At Home In Anacapri

To Anacapri’s verdant plain, we upward climb with willing feet, without whose grand and lovely sights a visit here is incomplete.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCIETTI

The island of Capri stretches four square miles and lies on the cusp of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Bay of Naples. Moorish white houses set on rocky limestone cliffs wrapped in endemic flora have made the blue isola a dreamy destination for travelers throughout time. Lying 1,982 feet above Capri is Anacapri, from the Greek for Capri of above.

Capri was not always an island. As legend says, it was once part of the Sorrentine Peninsula and was disconnected during the Phlegrean volcanic eruption. Say the word Capri—Italians say it with an accent on the first syllable—and immediately one conjures up images of the Blue Grotto, the buzzing Piazzetta, the Roman Emperor Tiberius—known to throw his concubines off its cliffs—Capri pants, and a guest list of jet-setting VIPs. It is no wonder that in 29AD Emperor Augustus traded Ischia, the neighboring volcanic island, for it. Augustus named it Apragapoli, a place of “cheko far niente,” meaning sweet do nothing; and built several villas and temples dedicated to the Nymphs. His successor, Roman Emperor Tiberius, also lived and reigned on the island for 10 years, building another 12 elaborate villas.

However Capri is not only a land of kings, queens, castles and villas, there is also a simple folk residing in Anacapri and they are called Ciammura. Ciammura, pronounced cha-moor-ras, are the contadini, the farmers who have been growing fruits and vegetables and making wine for centuries.

In local dialect, Ciammura translates to the mountain people or the natives of Anacapri. Swedish royal physician Axel Munthe resided in Anacapri from 1901 to 1948, and wrote, ‘on the top of the stairs is Anacapri, but only gente di montagna, (mountain people) live there.’ Years later, a distinct line stills exists between Capri and Anacapri, and the Caprese and Anacaprese.

Until 1874 the only thing connecting Capri to Anacapri was the Phoenician stairway or La Scala Fenicia. Chiseled in stone and climbing one thousand seventeen stairs up from the port Marina Grande to the Villa San Michele, the stairs were built by the Greeks and named after the Phoenicians. Upon reaching the top, you see grapevines, olive trees, vegetable gardens and orchards running wild. Tending these lush gardens are the contadini or...
pasture. Even Tiberius kept a skilled gardener on hand named Serpillo. The vegetarian Emperor Tiberius grew an elaborate vegetable garden at his Villa Jovis from which he would make Cianfotta: a vegetable medley of delicately chopped onions, browned with olive oil in a casserole, and then slow cooked with artichokes, potatoes, zucchini, asparagus, shelled peas, peppers, onion, tomatoes, broad beans, olive oil, parsley and basil and served with toasted garlic bread. This ancient specialty is still served today and is usually paired with the local white wine, Falanghina.

Recipes over time have not changed, and you will still find this local dish served from Monte Solaro to the gardens behind le Boffe, a paese of white casbah villas off the Piazza Vittoria. An almost hidden turn off the Piazza Vittoria leads you to a winding footpath lined with flora, farms and to Maria's garden.

Open the wrought iron gate that frames a welcoming ceramic tile bearing the name Maruzzella, (a nickname meaning little Maria or tiny sea snails) and step inside to the garden and cantina kitchen of Maria Acampora. A long country wooden table topped with fire engine red bell peppers, sweet cherry tomatoes, garlic and eggplant greet you, and there in her apron is Maria.

"I don't measure, I use my eyes," she tells us in Neapolitan dialect. Her burning black eyes are the color of the olives that she serves spiced with fennel.

She opens the door of the 100-year-old wood-burning oven and the sweet smell of salcetta paesa—handmade sausage wrapped in wild laurel leaves—hits your nose.

"From spring peas to poppies, summer roses, celery, potatoes, spinach, zucchini, egg-plant, black cherries, oranges, lemons and autumn squash are just a few of the things growing in our organic garden.

"What's in our garden is on our table," Maria explains. Her garden stretches from the foot of her kitchen and down toward the sea.

The table spread includes what Maria calls 'food for the farmers,' zucchini alla scapece—flash-fried squash cut on a mandolino to paper thin coins, dressed with mint, olive oil and sea salt; Caprese—a handmade braid of mozzarella dressed with cherry tomatoes and basil; involtini di melanzane—thiness sliced grilled eggplant that have been rolled and stuffed with smoked mozzarella and topped with diced cherry tomatoes; fagiolaia—fresh brown beans slow cooked with onion and pancetta in the brick oven, and fritturine di
basilico & frittature fiore di zucchini—small flash fried puffs or bocce as they are called, consisting of fresh basil and squash flowers flash fried in sunflower oil and sprinkled with sea salt. Zeppole Anacaprrese—sweet golden puffs twisted in a knot, lightly flash fried, dredged in sugar, filled with a crema pasticcera and topped with a black cherry are for dessert. This antica dolce dessert recipe, as Maria calls it, is made with flour, potatoes, sugar, butter and a little lemon.

Maria is just one of the Anacapri women who keep the harvest traditions alive. Anna Pane, her neighbor, tells us about the Ciammura.

“The Capri people call us the Ciammura, farmers and peasants,” she explains in her soft dialect. Anna, is an award-winning chef and owner of La Rondinella, her family restaurant. She tells more about the people and the town.

“Anacapri was always the poor part of town, and some 60 years ago, our family restaurant was the only place with a television; everyone came to watch it,” she says.

Ciammura is a pasta dish that has been handed down in her family and includes local ingredients that were always on hand, alici e olive verde, fresh sardines and fresh cracked green olives. This dazzling combination of fresh garden flavors with the ever so small delicate sardines tossed with linguine is a winner.

“Our food style is traditional, we use lots of vegetables that grow year round along with fresh local fish,” Anna explains. “What we make at home is what we serve in the restaurant.”

She shares her recipes for a traditional contadini lunch including, Polpettine Con Peperoncino Verdi—mini meatballs with sweet green peppers—hearty pan roasted sweet green long peppers with cherry tomatoes and garlic topped with small sized meatballs; Peszogna all’Aqua Panna—fish in Crazy Water—fresh fish from the dentex family slow cooked with garlic, cherry tomatoes; and, a Torta Caprese Bianca—white Caprese cake—a flourless cake made with almonds.

“We are simple people, and that’s what counts,” says Maria. The traditions of Anacapri and its harvest take place each September with an autumn festival called Settimana which celebrates the Autumn Harvest. Anacapri, a verdant plain, so close and yet so far from Capri.

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White Caprese Cake

3/4 cup butter, softened
3/4 cup + 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
6 eggs
10 ounces white chocolate
10 ounces almonds, peeled
Zest of 3 lemons
Juice of 1 lemon
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 tablespoon Limoncello
Powdered sugar, for dusting
Lemon zest curls for garnish, if desired

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, cream butter with an electric mixer for about 10 minutes until foamy. Add the sugar and continue to beat for an additional 10 minutes. Add the eggs one at a time while still mixing.

Meanwhile, chop white chocolate with almonds in food processor until finely ground. Add to the butter mixture and mix well. Add the lemon zest and lemon juice. Lastly, add the baking powder and Limoncello and mix until well combined. Prepare 12-inch round baking pan with butter and parchment paper (or butter and flour).

Pour batter into the prepared pan and bake for 40 to 50 minutes until golden. Remove and allow to cool completely. Once cooled, flip it out of the pan and serve dusted with powdered sugar and garnish with lemon zest curls, if desired.

Makes 12 servings.

Courtesy of Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri
Ciammura - Anacaprese Pasta

12 ounces linguine
4 to 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 whole cloves garlic
20 fresh anchovies, large pieces
1 tablespoon dry white wine
3½ ounces pitted green olives, chopped
Fresh parsley for garnish, if desired
Salt to taste

Prepare the linguine according to package directions. While the linguine is cooking, prepare the sauce. In a large pan, heat olive oil then add the garlic and sauté. Add the anchovies and sauté until they are golden. Add the white wine and allow to evaporate a moment, then add the chopped olives. Meanwhile, cook the linguine in boiling salted water and drain when just before al dente. Add the linguine to the pan with the sauce and sauté together another 2 to 3 minutes to finish cooking. Add chopped fresh parsley and salt to taste and serve.
Makes 4 servings.
-Courtesy of Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri

Basil Puffs

1 1/4-oz. package dry yeast
1 ½ cups water
Pinch of salt
3 ½ cups flour
Pepper, if desired
Basil, handful, ripped
Sunflower oil, for frying

Mix all ingredients except oil together and allow to rest 10 to 30 minutes depending on how warm it is outside. The batter should be elastic and pull back when you put in the spoon. Spoon the batter into hot sunflower oil and fry puffs for 2 to 3 minutes, turning so they turn golden on both sides. Drain on paper towel and serve.
Makes 4 servings.
Variations: Instead of basil, try making them with rosemary, arugula, sage, zucchini flowers or local herbs.

Fish in Crazy Water

1 pound sea bass or sea bream
Sea salt to taste
8 cherry tomatoes, quartered
1 or 2 teaspoons virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons or more fresh chopped parsley
Crostini

2 pieces stale bread (without crusts) dipped in milk
Handful Parmigiano, grated
1 clove garlic, chopped
Salt, to taste
Pinch of parsley
1 egg

For the Green Chile Peppers:
7 ounces long, mild green chile peppers
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 whole garlic clove
5 ounces cherry tomatoes, about 10 to 15
Pinch of oregano
Handful of fresh basil
Salt to taste

For the meatballs, mix together the ground beef, moistened stale bread, Parmigiano, garlic, salt, parsley and 1 egg. Form into small balls about the size of marbles (about 1/2 tablespoon each). Fry or bake meatballs until browned.
Remove the tops of the green chile peppers (seeds will come out with the stem). In a large pan, heat olive oil and add the whole garlic clove. Add the cherry tomatoes and sauté about 5 minutes until cherry tomatoes are soft.
Add the green chile peppers and cook about 10 minutes, covered. Add the cooked meatballs and toss together for an additional 10 minutes so the meatballs take on the flavor of the green chile peppers. Add oregano, fresh basil and salt to taste. Serve immediately as an appetizer or second course.
Makes 4 servings.
-Adapted from a recipe by Anna Pane, La Rondinella, Anacapri