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**THE AMALFI COAST** as seen from Conca dei Marini village.



# HEAVEN IN CONCA DEI MARINI

First created in a monastery along the Amalfi Coast, a delicate pastry lives on.

*by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*

**S**fogliatella, probably one of the hardest words in Italian to say, is the easiest word to fall in love with. Meaning many small, thin layers, it refers to a traditional dolce consisting of delicately layered pastry filled with a cooked cream. Baked to a golden brown and garnished with cooked pastry cream and one black cherry, sfogliatelle were first created in the Monastery Santa Rosa, in Conca dei Marini, by the holy hands of a nun in the 16th century. With a lot of time on their hands, the nuns prayed and baked all day, and were known to have created the best pastries and desserts in all of Italy.

It was the reverend mother, Clotilde, who headed the kitchen at that time, and who we can thank for this delicious flaky bite. One day, while busy baking, she was said to have added semolina to hot milk and made a cream that she didn't know what to do with. To heighten the flavor, she added dry citrus fruit and vanilla and then decided

to put it between sheets of pastry dough that were brushed with lard and white wine. It was a heavenly recipe made by mistake.

In keeping to her religious order, she pushed up the top of the pastry dough, giving it the shape of a cappuccino di monaco, the hood of a monk, before popping it into the oven to bake. Once baked to a golden brown, she held it close to her nose and thought how she could increase donations with such a sweet smelling pastry.

She wasted no time and proceeded to put a few of the pastries out in the little revolving wheel in the wall of the convent, hoping someone, anyone, would take one and leave a few coins. Within minutes, the pastries were gone and the sfogliatelle became an instant success. The reverend mother went on to bake more. The more she baked, the more coins were left—everyone liked the combination of crispy, buttery layers stuffed with cooked cream and topped with a black cherry. She dedicated the pastry to the convent

cen defense tower.

Gone are the nuns in the kitchen. Monastery Santa Rosa is now a hotel, resort & spa. Executive chef Christoph Bob, a German, is now at the helm of the kitchen at Ristorante Il Refettorio, the on-site restaurant. He has taken the original recipes from this holy kitchen's past and added his interpretation for a light and modern twist, and the sfogliatella is one of them.

As I follow his instruction on how to make the perfect sfogliatella, he shares his story on how he landed in Italy. "I not only fell in love when I came here, I fell in love with the food. Nowhere on earth does the sun and the soil give us such richness of flavors as do the fresh produce, herbs, and seafood found right here on our coast," he says.

After rolling and stuffing each pastry, they're put in the oven to bake. Chef Bob then invites me to visit the original herb garden that was once cultivated by nuns. Perfectly manicured, the garden includes herbs like

stuffed with king prawns, Corbara tomatoes and candied lemon; and fusilli pasta with calamaretti, baby squid and piennolo tomatoes smothered with eggplant and basil, to name a few.

When I ask him what his favorite food is, without giving it a second thought he says, "I'm happy with spaghetti with tomato sauce. After spending 16 to 18 hours in the kitchen, and having all there is to desire from lobster to beef and fish, I am happy to have spaghetti. I think spaghetti with tomato sauce is one of the most difficult recipes to make because you need the right spaghetti, the right tomatoes—not cooked too much and not cooked too little, and not too acidic. It's complex, not simple, and quite a challenge to make this recipe perfect," he says.

The Dominican sisters at Santa Rosa were a strong minded and devoted denomination, but they waned away in the mid-1800s, thought never to be replaced again, until the strong-minded and creative Bianca Sharma,

# The nuns prayed and baked all day, and were known to have created the best pastries in all of Italy.

and called it La Sfogliatella Santa Rosa.

Her recipe remained a secret and was confined within the monastery walls for 150 years. Then one day, the sfogliatella appeared in a sweet shop on Via Toledo in Naples. A man by the name of Pasquale Pintauro, who happened to be the nephew of one of the Santa Rosa nuns, had gotten hold of the recipe and began making them in a revised rendition, eliminating the dome top and black cherry. Soon sfogliatelle became popular around the world.

The story of sfogliatelle is so fascinating that I decided to hop in my Fiat 500 and drive to the Monastery of Santa Rosa to see just how they are made. It is a 40-minute drive along the Strada Statale 163 from Positano to Conca dei Marini through a vertical landscape where mountains surge from the sea and a horizontal road is carved into the cliffs overlooking the Tyrrhenian. The scenery is an explosion of colors—the sea tones change from emerald green to indigo blue, and blankets of green citrus orchards line terraces burgeoning with lemons the color of the sun.

You'll know you are close when you make the sharp curve after the Grotta dello Smeraldo, the green grotto. The majestic monastery appears several hundred feet above the road. Cut into a limestone cliff, it overlooks the Amalfi Coast, keeping watch like a Sara-

basil, mint, and rosemary, as well as vegetables such as eggplant, artichokes and tomatoes, and anything else in season.

"Our herb and vegetable garden is just two steps out of the kitchen and we grow the same herbs the nuns grew 300 years ago," says Chef Bob. He leans over and picks a couple of zucchini from the vine.

"We use these to make local pasta and zucchini with provolone cheese. Our cuisine is traditional with classics such as puttanesca, where I use fresh tuna, which is lighter. There is saltimbocca, which is veal, prosciutto and sage, rolled up and cooked in dry white wine. I braise the veal slowly, not boiling it, so it keeps the proteins. We keep traditions and revisit them in modern way, so there is less fat," he says.

We discuss how the nuns and monks throughout history were the ones creating the best food, medicine and liqueurs. "Dom Pérignon was the first to make Champagne in a monastery, like beer, wine and medicine, too, also born in a monastery. It's easy to work in such a place with rich history of food, products and ingredients," he tells me.

Chef Bob's love affair with Italian cuisine is displayed on every plate that comes out of the kitchen: his signature appetizer, a trio of crustaceans—lobster with chickpea puree and smoked olive oil broad bean salad; ravioli

an American, sailed by on a yacht one day and set eyes on the monastery. She eventually purchased the property and worked diligently for the next 10 years to renovate it. She converted the former nuns' domain into a luxury boutique hotel with 20 elegant suites, and turned their wine cantina into an elaborate spa. There is also Ristorante Il Refettorio, the hotel's award-winning restaurant.

Exotic greenery and landscaped gardens surround an infinity swimming pool that overlooks the sea, all in keeping with the original look and respecting the property's ancient architecture.

The day Ms. Sharma, my neighbor in Positano, officially opened, I called to congratulate her. I told her I had followed her story from the first time she sailed by and during the 10 years that followed. She invited me to lunch at Santa Rosa during opening week. That was four years ago. The hotel now is ranked one of the premier luxury properties in the world.

Today, I was lucky enough to return to the kitchen to make sfogliatelle with Chef Bob. The sfogliatella are being dusted with confectioner's sugar and everything is heavenly.

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**A REVEREND MOTHER** was blessed with inspiration for exquisite pastries that made her monastery famous.



# The Recipes



## La Sfogliatella di Santa Rosa – Neapolitan Cream-Filled Pastry

There are many variations of this recipe, which may take some practice to master. But if you're a fan of Italian pastry, this is a classic.

### For the dough:

- 8 cups of flour, divided
- 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cups water
- 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 7 tablespoons of lard, softened

### For the cream:

- 1/4 cups water
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 3/4 cup semolina flour
- 1 cup ricotta cheese, drained
- 2 large eggs
- 3/4 cup candied orange peel, diced
- Grated zest of 1 small lemon
- Grated zest of 1 small orange
- 1/8 teaspoon cinnamon

### For garnish:

- 1/4 cups confectioner's sugar
- 40 Amarena cherries in syrup

### For the dough:

Combine 7 cups of flour with the water, sugar and salt. Mix until well combined and you have a smooth, compact dough. If the dough is too stiff, add more water a little at a time. Form the dough into a ball and grease the ball with a little of the lard. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest half an hour.

After half an hour, flatten the dough slightly and pass through a pasta machine to obtain a very thin sheet of pastry. Dust a work surface with some flour, lay out the dough and grease the surface with a little more of the lard. Roll the dough up very tightly so you have a roll measuring 2 1/4 inches in diameter by 10 inches long. Grease the surface of the whole log with a little more lard and wrap in plastic wrap. Place in the refrigerator for at least 4 hours.

### For the cooked cream

Place the water in a pan and add the salt. Add the semolina flour and cook over medium heat about 5 minutes. Drain well and cool. Once

the semolina is cool, place it in the bowl of a food processor. Add the drained ricotta, eggs, diced candied peel, cinnamon, grated lemon and orange zests. Mix well until you obtain a firm mixture. Reserve 1 cup of the cream filling to use as garnish.

### Assembly

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Remove the dough from the refrigerator and, using a sharp knife, cut it into 1/4 to 1/2-inch thick slices. Grease the surface of each slice with lard and, using your hands, work the dough into a bell shape. Fill the inside of the pastry shell with the stuffing right up to the edge which will not be closed. Repeat this process until you have used all of the dough and filling.

Place the sfogliatelle on a cookie sheet lined with parchment and bake for 20 minutes. Once cooked, allow to cool until tepid. Dust with confectioner's sugar and garnish with a little of the reserved pastry cream and one Amarena cherry on top of each one.

Makes 40 small pastries.

—Recipe courtesy of Chef Christoph Bob, Monastery Santa Rosa

## Lamb with Garden Vegetables

This recipe calls for a whole saddle of lamb, which is also known as a double rack, that you'll cut yourself. You may also have your butcher do the cutting at the time of purchase, if you prefer.

### For the cream of peas:

- 1/2 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 pound fresh peas, shelled
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 4 ounces pancetta, finely chopped
- 4 ounces onion, minced

### For the lamb and vegetables:

- 1 whole saddle of lamb, about 6 pounds including the bones
- 3/4 cup green onions, chopped
- 3/4 cup green beans, chopped
- 3/4 cup snow peas, chopped
- 1/2 cup peas
- 1/2 cup fava beans
- 3/4 cup asparagus, chopped
- 1 cup artichoke hearts, chopped
- Extra virgin olive oil, for sautéing
- Sea salt and black pepper, to taste

### For the cream of peas:

Heat a large pot of water over medium-high heat. Add the salt and the fresh peas. Bring the water to boil and cook the peas until tender, 2 or 3 minutes, then drain.

In a pan, heat the olive oil and sauté the onion with the pancetta over a medium heat until the onion is cooked but not golden. Place the peas and the onion mixture in a food processor and whiz until you obtain a cream. Pass the cream through a sieve to ensure it is completely smooth. Check the seasoning and

add salt and pepper, if desired. Keep warm.

### For the lamb and vegetables:

Take the saddle of lamb and separate the loins from the ribs, and cut the ribs into cutlets. Set aside.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Blanch the onions, green beans, snow peas, peas, fava beans, asparagus and artichokes in boiling water. Dry them off and sauté them in a pan with olive oil until tender. Season with salt and pepper to taste, if desired.

Meanwhile, flash grill the lamb cutlets and loins on both sides on a broiler, then bake for 8 minutes, or until lamb is pink. Season with salt and pepper, as desired.

Serve the lamb with the warm cream of peas and the vegetables artistically arranged on the plate.

Makes 4 servings.

—Recipe adapted from Chef Christoph Bob, Monastery Santa Rosa

## Pasta with Shrimp, Tomatoes and Sparkling Wine

- 1/2 pound pasta, such as vermicelli
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 Roma tomatoes, diced
- 2 tablespoons toasted pine nuts
- 1 cup dry sparkling wine, divided
- 1/3 cup capers, rinsed and drained
- 1/4 teaspoon sea salt
- 16 jumbo shrimp
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/4 cup Italian parsley, chopped

Cook the pasta according to package directions. Heat a large skillet on medium. Add butter and garlic, and cook for 1 minute. Add the tomatoes, pine nuts and 1/4 cup sparkling wine. Cook for 2 minutes. Add capers, salt, shrimp and lemon juice. Cook another 3 minutes. Add the remaining sparkling wine and bring to a boil. When pasta is al dente, drain it and add to the skillet. Toss well, remove from heat, and add freshly ground pepper and Italian parsley. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.





**EXECUTIVE CHEF CHRISTOPH BOB**  
makes a Sfogliatella di Santa Rosa -  
Neapolitan Cream-Filled Pastry