

Traditions of an Italian Holiday Season

Tastes of Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

DECEMBER 2010

Holiday Desserts

Praline Mousse Cake
Cassata Cream Cake
Pine Nut Cookies
Rum Bread Pudding
Lemon Cream
Almond Cookies
Date Nut Bars
Wine Biscuits
and more!

Chocolate
Espresso
Almond Torte
Page 57

Winter Basics

Roasted Vegetable Soup
Baked Eggplant
Roast Chicken
Stuffed Calamari
Linguine
with Seafood



Buon Natale!

New ideas for holiday gatherings

DECEMBER 2010



U.S. and CANADA \$5.95

SWEET CHRISTMAS

NONNA'S LUCIA'S FIFTH GENERATION RECIPE BOOK OR C'ERA UNA VOLTA

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI**

Music in the kitchen, sweet almonds toasting, and a busy oven that is always baking. This is Marie Lucia's recipe for Pratese biscotti. Reigning from a long family of pastry makers from the sleepy town of Prata Sannita, Marie Lucia has kept her Italian heritage alive with cooking, culture and her family. As she tells about another recipe from her grandmother's recipe book, she takes a moment to rotate the pans in her wood-burning brick oven.

"Lucia was my grandmother, born in 1893, she was a wife, mom and great pastry maker. She left Prata Sannita at the turn of the century, took a boat from Naples and sailed to New York for a better life. She married Pasquale Scuncio in America, and sadly passed away





CITRUS CANDY
Lemon torrone is a holiday favorite

TRADITIONS

when she was only 25, during the influenza epidemic. She left three small children behind, Philomena, Antonio and Giovaninna. My mother, Philomena, was the oldest and she was only 5 years old when her mother died. Although I did not know my Nonna Lucia, I learned all about her from my mom," Marie tells her story, as she turns another page of the tattered recipe book spotted with red wine, flour and olive oil.

Lucia and Pasquale came from the Appennino Campano, the Appennines of Campania that reach to the heavens in this part of Casserta. Today, their quaint ancient village sits against the majestic mountains like a twinkling presepe at Christmas time.

Prata Sannita is a perfectly preserved village, white-washed and faded with all its calm and peacefulness. Dating back to Paleolithic times, the small village of 1,700 inhabitants is just a twenty-minute ride off the Autostrada del Sole.

Ever so small, but big in history, religion and tradition, Prata is unknown to travelers. Its illustrious past includes the ancient people of this region, the Samnites or i Sanniti who were courageous warriors, and later the monks and nuns who dominated the churches and monastery.

"Over time, the small 8-square-mile paese became home to several churches and convents, including one of the oldest, Medieval Borgos, circa AD 1000. Others include the convent of San Augustino, circa AD 1100, the convent of San Francesco, and the churches of Maria delle Grazia, San Pancrazio and San Francesco. The monks of Montecassino governed Prata from 500 to AD 1062, as the pious population produced biscotti and liqueurs to support the churches. The biscotti, made by the monks, nuns and women of the village, were given out to the noble families in exchange for their donations to the churches. The nuns and monks turned out some of the best pastries and liqueurs. With the Pratese churches came a long lineage of pastry makers, and the Scuncio family is one of them," says Marie.

Biscotti, the Italian dry cookies, take their name from the Latin, bis, meaning twice, and cotti, baked. The biscotti of Prata are made both salty and sweet. The salted recipe, called taralli, are boiled then baked. The grisinni al pepe, also consist of flour, olive oil, yeast, sulfuric water from the region's springs, pepper and fennel seeds; while the sweet recipe includes Falerno red wine (the preferred wine of the Roman Empire), olive oil, flour, sugar and





FAMILY TIME:

Marie Lucia, right, daughter Gina, left, and granddaughters Chloe Lucia and Siena, right, with Christmas cookies.

yeast, for biscotti al vino rosso.

Marie tells us, “Nonna Lucia was known as the best tarralli maker in Prata. By eye she would mix lots of flour with pepper, fennel and anisette seeds, and then add olive oil, water, sea salt and yeast. Biscotti, or cantucci, as they are called, were another one of her favorites. They fall into the pasticcini secchi family, the Italian word for all the varieties of sweet dry biscotti like almond, lemon, anisette, orange or vanilla.

All biscotti were made for dipping, either in an espresso, cappuccino, wine, liqueur or soup. Sailors, crusaders, pilgrims and merchants carried biscotti of all kinds when they traveled on long sea and land voyages, because they lasted for months without spoiling.

Vino, pepe, mandorle, limone, and anisette biscotti flourished from the small town of Prata, and the bakers continued to bake in order to support their many churches. As traveling increased, the Pratese biscotti made their way around the

world. “In Italy the Christmas celebrations start with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8th, and we start making biscotti a few days before.

“On December 13th, we celebrate Santa Lucia, the 25th is Christmas, and January 6th is the Epiphany. It is a family tradition with my daughters and grandchildren in the kitchen, and we usually make around 20 different types of cookies,” Marie explains.

Her grandmother’s recipe book is five generations old and inside it are recipes for torrone—a sweet nut, honey and sugar candy; biscotti al vino rosso, biscotti ai datteri e noci, a soft cake dessert with dates, nuts and rolled in confectioner’s sugar; biscotti di mandorle e sesamo, sesame almond biscotti; struffoli, small fried pastry puffs sprinkled with honey, and tossed with candied orange & lemon rind; chiacchiere, small ribbons of quickly fried dough dusted with sugar; and susamielli, the dark S-shaped cookies that were once called

sesamielli. The word sesamielli is taken from the word “sesame seed,” which the cookies were originally covered in. They are also called sapienze, because they were made by the nuns in the Monastero de Sapienza.

Marie Lucia, named after her grandmother, is my mother. She has kept all the traditions of Italian food, music, and life alive in our family. Today there are five generations of Scunciros ranging from 2 to 95 years old. Join us at home in Prata Sanita and learn Christmas biscotti making just like the monks and nuns of Christmas past.

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Marie Lucia's Biscotti di Mandorle e Sesamo ~ Almond Sesame Cookies

- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons vanilla
- 1 tablespoon almond extract
- 3/4 cup white sugar
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 1/2 cup whole almonds
- 1 1/2 cups filberts
- Zest of 1 orange
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup sesame seeds

Beat together eggs, vanilla and almond extract. Add sugar, spices, baking powder and butter and mix until well blended. Add nuts and orange zest. Add flour, slowly, until dough is firm and add additional flour if necessary if dough is too sticky.

Place sesame seeds on a piece of wax paper, 24 inches long. Shape dough into 12- to 14-inch logs (about 3 to 4 inches wide and 1 1/2 inches tall) and roll in sesame seeds.

Bake in preheated oven at 350° F until golden brown, approximately 25 to 30 minutes. Rotate cookie sheet for even color.

Remove and allow cookies to cool for 5 minutes. Slice on an angle then return to oven for another 5 minutes to finish making your biscotti. Makes 24 biscotti.

Marie Lucia's Grissini al Pepe ~ Pepper Sticks

- 6 to 7 cups flour
- 1/4 cup fennel seeds
- 3 to 4 teaspoons each salt and pepper
- 2 yeast cakes
- 2 cups of warm water
- 1 cup oil (light olive oil or canola oil)

Preheat oven to 350° F.

Add all dry ingredients together in a large bowl. In a small bowl, add yeast to warm water and let dissolve thoroughly. Add yeast mixture to flour mixture, then add the oil. Mix well until workable, turn onto a floured surface and knead until smooth.

Cover dough with clear plastic wrap and place a dishtowel over the bowl. Let rise until doubled in size for about 2 to 3 hours.

On a floured surface, roll dough into sticks about 6 to 7 inches long. Place on a greased cookie sheet about 1 inch apart. Bake until

golden brown, approximately 20 minutes. Makes 24 sticks.

Nonna Philomena's Susamielli

- 1 or 2 eggs depending on size
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1/3 cup canola oil
- 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon each of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, depending on your taste
- 1 orange peel, zest
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 3 cups flour
- 1 cup or a little more of molasses (whatever it takes)

In a large mixing bowl, beat eggs, sugar, salt, baking powder and canola oil.

Add orange zest, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and walnuts then gradually add the three cups of flour. Lastly, add molasses to form a workable dough and roll out into "S" shapes.

Bake in a preheated oven at 350° F until golden brown. Allow to cool completely and store in an airtight container until ready to serve. Makes 24 cookies.

Biscotti ai Datteri e Noci ~ Date Nut Bars

- 1 1/4 cup flour
- 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 tablespoon melted butter
- 1 tablespoon hot water
- 2 cups chopped dates

- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup confectioner's sugar

Beat eggs, salt, sugar, baking powder, butter and water. Add walnuts and dates, then lastly add flour mixing by hand with a heavy wooden spoon.

Grease an 8 x 11 1/2 x 2-inch baking pan or glass Pyrex dish and pour the mixture into the pan.

Bake in a preheated oven at 350° F until lightly golden brown, approximately 25 to 30 minutes. Allow to cool then cut in squares.

Roll in confectioner's sugar. Makes 24 bars.

Marie Lucia's Biscotti al Vino Rosso ~ Wine Biscuits

- 1 cup Aglianico or red wine
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 to 3 cups flour, or more, until dough is not too soft. The dough should be smooth and not sticky.
- 1 egg, beaten

Preheat oven to 350° F. Combine wine, sugar, and oil and mix well. Add the baking powder and stir. Add the flour slowly to the batter until the dough is workable. Roll the dough into small logs about 5 inches long and as wide as desired. Roll into a twist or like a coil. Place on a greased baking sheet about 2 inches apart. Brush the beaten egg on top of each biscuit.

Bake 20 to 25 minutes or until golden brown. Allow to cool and serve.

Makes 24 biscuits.



BITE SIZE:
Wine biscuits are perfect to serve during the holidays.



TIME HONORED
A doorway in one of the ancient
houses of Prata Sannita