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LARRY MANETTI

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LARRY MANETTI'S
STEAK LORENZO
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Italian *Royalty*

Executive Chef Franck Cerutti, with three Michelin stars, reigns in the kitchen at the Louis XV located in the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, wowing guests with his sensational seasonal food.

[*By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*]

How many stars do you have now, I've lost count?" I ask.
"Three stars," replies executive chef Franck Cerutti. He has serious deep-set eyes and he speaks gently in a soft voice.

"Obtaining three stars in no more than four years, that was the agreement?" I ask. "Sì, sì," he replies in Italian with a French word every now and then.

When Alain Ducasse invited him to work at the Louis XV, the terms were clear: three stars in no more than four years. Cerutti accepted the challenge. He was accustomed to

challenges. Prior to signing on with Ducasse, he had worked and trained with Executive Chef Jacques Maximin at the Negresco in Nice. There he was accustomed to palaces.

Fifteen years later and Chef Cerutti reigns in the kitchen at the Louis XV located in the Hotel de Paris in the Principality of Monaco, better known as Monte Carlo. As executive chef and managing director, he presides over 100 chefs (20 for Louis XV alone) in the four Alain Ducasse establishments.

Built in 1864, the Louis XV is named after the monarch who once ruled. Today it boasts a menu of Italian Provençal cuisine thanks to the Ducasse-Cerutti team. This dining



room has seen a long procession of grand dukes, royals, and statesmen.

Among the world's most famous restaurants, Louis XV holds three Michelin stars, has 250,000 bottles of wine in its cave, and is frequented by a rich and famous clientele from around the world. But its secret to success is simplicity, which Cerutti is known for. He uses seasonal, high quality products and crosses the border into Italy to do his shopping. Fresh produce, fish, game, cheese and herbs are just a few items on his shopping list.

From the "entroterre" (inland, the mountains), "I wanted to be a contadino, a farmer," Cerutti says. His grandparents were from Piemonte and he holds strong to his Italian roots and praises his kitchen experience in Florence where he found his passion for simple Mediterranean cuisine.

When asked about how he made a full circle from a heartland farmer to Michelin star chef, he explains. "At 14 years old, I competed in two academic exams, one for Scuola Alberghiera, Hotel School and the second for Scuola di Agraria, School of Agriculture, and I won both. My parents recommended I go on to to be a chef, so I would be able to travel, meet people and have a good life economically," he says.

He listened to his parents. "I thought about going on to sommelier school, but decided to be a chef. I wanted to be in contact with the land and chefs are always in contact with the land—with the meat, fish, vegetables and nature that they come from," he explains.

Today heading the all-star kitchen at the posh Hotel de Paris, he buys his products in San Remo, Ventimiglia, Nice, Tuscany and into the heartland of Piemonte. He holds court over a circle of farmers and producers with whom he has honed relationships with for more than 20 years.

"I go to local artisans and farmers who I trust. I love working with these small private farms, because there I buy absolute quality products, including beans, salads, artichokes, asparagus, potatoes, and spagnoli—mushrooms—fresh in season. Each season is a discovery and has its special products," he explains.

Cerutti is known as "the king of plants, herbs and everything natural." He smiles.

"Italians love vegetables, so we have created a gourmet tasting menu based on vegetables, not all vegetarian, but with a piece of baccala, pancetta, or pork checks here and there." When I asked what his favorite dish is, he says, "Tutto, I love everything, I am content with each season's products."

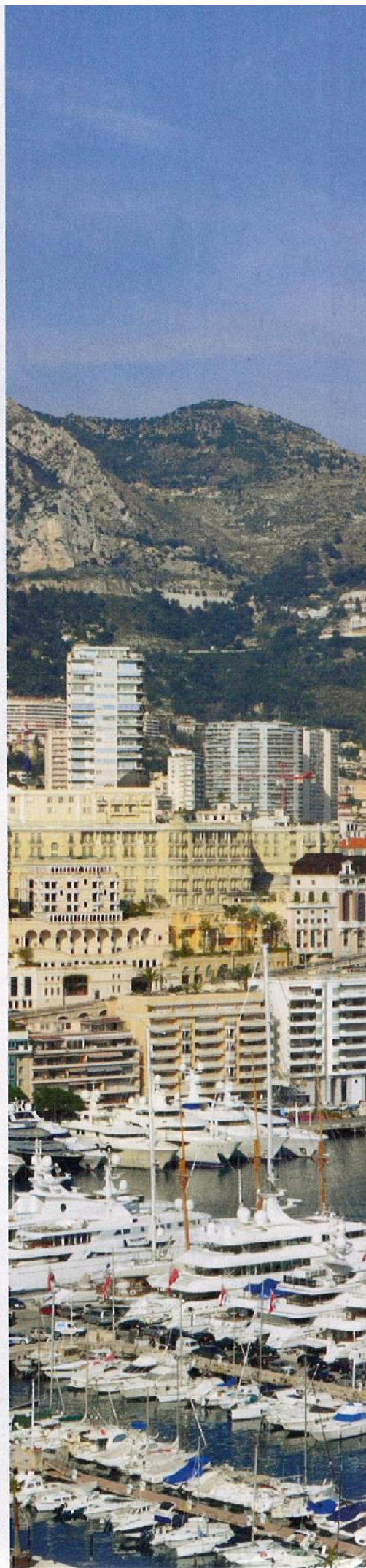
As for his kitchen, he adheres to his philosophy and keeps it simple. "La prima donna, the first lady in the kitchen, is the quality of the product, followed by technique. And of course you must cook with love," he says.

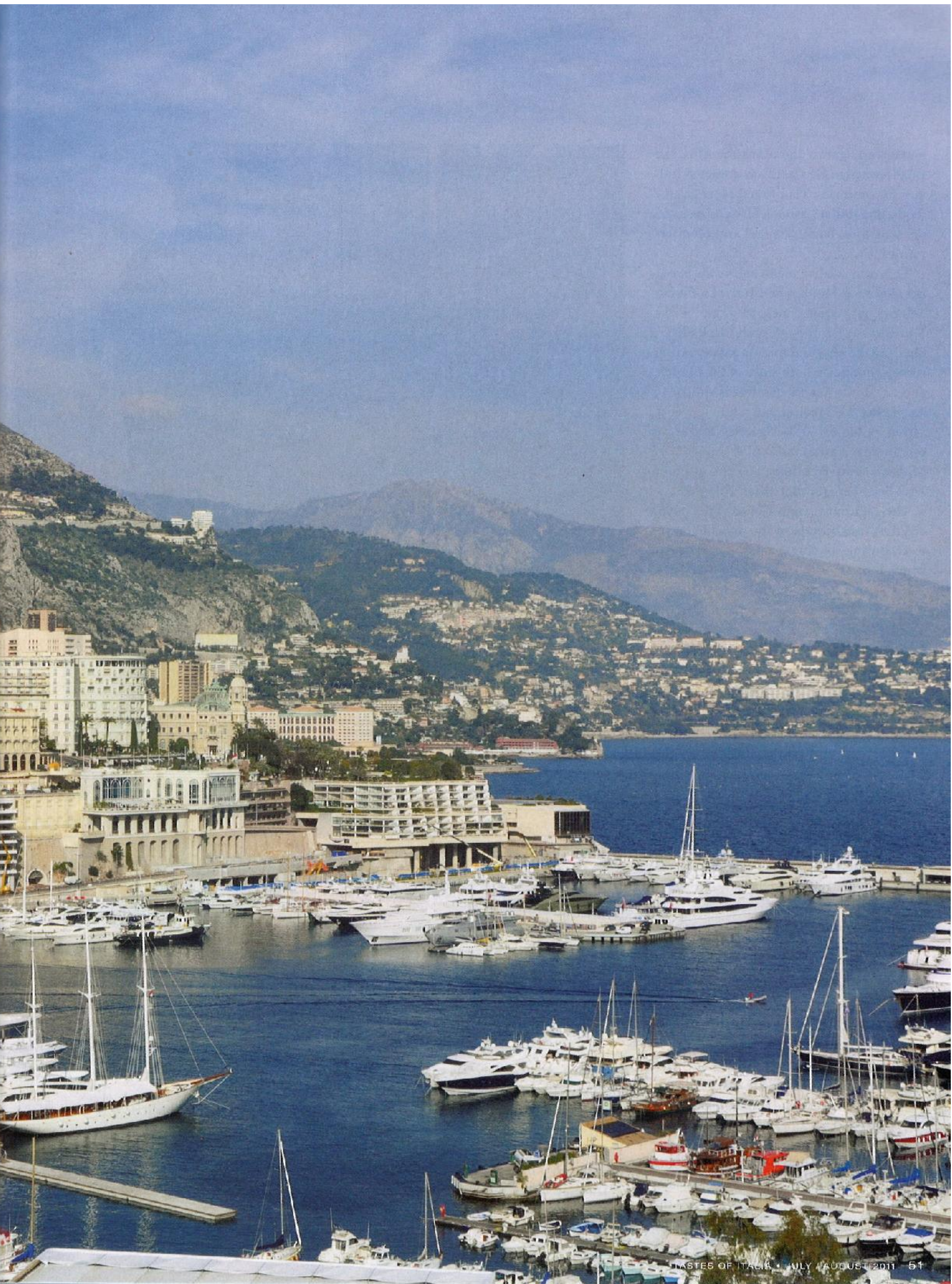
Cerutti and Alain Ducasse have created a recipe of success with their Italian Provençal cuisine. "I remember when Ducasse came here at the Louis XV. He said 'We are at the border with Italy and Monaco and we need to combine the two cuisines.'" Ducasse was the first to cross borders with simple Italian Provençal cuisine for the world's most famous restaurant, and they have been wowing guests with their sensational seasonal food ever since.

Cerutti travels deep into Italy for superb products throughout the seasons. "I have an address in Florence for the best white truffles," he proudly says. He tells me about the first time he went to buy the precious tubers from his small artisan seller. "The farmer had never sold truffles to Monaco. He got a kick that I had come cross-country to buy his truffles for Monaco," he explains.

"Italian products in my kitchen are important. I am passionate about Mediterranean cooking because my first real experience was in Italy. I was a young chef learning la cucina Italiana, in a one-star Michelin restaurant. We were instructed to cook nouvelle cuisine (French). Clients wanted Italian. And when it was time for us to eat, the chefs always cooked simple Italian. We ate better than the clients. It was the classic cucina Mediterranea. My choice was always spaghetti, aglio e olio—spaghetti, garlic and olive oil. The pasta must be cooked just right with good olive oil. It's simple pasta, but you need to know how to make it," states Cerutti.

Monaco has strong ties to Italy. Its geographical location sets it only a few minutes from the Italian border. Sitting front row on the Mediterranean Sea with its back





nestled up against the Maritime Alps, the small sovereign city-state has attracted Italians for centuries. Traditional Monégasque foods, like Italian, include black olives, garlic, tomatoes, basil, olive oil and Mediterranean fish.

This comparative menu shows the closeness between Monaco and Italy: La Pissaladiera is equivalent to the Pizza Marinara—pizza dough with black olives, alici (anchovies) and tomato sauce; ravioli served equally on both sides of the border; and La Morne à la Monégasque is similar to Acqua Pazza—Mediterranean white fish with olives, potatoes, garlic, parsley and olive oil. There is a profound Italian influence in Monaco, and rightfully so—the Italians have been here for more than 700 years.

The Ligurians, from Genoa, Italy, were the first inhabitants of the area. They arrived during the pirate times and were attracted by Monaco's strategic port and rocky spur hill with its fortress—often referred to as "the Rock." Following a land grant from Emperor Henry VI in 1191, Monaco was re-founded in 1228 as a colony of Genoa.

On January 8, 1297, Francesco Grimaldi, better known as Il Malizio—the malicious—captured the fortress with his fellow Italians. Dressed as Franciscan monks, (Monaco translates to monks) the men asked for a hot meal and place to stay for the night. Once they entered, they captured Monaco under siege. This was the start of the Grimaldi dynasty. The Grimaldis gained control and then invited fellow Italians to Monaco. They put a tax-free law into effect encouraging other Italians to follow. Monaco remains a tax-free paradise thanks to the Grimaldis. Since the invasion, the Grimaldi family has remained in control (except when the French intervened for a short time from circa 1793 to May 17, 1814). More than 700 years later the Italian tradition continues in Monaco.

Chef Cerutti and I tour his two kitchens, the size of landing fields. On this particular day, he's flown in all the Italian ingredients that he'll need for a perfect Bolognese dinner event, including the chef. Speaking Italian in two different dialects, Chef Mauro Fabbri from the Ristorante Diana in Bologna and Chef Cerutti go over the



FRESH CHOICE: Chef Cerutti seeks out the freshest ingredients at farmers markets.

menu. They have teamed up in the kitchen to prepare an authentic Bolognese menu for a group of Monégasque Italian clients.

Cerutti enjoys his work, crediting Ducasse.

"When you work with intelligent people, someone like Ducasse, you learn too. He has transmitted his experience, shared his knowledge and helped me a lot. It's the truth, and I always say, I am better with Ducasse, than without Ducasse. Mai firme (never stop)," he says with a smile.

Ducasse holds the record as the only chef to hold 19 Michelin stars. What does

"the great boss" Ducasse have to say Cerutti? "He's the spirit of the Mediterranean. It's in his blood and he knows to express it on a daily basis," Ducasse says.

Humble and kind-hearted, Chef Cerutti is as simple as the ingredients he cooks with.

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Tuna with Garlic,
Tomatoes and Herbs



Tuna with Garlic, Tomatoes and Herbs

- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 (6-oz.) slices of tuna, 1-inch thick**
- 2 to 3 tablespoons olive oil**
- 3 or 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped**
- ½ cup dry white wine**
- 3 ripe plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped**
- 1 teaspoon dried herbes de Provence**
- Basil leaves to garnish**

Season the tuna steaks with salt and pepper. Heat a heavy frying pan over high heat until very hot, add the oil and swirl to coat. Add the tuna steaks and press down gently, then reduce the heat to medium and cook for 3 to 4 minutes on each side or until desired doneness.

Transfer the steaks to a serving plate and cover to keep warm. Add the garlic to the pan and fry for 15 to 20 seconds, stirring constantly, then pour in the wine and add the tomatoes and dried herbs and cook for 4 to 5 minutes until the sauce is bubbly. Season with pepper and pour over the tuna. Serve, garnished with fresh basil leaves.

Makes 2 servings.

Herbes de Provence

- 3 tablespoons dried marjoram**
- 3 tablespoons dried thyme**
- 3 tablespoons dried savory**
- 1 teaspoon dried basil**
- 1 teaspoon dried rosemary**
- ½ teaspoon dried sage**
- ½ teaspoon fennel seeds**

Combine ingredients and blend well. Store in an airtight container. Makes 12 tablespoons.

Zucchini & Tomato Bake

This dish has been made for centuries and gets its original name from the shallow casserole, "tian," in which it is traditionally cooked. In the days before home kitchens had ovens, the assembled dish was carried to the bakery to make use of the heat remaining after the bread was baked.

- 1 tablespoon olive oil, plus more for drizzling**
- 1 large onion, about 8 ounces, sliced**
- 1 large garlic clove, finely chopped**
- 1 pound of tomatoes**
- 1 pound of zucchini**
- 1 teaspoon dried herbes de Provence**
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Heat the oil in a heavy saucepan over low heat and cook the onion and garlic for about 20 minutes until soft and golden. Spread the base of a 12-inch shallow baking dish with the onion mixture.

Cut the tomatoes crosswise into ¼-inch thick slices (if the tomatoes are very large, cut the slices in half).

Cut the zucchini diagonally into slices about ½-inch thick.

Arrange alternating rows of zucchini and tomatoes over the onion mixture and sprinkle with herbs, cheese and salt and pepper. Drizzle with olive oil, then bake for 25 minutes until the vegetables are tender. Serve hot or warm.

Makes 4 servings.

Lemon Tart

- 1 pie crust for a 9-inch pan**
- Grated rind of 2 to 3 lemons**
- ⅔ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice**
- ½ cup superfine sugar**
- 4 tablespoons heavy cream**
- 4 eggs, plus 3 egg yolks**
- Confectioner's sugar for dusting**

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Roll out the pastry for the pie crust thinly and use to line a 9-inch pie pan. You may also use store-bought pie crust. Prick the base of the pastry.

Line the pastry shell with foil and fill with pastry weights. Bake for about 15 minutes until the edges are set and dry. Remove the foil and baking weights and continue baking for 5 to 7 minutes more until golden.

Place the lemon rind, juice and sugar in a bowl. Beat until combined and then gradually add the heavy cream and beat until well blended.

Beat in the eggs, one at a time, then beat in the egg yolks and pour the filling into the pastry shell. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until the filling is set. If the pie begins to brown too much, cover the edges with foil. Let cool. Dust with confectioner's sugar before serving.

Makes 8 servings.



SWEET TART: Tempting dessert made with fresh lemons, sugar and cream.