

Special Issue: The Home Cook's Backyard Guide

THE ITALIAN GRILL

Tastes *of* Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

AUGUST 2017

**SUMMER
TRAVEL**

*The Road
to Capri*



**Grilled Shrimp
with Lemon
Parsley Butter**

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Summer's Bounty

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SUMMER BOUNTY

TUCKED INTO AN IDYLIC LITTLE
TOWN IN THE PROVINCE OF
NAPLES, AN AVID GARDENER
REAPS THE BOUNTY OF THE
EARTH'S SUMMER YIELD.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

H

igh above the Amalfi Coast is a quiet town named Agerola. The road ascends along a curvy climb with hairpin turns that cut into the Latteri Mountains. When you arrive at Agerola, you'll discover a slice of heaven—the air is clean, the hills are verdant and the food is *fine del mondo*.

Even though Agerola has more pizzerie per square meter than any other place in Europe—including Naples—and delicious trattorie serving up local fare (biscottata, fresh pasta, hand-made salumi, sausage, mozzarella made from the milk of cows that graze on grass on the nearby farms), my favorite place is la casa della Signora Maria.

When I visit my friend and home chef, Maria, I always bring her a sack of our sfusato lemons picked from my garden by the sea in Positano, and she, in turn, always sends me home with a round of her homemade caciotta cheese.

It's mid-July and quite warm as I drive up the mountain, but there's a breeze up here. I cut the last sharp turn in the road which leads me to Maria's property. Even though lunch won't be served until 2 p.m., I've arrived early so I can help her in the garden.





Tomato salad with mozzarella, olive oil and balsamic vinegar.



“Ciao benevenuti,” Maria waves, welcoming me warmly.

“Ciao, buongiorno, Maria,” I respond. “Grazie.” It’s a beautiful day. A bright yellow sun shines through the bougainvillea casting a magenta hue in the garden. I follow the path lined with neatly groomed bushes of aromatic lavender swirling and rows of sunflowers with their bright heads raised to the sun.

In this garden, there are very straight rows of everything: lettuce, eggplant, zucchini, pumpkin, carrot and pepper plants. Tomato plants tied tightly to a wooden trellis run along the edge of the property. Basil, parsley, mint, chili pepper and sage fill giant terracotta vases near her kitchen window, while English rose bushes dotted with pink petals frame her terrace.

Maria picks up a basket filled with squash flowers, then wipes her hand on the front of her violet apron. Her blond locks are held back in a white linen kerchief. “I hope you are hungry and not on a diet today,” she calls out.

“We’ll start with antipasto and make stuffed little eggplant. Fresh pasta with tomato and eggplant—our primo—will follow. Meat! Yes, in Agerola we eat a lot of meat. We’ll grill lamb chops with mint and roast baby potatoes with rosemary. We’ll make bracirole stuffed with cheese, parsley and herbs, too. For dolce, we’ll make pizza di crema della Nonna, not a pizza at all, but a cherry tart.

All Agerolesi love this cherry tart!” she says.

Though her favorite pasta is Pasta alla Siciliana con Malanzane (pasta with eggplant), she notes that the best summertime lunch is linguine with a fresh cherry tomato sauce, made in the moment, then garnished with basil. “But then again, I love all pasta!” she exclaims.

We spend the next hour pulling weeds and picking vegetables in the garden. Maria tells me about the oval shaped lemon, the Chinese eggplant and Vesuvio tomato, none of them indigenous to Italy; ‘adopted transplants,’ she calls them.

She holds up one of the lemons I’ve brought her as an example. “The lemon was brought to Italy by the Arabs who were great merchants that first came to Amalfi trading and selling their goods. They carried exotic spices here, like vanilla, cinnamon and nutmeg. They also introduced the agrodolce style of cooking, agro (sour) and dolce (sweet). They saw that our volcanic soil offered the perfect growing conditions and climate for the lemon, so they started planting.” During the 18th century, the British navy began requiring sailors to consume citrus fruit to prevent scurvy. “Soon, every Italian picked up his hoe and started terracing and planting lemon trees. There was literally an economic boom, thanks to the lemon,” she says.

As for the eggplant, it arrived in Italy thanks to the



Fresh eggplant
awaits transformation
into a recipe.

“Of all the things in her garden to cook, squash and pumpkin flowers are perhaps her favorite.”





Chinese. “In fact, today, we continue to call them ‘Chinese eggplant,’” she says. The tomato arrived in Italy with Christopher Columbus and dates back to 1493. “Prior to this there were no tomatoes in any recipe,” Maria says. “During the Renaissance, tomatoes were used only as table decoration, since people thought they were poisonous,” she adds.

Of all the things in her garden to cook, squash and pumpkin flowers are perhaps her favorite. She’s versed in their stories, too.

“Did you know there are female squash flowers and male ones too? The female blossoms mature into a squash. The male ones fertilize the flower,” she says.

Squash flowers are a popular Italian summer delicacy. Enjoyed in a variety of ways, Maria makes hers stuffed with mozzarella, fresh ricotta and a piece of boiled ham.

We head to the kitchen where the food in her pantry has been made on her property. Italians use what they have in their gardens and eat what is in season.

“We grow our garden, even in winter,” she says. “Throughout the summer we grill vegetables and put them up in glass jars filled with vinegar or olive oil so we can have pumpkin, cauliflower and squash all winter long. Pasta is made fresh in my kitchen daily, and I bake bread a couple of times a week in the wood-burning brick oven,” she says.

Imagine almost never going to a market and living among organic homemade everything. As we start to slice the eggplant for the antipasto, I remember how my nonna would thinly slice what seemed like millions of eggplant to the point that her hands turned purple. Then she’d hang them on long clean clothes lines kept in her cellar. She’d cover them with wax paper until they dried. She did the same with zucchini.

I follow Maria around, learning new tricks along the way. No matter how many times you’ve seen your nonna or mamma make something in their kitchen, there’s always something new to learn when you watch someone else.

At last we finish prepping our lunch. Maria pops the cherry pie in the oven.

She tells me that she loves her simple life and is fortunate to live in Agerola. As a young girl, she had moved to Brescia, near Milan, where her husband, Umberto, worked as a farmer growing flowers and where they had their two sons, Tobia and Alessandro. She returned to her homeland after 14 years.

“Why did you return?” I ask.

“I missed the sun and culture of southern Italy. I missed my kitchen and my garden. I was born with a gift to live in this beautiful place, Agerola. I realized what I had only when I went away. So, I returned,” she says.

Today, Maria hosts cooking tours with me in her villa overlooking the rooftops of Agerola, sharing a wealth of culinary knowledge with those lucky enough to visit.

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