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Giovanni DeCunto

Italian Painter & Chef

A Boston-based visual artist of world renowned fame credits his Neapolitan roots for his inspiration.

by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

NATIVE SOIL

“My mamma and papà were dancers and my uncles were musicians; they were from Naples. They were great cooks. I grew up in a very big Italian family where everyone was in show biz; however, I’m the only one who is a painter,” says Giovanni DeCunto, a Boston-based visual artist of world renowned fame. His artwork hangs in public and private collections that range from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. to the Padova City Hall in Padova, Italy, as well as in the homes of celebrities and sports heroes.

But for DeCunto, his artwork is an expression of who he is, a creative work in progress with many outlets. His Italian roots have something to do with that.

“Like all Neapolitans, we are an artistic family,” DeCunto says. “We have fire in our soul, passion in our heart and a great pride for our Neapolitan culture. It must be Vesuvius boiling under our feet.”

DeCunto started painting at a very young age and always loved the great Italian masters. Now with silver hair and hands stained with paint, he tells me a story of his love for Italian art, family and cooking.

“I was 12 when I sold my first painting,” he says. He had painted a figure from Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* and sold it for \$35. “I thought I had made a million dollars. Everything started at that point. I could not make money any other way. I thought, ‘Wow. I will make a living painting.’ At that time, I was told to leave school almost every day because I was drawing all the time. Then one day my friend Jamie’s mom, Mrs. Clara John, who was a Neapolitan, said, ‘Giovanni, just keep doing this because you are not like the other kids.’ He listened to her and stayed in school.

DeCunto continued to paint, and after high school attended the Vesper George School of Art in Boston, then studied at the Art Institute of Boston, and eventually attended Boston University. During his time, he was selected to attend a special study abroad program. He was offered a fellowship to study at Oxford University in England or Padova, Italy. He chose Padova, known as Padua in English.

After studying in Padova, DeCunto returned to Boston where he started to paint notables. When I ask him to name a few, he puts down his tube of paint and says, “I will start with the Italians: Robert

De Niro, Gianni Versace, Pope John Paul II, Al Pacino, and Tony Bennett. I also painted John F. Kennedy, Jr. and Princess Grace of Monaco. Tom Cruise once called me to do a family portrait when he was married to Katie Holmes. Shaquille O’Neal commissioned me to do a portrait of him when he retired. I recently painted Donald Trump for Ernie Boch’s end of summer party,” he says.

DeCunto created a commemorative 9/11 painting and presented it to Rudolph Giuliani, who was the mayor of New York City in 2001 when the World Trade Center was attacked. Besides celebrity paintings and his 9/11 tribute, DeCunto is also known for celebrating the Boston Red Sox in his work.

Sitting with me now, DeCunto opens his photo album. The pages date to his art school days in Italy and he reminisces about Padova. His black eyes, the color of his espresso, stare at each page.

“I fell in love with Italy. We studied in small groups led by some of Italy’s greatest art historians. Then we traveled to Rome, Venice, Florence and Naples. We learned about civilization, art, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo was an engineer, writer, poet, architect, sculptor, and painter. Da Vinci was an inventor, sculptor, engineer, writer, painter and great cook. He even invented a few cooking tools like rotating spits, mechanical nutcrackers and a left-handed corkscrew, and was reputedly a vegetarian. Both men were the greatest artists of their time. I also liked Gian Lorenzo Bernini, writer, stage designer, architect, sculptor and painter, too. I admire all of them, but Bernini was different because he worked in marble and pieced it together.

“Studying in Italy did something to me,” DeCunto continues. “It helped me discover that I was a classical painter. Living in Padova also made me realize that I had to leave classical painting to find my own style; otherwise, I would have just been one of the many people that were a follower instead of a leader. That experience taught me how to be a leader. Up until that point, I was an oil painter in 17th-century style. But I broke it down and built it back up—it was like starting all over again. That’s when I started painting from the tube. It happened one day while I was mixing paint. I looked at my palette and thought about how I could do everything right on the canvas so people could see the whole experience,





Veneto Clams

- 2 pounds small clams
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 chili pepper
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- ¼ cup fresh parsley, finely chopped
- Sea salt and rose pepper, to taste

Rinse the clams well, up to three times, removing the sand and any broken ones. If sand still remains, let sit in a bowl of cold water until they release the sand. Then rinse well again.

In a large sauté pan, warm the olive oil and sauté the garlic and chili pepper until brown. Remove the garlic when brown. Add the clams and white wine, cover the pan and let cook for 4 to 5 minutes or until the clams have opened. Once they are cooked, remove from the pan, garnish with fresh chopped parsley, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve with toasted bread rubbed with fresh garlic, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

NATIVE SOIL





**Penne all'Arrabiata
(Angry Pasta)**

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 small onion, minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and drained
- ¼ teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 (20-oz.) can chopped tomatoes
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1 pound penne pasta

Heat the olive oil in a large pan and sauté the onion and garlic until it softens, but don't allow it to color. Add the pepper flakes, capers, oregano and tomatoes. Simmer uncovered about 8 minutes, and let the excess liquid evaporate. Season with salt, to taste. Reduce the heat and simmer 10 minutes more, crushing the tomatoes into the sauce. Check the seasoning and adjust as desired.

Meanwhile, cook the penne in abundant salted boiling water. When cooked al dente, remove from water and add to the pan with the sauce. Toss well together over high heat, then serve.

Makes 4 servings.

NATIVE SOIL

without hiding anything,” he says.

Giovanni now splits his time between Italy and Boston, where his studio is in the city’s North End.

“This neighborhood is the most Italian neighborhood in America. You can sip Italian espresso, eat cannoli or a plate of linguine and hear people talking Italian in the streets. It’s almost like you’re in Italy,” he says.

“But there’s no place like Italy. When I go to Italy, I visit Padova, I go to Naples, but I stay in Positano. I love to paint in Positano. The colors and light are unique and it’s inspirational to any artist. I teach painting workshops there which include morning classes during the week, three hours each, followed by discussions where we critique. When we are finished painting, we cook, drink wine, and have sfogliatella for dessert. I feel alive—cooking brings me back to my childhood with ragù napoletano, pasta arrabiata and polpette di carne, meatballs,” he says.

A favorite Italian dish is Pasta Arrabiata. “It literally translates to ‘angry pasta.’ It’s simple to make and even a little spicy. I love Neapolitan cuisine and the ingredients are exceptional: extra virgin olive oil, red chili peppers, garlic and pomodori Vesuviani, local tomatoes,” he says.

But he also enjoys the food of Padova: sauté of clams, ravioli di radicchio and capesante al forno, baked scallops. “But Neapolitan cuisine is something extraordinary. And Neapolitan desserts—they’re crazy good: babà al rum, sfogliatella Santa Rosa, ricotta e pere, a cheese and pear cake, and the delizia al limone,” he says.

“I love Italian food, music, art and culture. I adore Italian artwork. It was the culture of Italy that gave me my style,” he adds.

To learn more about DeCunto, see www.giovannidecunto.com. For a taste of some of the Italian dishes that inspire him, try the ones with this article.

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My Mamma's Neapolitan Meatballs

- 1 ground lean sirloin hamburger
- 1 pound ground veal
- ½ pound ground pork
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- ¼ cup finely chopped parsley
- ¼ cup basil, torn into small pieces
- ¾ cup bread crumbs, divided (¼ cup for the meat mixture and ½ cup for topping)
- ¾ cup grated Parmigiano cheese, divided (¼ cup for the meat mixture and ½ cup for topping)
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup dry red wine
- Sea salt, to taste
- Black pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Place the meat in a large mixing bowl. Add the garlic, parsley, basil, ¼ cup bread crumbs, and ¼ cup grated cheese. Mix well.

Roll the meat into balls, approximately 3 inches in diameter. Place them on a cookie sheet.

Mix the remaining bread crumbs with the remaining cheese and sprinkle well on each meatball.

Place the meatballs on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper and bake for 30 minutes until golden brown. Remove from heat, drain on paper towels, season to taste and serve warm.

Makes 8 servings.

Stuffed Eggplant Rolls

For the tomato sauce:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, minced
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 (32-oz.) can of tomatoes
- Sea salt and black pepper, to taste

For the eggplant:

- 3 medium eggplant
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
- 5 large eggs, lightly beaten
- Peanut or sunflower oil for frying (amount will vary depending on the size of your pan)

For the filling:

- 2 pounds ricotta cheese
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup shredded mozzarella
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grated Parmesan, plus extra for garnish
- Sea salt and black pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

For the tomato sauce: Heat the olive oil in a pan and sauté the onion and garlic until they color slightly. Add the tomatoes, season with salt and pepper and cook over a low heat for about 30 minutes. Pass through a vegetable mill to make the sauce smooth. Set aside.

For the eggplant: Peel eggplant then slice lengthwise (about 5 slices per eggplant). Cover with salt for about five minutes. Rinse three times to remove salt and bitter liquid from the eggplant and squeeze out extra water. Dip the eggplant in the flour then in the beaten egg, then again in the flour. Fry in hot oil, turning halfway so the eggplant slices cook evenly. Once golden, remove and transfer to a paper-towel-lined baking sheet to drain.

For the filling: Mix together the ricotta, eggs, mozzarella and Parmesan cheese. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To assemble: Place the eggplant slices on a paper towel. Spread the filling mixture on each one. Roll up and place in a baking pan, packing the eggplant rolls side by side. Lightly cover the rolled eggplant with tomato sauce. Sprinkle with the extra grated Parmesan and bake about 20 minutes until just golden on top.

Makes 4 servings.

Padova Pumpkin Fritters

- 1 pound of fresh pumpkin, skin and seeds removed
- 2 small eggs, beaten

- $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce fresh yeast, mixed in 2 tablespoons of warm (110°F) water
- Juice from 3 fresh oranges, preferably organic
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon nutmeg, freshly ground
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon sea salt
- Canola or peanut oil for frying
- Confectioner's sugar for garnish

Preheat the oven to 200°F.

Cut the pumpkin into cubes, place it on a baking sheet covered with parchment paper and bake about 20 minutes until soft. Remove from oven and squash with a potato masher.

Drain all the water from the mashed pumpkin by pressing it in a colander. Be sure that the pumpkin is as dry as possible. Place it in a bowl. Add the eggs, dissolved yeast, juice from the three fresh oranges, sugar, flour, nutmeg and sea salt. Mix until you have a smooth mixture. Put the dough in a warm place to rise for about 2 hours.

When the dough has risen, heat the canola or peanut oil in a large deep fry pan. Test fry a small drop: if the batter floats, the oil is ready. Fry the dough in small rounds, until they float to the top and are golden brown all over. Remove them from the oil and drain on paper towels.

Sprinkle with confectioner's sugar and serve piled high on a plate.

Makes about 36 fritters.

Saint Anthony's Almond Biscotti of Padova

- 2 egg whites
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cups blanched almonds
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup almonds with the skins
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup candied orange peel cubes cut into small pieces

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Whip the egg whites into stiff peaks. Chop both types of almonds finely and mix with the sugar. Fold into the egg whites along with the candied orange until all ingredients are mixed well.

Using a teaspoon, scoop out spoonfuls of the cookie dough and place on a greased cookie sheet. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes until golden brown. Remove and allow to cool.

Makes 2 dozen cookies.

Ravioli Stuffed with Ricotta and Radicchio

For the dough:

- $2\frac{1}{3}$ cups flour
- 3 large eggs

For the filling:

- 10 ounces red radicchio (about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup)
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and pepper, to taste
- $3\frac{1}{2}$ ounces ricotta
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grated Grana or Parmesan cheese
- 1 egg yolk

For the sauce:

- 3 ounces unsalted butter
- 2 ounces pine nuts
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grated Grana or Parmesan cheese
- Pepper, to taste

To Cook:

- 1 large pot boiling water
- 1 tablespoon of salt

Chopped parsley, for garnish

For the dough: Mix the eggs with the flour until you obtain a smooth, pliable dough. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and let it rest while you prepare the filling for ravioli.

For the filling: Wash and cut the radicchio into thin strips. In a skillet over medium heat, melt the butter with the oil and add the radicchio. Add salt and pepper to taste. Cover the pan and cook over a low heat for 20 minutes, keeping an eye on it so that it does not dry out. When the radicchio is cooked, remove from heat and let cool.

Put the radicchio into a food processor and pulse. Remove the radicchio, place in a mixing bowl, and add the ricotta, grated cheese and egg yolk, and mix well until creamy.

Roll out the pasta dough into a thin sheet. Cut into squares. Place a spoonful of the ricotta and radicchio filling in the center of half of the squares, then cover each with another square of pasta. Close each ravioli gently with your hands, then press the edges with the tines of a fork to seal well.

For the sauce: In a pan, melt the butter. Add the pine nuts and roast lightly. Remove from heat.

To cook: Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add 1 tablespoon of salt and return to boil. Add the ravioli and cook for 2 to 3 minutes or until they float to the top. Using a slotted spoon, carefully remove the ravioli from the boiling water and put into a pasta bowl. Toss with the melted butter and pine nuts, pepper and grated cheese. Garnish with chopped parsley. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

