cookery that is most associated with Abruzzo, it has to be zafferano, or saffron. Saffron is the pistil of the tiny crocus flower. On the high plateau of Navelli, the soil conditions and cool autumn weather are perfect for growing saffron crocuses. Each October, the crocus buds push their way up through the soil to bestow upon the world a most beautiful purple blossom. Once the crocus bud emerges, it must be picked right away, before the blossom opens. It is an arduous and backbreaking task for the harvesters! Once harvested, the red pistils are plucked from the buds and set to dry over hot coals. The crocus buds can only be harvested by hand, which makes saffron very expensive. In fact, it is said to be the most expensive spice in the world by weight. In Rome or Milan, an ounce of Abruzzese saffron is likely to cost over \$200! Fortunately, it only takes a pinch to add wonderful flavor and a tantalizing yellow color to any dish. In the small towns of the Navelli Plateau, saffron is added to crisp, savory potato croquettes called frittatina. I always add a handful of grated Pecorino Romano cheese to the potato filling for extra depth of flavor. Served piping hot with a glass of red wine, they are the perfect wintertime snack.*

3 lbs. russet potatoes	6 extra-large eggs
½ cup milk	3 cups finely ground dry bread
3 pinches saffron threads	crumbs
5 tbsp. melted butter	2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed
2¼ cups grated Pecorino Romano	Italian flat leaf parsley
cheese, divided	Olive oil, for frying
Salt and black pepper to taste	

Peel the potatoes and chop them into 1½ inch chunks. Place the potatoes in a pot, cover them with water, season lightly with salt, and boil for 20 minutes or until tender. Drain the potatoes well, transfer them to a mixing bowl, and allow them to cool completely.

Meanwhile, place the milk and saffron in a small saucepan over low heat and steep the saffron until the milk turns bright yellow. Strain out the saffron threads using a mesh sieve, discard, and allow the milk to cool.

When the potatoes are room temperature, mash them. Then incorporate the milk, melted butter, and 1½ cups cheese and season with salt and black pepper to taste. The mixture should be smooth and firm enough to form croquettes. If the mixture is too dense, add an additional splash or two of milk.

Beat the eggs in a mixing bowl with a splash of water. Combine the bread crumbs, parsley, and remaining ¾ cup of grated cheese in another bowl. Form oval shaped croquettes from the potato mixture, dip the croquettes in the beaten egg, and then dredge them in the bread crumbs. After you have breaded all of the croquettes, let them sit for 10 minutes and then pass them through the egg and bread crumbs a second time.

Add ½ inch of olive oil to a 5½ quart frying pan over medium heat. When the oil has heated, fry the croquettes on each side until golden brown. Place the croquettes on paper towels to absorb the excess oil and sprinkle lightly with salt. Serve hot. Makes 18 to 22 croquettes, depending upon size. Serves 6 to 8 adults.



*Arancini di Riso (Saffron Rice Croquettes Filled with Beef Ragù, Peas, and Mozzarella)*

**SICILY**

*I love the city of Palermo. The streets are full of hustle and bustle, with cars coming at you from every direction, horns blowing, and people pushing their way down crowded sidewalks. That being said, it is no wonder that Palermo is such a great city for street food. After all, one must certainly work up an appetite navigating through the traffic and crowds! In Palermo, there are friggitorie or “fry shops” on every corner ready to serve up Sicily’s version of fast food: rice croquettes called arancini, chickpea fritters called panelle, and batter-fried artichokes and vegetables. A line of people at the fry shop window and plenty of more people eating nearby are always the sign of a good friggitoria. When you are in Palermo, be sure to grab a snack at one. Arancini means “little oranges” in Sicilian dialect. They are tasty croquettes of saffron-tinged rice filled with ground beef ragù and peas. When breaded and fried to golden perfection, they resemble little oranges, just as the name implies. Arancini are a sure find at every friggitoria in Palermo. They are traditionally eaten as a snack, but I also serve them as a warm antipasto on special occasions.*

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| 1½ quarts chicken broth                          | 1 heaping tbsp. finely chopped prosciutto     |
| 3 large pinches saffron                          | 2 rounded tbsp. tomato paste                  |
| Olive oil, for sautéing                          | ½ cup red wine                                |
| 3 cups Arborio rice                              | 1 cup tomato puree                            |
| Salt and black pepper to taste                   | 1 rounded tsp. dried oregano                  |
| 1½ cups white wine, divided                      | 1 rounded tsp. dried basil                    |
| 6 tbsp. butter                                   | ⅔ cup frozen peas (thawed)                    |
| 1½ cups grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese        | ⅓ lb. mozzarella cheese (low moisture), cubed |
| ¾ lb. ground sirloin (90% lean)                  | 6 extra-large eggs                            |
| ½ small Spanish or Vidalia onion, finely chopped | 1 lb. finely ground dry bread crumbs          |
| 1 clove garlic, minced                           | 3 quarts corn oil, for deep frying            |

Set the broth to simmer in a pot with the saffron for 7 minutes so that the saffron infuses the broth. Remove the threads with a mesh skimmer and discard.



Coat the bottom of a 5½ quart frying pan with olive oil. Add the rice and sauté over medium-low heat for 2 to 3 minutes or until opaque, stirring constantly. Then season the rice with salt and black pepper.

Add ½ cup of white wine to the rice. Stir constantly until the wine is absorbed. Then add the remaining white wine ½ cup at a time. Continue stirring constantly, making sure the wine has been absorbed before more is added.

Add the hot broth to the rice one ladle at a time, stirring constantly and adding the next ladle after the rice has absorbed the broth. This

process will tenderize the rice. It will take about 20 to 25 minutes for the rice to become tender. Depending on the rice and desired tenderness, you may or may not use all of the broth.

Whisk in the butter and then the grated cheese. Continue sautéing for another minute or until the rice is thick and creamy. Transfer the rice to a bowl and allow it to cool to room temperature. If possible, allow it to cool further in the refrigerator, covered, for several hours or overnight, as this will make it easier to mold into balls.

Brush the bottom of a frying pan with olive oil, add the ground sirloin, and season it with salt and black pepper. Brown the meat over medium-low heat, breaking it up with the back of a wooden spoon. Drain off any excess grease and set it to the side in a bowl.

Coat the bottom of the frying pan with olive oil and sauté the onion until soft. Add the garlic and prosciutto and continue sautéing for another minute. Push the sautéed items to one side of the frying pan, tilt the frying to the other side to pool the oil, and fry the tomato paste in the oil for 1 minute. Add the red wine, followed by the tomato puree, oregano, and basil and season lightly with salt and black pepper. Simmer on low heat for 5 minutes, stir in the ground beef, and continue sautéing for another 5 minutes. If necessary, add more wine or some water to moisten the mixture. Stir in the peas, remove the frying pan from the burner, and allow the meat mixture to cool completely.

Set a piece of wax paper on your work surface. Take a handful of rice, form it into a ball, and then press it on the wax paper into a round patty that is about 5 inches in diameter and just under  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick. Place some of the meat mixture and a cube or two of Mozzarella in the center of the patty. Slip your hand under the wax paper, lift the wax paper and patty, and, using the wax paper as an aid, fold in the edges of the patty to completely enclose the filling within the rice. Shape into a ball, set it on a baking tray, and continue making rice balls.

Beat the eggs with a splash of water. Place the bread crumbs in a wide bowl. Dip the rice balls in the beaten egg, dredge them in the bread crumbs, and let them sit for 10 minutes. Then pass them through the egg and bread crumbs a second time.

Heat the corn oil in a deep pot, fry the *arancini* until golden brown, about 3 to 5 minutes, and set them on paper towels to absorb any excess oil. Serve hot. Makes 8 *arancini*, with enough filling left over to make a second batch. Serves 8 adults.



### *Crocchette di Gamberi (Pan Fried Shrimp Croquettes)*

#### CAMPANIA

*In Positano, colorful houses with bougainvillea-covered terraces cascade down a steep slope to the sea. On the pebble beach below, small boats sit in neat rows looking out at the warm azure waters. Once a sleepy fishing village, Positano's seductive climate and dramatic scenery have helped transform it into a chic resort. Today, the Costiera Amalfitana has become the Cote d'Azur of Italy, surpassing Liguria's Riviera Ponente as the preferred destination of jetsetters. Here, rooms at the best hotels will set you back \$1,000 per night. But sitting on the balcony of your hotel room and sipping a glass of wine as the sun sets over the Mediterranean is worth every cent. If only I had enough pennies!*

*Here is a recipe inspired by the Costiera Amalfitana, where there is a fine tradition of croquette making. Croquettes are typical of rustic Italian cooking. They are a way to turn a few meager ingredients or leftovers into another meal or snack. The specialty of Positano is a potato croquette, which is deep fried until golden brown and crisp. It is a popular snack at restaurants and snack bars all along the Costiera Amalfitana. As the cuisine of this region is tied to the sea, fish and shrimp are sometimes cooked in tasty croquettes too! Here is my version, which is made with sweet, succulent shrimp. I chop the shrimp, toss them in a stiff batter, shape the mixture into patties, coat them in bread crumbs, and pan fry them until crisp and delicious. Serve them as an entrée, antipasto, or afternoon snack with a squeeze of fresh lemon.*

2½ lbs. shrimp	1 tbsp. olive oil, plus additional for frying
1 cup all-purpose, pre-sifted flour	2 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed Italian flat leaf parsley
1 tsp. baking powder	5 cups finely ground dry bread crumbs
¼ tsp. garlic powder	Salt to taste
½ tsp. black pepper	3 lemons, cut in wedges
½ tsp. salt	
1 extra-large egg	
½ cup milk	

Peel, devein, and finely chop the shrimp. Combine the flour, baking powder, garlic powder, black pepper, and salt in a mixing bowl.

In a separate bowl, beat together the egg, milk, and olive oil. Add the liquid ingredients to the flour mixture and whisk to form a smooth, thick batter. Then incorporate the shrimp and parsley.

Sprinkle the bottom of a baking tray liberally with bread crumbs and place the rest in a bowl. Drop a scoop (about ⅓ cup) of the shrimp mixture into the bowl, dredge it in the bread crumbs, shape it into a patty, and set it to rest on the baking tray.

When you are done forming patties, place ½ inch of olive oil in a 5½ quart frying pan over medium-high heat. When the oil has heated, fry the patties on each side until golden brown. Place the patties on paper towels to absorb the excess oil and sprinkle lightly with salt. Serve hot, with lemon wedges. Serves 6 adults.



*Fiori di Zucchine Ripieni (Batter Fried Zucchini Blossoms Stuffed with Ricotta Cheese, Prosciutto, and Herbs)*

LAZIO

The Campo de Fiori is a large square located in the heart of Rome, not far from the Piazza Navona. This is where you will find the Mercato di Campo de Fiori, Rome's most splendid outdoor produce market. The name Campo de Fiori means "field of flowers," which certainly seems odd as the square is located in the urban core of Rome. Back in the days of Julius Caesar, however, the area was a meadow that stretched to the banks of the Tiber. The mercato is a lively place in springtime when young vegetables, fresh greens, aromatic herbs, and bouquets of bright, golden zucchini blossoms fill the stalls. There is always a large variety of produce to choose from, most of which comes in fresh each day from the surrounding countryside. Discerning Romans will go from vendor to vendor searching out the best produce and haggling for a good price. No doubt, they always leave with their shopping sacks full!

Zucchini blossoms are popular throughout Italy, but they are especially favored by the Romans. They are fried until crisp, stuffed with cheese and ham, tossed with pasta, or cooked in omelets. This recipe was inspired by the stuffed zucchini blossoms I ate at a small family-run restaurant near the Spanish Steps. I'd bet the zucchini blossoms were purchased that morning at the Mercato di Campo de Fiori! It was a simple preparation of batter-dipped flowers filled with creamy ricotta cheese. In my recipe, grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, finely diced prosciutto, and fresh herbs add extra flavor. Serve them with a glass of Frascati wine from the verdant hills outside of Rome for a taste of Lazio in the springtime.

¼ oz. active dry yeast	2 tbsp. finely diced prosciutto
1¼ cups warm water	1 tbsp. finely chopped, firmly packed
1¼ cups all-purpose, pre-sifted flour	Italian flat leaf parsley
¼ tsp. salt	Salt and black pepper to taste
1 extra-large egg yolk plus 1 extra-	2 dozen zucchini blossoms
large whole egg	Corn oil, for frying
2 cups ricotta cheese	
2 tbsp. grated Parmigiano-Reggiano	
cheese	

In a mixing bowl, dissolve the yeast in the water and let it sit for 5 minutes. Add the flour, salt, and the yolk of one egg, whisk to form a frothy batter, and let it rest for 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, prepare the filling: Stir together the ricotta cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, prosciutto, parsley, and the remaining whole egg. Season the ricotta mixture with salt and black pepper.

Remove the pistil or stamen from the blossoms. Place the filling in a pastry bag and squeeze some into each flower. Twist the petal tops gently so the filling will not escape.

Add 1 inch of corn oil to the bottom of a large, deep frying pan over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, push down the batter with a wooden spoon. (As the batter is resting, the yeast will cause it to rise.) Dip the stuffed blossoms in the batter, and fry them in the oil until golden brown. Set the fried zucchini blossoms on paper towels to absorb the excess oil and sprinkle lightly with salt. Serve hot. Serves 6 to 8 adults.

