

Special Issue: Enjoying the Italian Christmas

THE HOLIDAY ISSUE

Tastes of Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

DECEMBER 2017

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Panettone - traditional Italian Christmas cake.



TASTES *of* LOMBARDY

THE TRADITIONS OF CHRISTMAS
UNFOLD IN THE WARMTH OF AN
ANCIENT KITCHEN IN LAKE GARDA.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

I'm Anna, named after Saint Ann, and I was born in Brescia," says Signora Anna, our hostess for this cooking adventure in Lake Garda, part of the northwestern region of Lombardy. Brescia, located near the foot of the Alps, isn't far from Lake Garda.

"I have lived in this villa my entire life," Anna continues. "My family has owned the property since 1657. Nothing is new here. Everything is very old, from the marble-columned patio, to the arcade, and the original frescos built in the 1600s. It's quite exciting when we welcome guests from young countries like America, because everything is so ancient in this house. There's a deep sense of history," she says.

Signora Anna is blonde, poignant and a master cook. She speaks with smiling brown eyes. As she swivels to open the oven and removes a golden-baked panettone, *Tu Scendi dalle Stelle*, an Italian Christmas song, plays in the background and the scent of warm butter and orange scent the air. She props the domed beauty on the countertop, then swivels back to sip her espresso and share more of her story.

"My husband and I love to welcome guests to our kitchen and share our old-world traditions of Lombardia, like this airy panettone. We don't want to forget where we come from, nor what our ancestors gave to us," she says.

"When the panettone is cooled, we'll turn it into panettone ripieno. Wait until you see it. But now, try my torrone. I made it this morning. It's a typical dessert of Lombardy," she says. Her torrone is made with lots of egg whites and sugar, and is creamy to the bite. It's copiously filled with teardrop-shaped Sicilian almonds and organic honey.

"I keep the traditions of my ancestors alive, not only with our splendid dolci di Natale (Christmas desserts), but also with lunch and dinner, on Christmas day. Each recipe is a treasure that's been passed down in my family since the 1600s. We begin our lunch at 1 p.m. sharp—just after Mass and the Pope's blessing on the television in all languages. My table is set with festive red and white candles. Lunch is always served in the main dining room with the fireplace crackling. In the evening, we sing Italian holiday songs by the Nativity scene and Christmas tree," she says.

"In our family, the Christmas season starts December 12, because our son, Alessandro, was





Sunset over Lake Garda
in Italy's Lombardy region.

born on this day. On December 13, we celebrate the feast day of Santa Lucia. For her feast day, the good little children receive gifts. Christmas presents were never a tradition in our family, because in Lombardy gifts aren't exchanged. Even though we never exchanged gifts in the past, today we do because my husband, Jacques, is French and he celebrates Papa Noël."

Anna tells me about her Christmas menu. It starts with Risotto with Pears, Gorgonzola Cheese and Walnuts because her mother is from Mantova and that's her tradition, she says.

The main course follows with Spicy Beef with Polenta Taragna: tender beef cooked in a terracotta pan for five hours and seasoned with cloves, pepper, coarse salt from Brittany, garlic, onions, and bay leaves. Anna serves it with creamy polenta taranga, because it's an old traditional recipe that was her great-grandmother Doralice's from 1895, Anna says. She makes her homemade bread daily and serves it with artisan cheeses. Panettone ripieno—the buttery sweet bread filled with Mascarpone cheese, pieces of dark chocolate and cherry liqueur—is the grand finale dessert because it was her Grandma Alda's recipe, she says. Each course is paired with her dear friend Patrizia Cadore's wine: Lugana, Cabernet and sparkling Chardonnay wine, "because it's simply the best."

"It's always a beautiful Christmas because we have a touch of France in our home, thanks to my husband, Jacques. We met in Morocco while on holiday in 1989. It was love at first sight. He was an officer in the army. During that year we saw each other 55 days. Then he left for the Gulf War in 1990. When he returned, we were married in that same year. I've written a little book about my love story and all of the love stories that have transpired in this villa over the years. The last story is about my husband," she says.

"Turning our villa into a bed and breakfast was a natural because we always had lots of American friends who came to stay with us. They encouraged us to take on the project. It made sense because we're close to all major art cities, such as Verona, Cremona, Mantua, Bergamo, and Brescia, and Lake Garda is just a few minutes away. This year marks 20 years since we first opened our doors."

As I leaf through Signora Anna's recipes, I quickly see that her cooking style is truly Northern Italian. "I cook and follow everything that my mother, father, grandmother and great-grandmother did. My great-grandmother was born in 1873. She passed in 1973. She was 100 years old. I was 10 years old at the time, and we had cooked together every day. I still have her recipe book and each recipe is hand-written in calligraphy. I'm very grateful that I have her recipes. She always used local ingredients that





**The historic city of
Mantua** in Lombardy.

were in season and I follow her philosophy," Anna says.

I ask Anna if she has a favorite food.

"I love cooking pork, beef, potato cakes, and, of course, biscotti bresciano, which are the most typical type of biscuit from this area. They're made with farm-made butter, sugar, and eggs," she says.

During my stay in Lake Garda, I learn that this particular butter cookie is heir to the rustic simplicity of times past in Lombardy.

Anna shares with me her insight into northern Italian cuisine versus southern cuisine. "Italians use what's in their gardens, farms and pantries; the cooking is simple. The most amazing thing is that you can easily reproduce all of these recipes in your home kitchen. In northern Italy, unlike southern Italy, we use butter and extra virgin olive oil together. I love making linguine bigoli, a typical pasta of this area. I make it with melted butter and sage from my garden. But my favorite is any type of pasta, especially homemade tagliatelle prepared with seafood and homemade tomato sauce. I love this pasta and cook it every year for our wedding anniversary," she says.

"Before this life, I was an interpreter. Now I am a host and cook," she says. "The last 20 years have been the most rewarding because it (being a host and cook) suits my personality. We share every single day of our life with foreigners. I bring my guests to the local market and show them how to select the in-season fruits, vegetables and local products such as Garda DOP olive oil made with freshly pressed Casaliva olives; oranges and lemons from the shores of Lake Garda; tiny plums from Dro in summer and chestnuts from Drena in the fall. We pick up ingredients for our cooking classes, while learning about the Italian way of life," she says.

"I take guests to Mantua with its grand palazzos, we sail on Lake Garda and stroll along the pretty lakeside streets of Sirmione. And, of course, we visit Patrizia Cadore's vineyard. Our guests arrive as strangers and by the time they leave, they're like family. I love doing this, especially at Christmas time."

Join Chef Anna on Lake Garda by visiting cooking-vacations.com/tour/cooking-classes-lombardy-lakes. In the meantime, try some of her recipes.

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Spicy Beef with Polenta Taragna

White vinegar gives this dish a fresh and unique twist. Also, this recipe is best when prepared in a terracotta pot. Terracotta is perfect for slow cooking over low heat. When purchasing terracotta cookware, be sure to read the label carefully and always prepare and clean it according to the manufacturer's directions.

- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup white vinegar
- 4 cloves of garlic
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- Salt to taste
- 2 pounds beef shoulder

In a terracotta add the olive oil and vinegar. Add the cloves of garlic, bay leaves and the chopped onion, then salt and pepper to taste.

Place the beef in the pot and cover, then let it cook for 4 hours on a very low heat.

When the meat is finished cooking, cut into thin slices. Serve with a simple polenta, if desired.

Note: Excellent with Garda Cabernet Sauvignon from Patrizia Cadore Winery of Lake Garda.

Makes 4 servings.

Panettone Ripieno (Filled Panettone)

- 1 artisanal panettone
- 3 large eggs
- 2 cups of Mascarpone cheese
- 1 cup of sugar
- 1 scant cup of dark chocolate chips
- ½ cup Bailey's Irish Cream liqueur

For the Cream:

Separate the eggs. Whip the yolks with the sugar until thick and frothy. Then add the mascarpone and mix until combined.

Whip the egg whites until stiff and peaks form. Fold the egg whites into the yolk-mascarpone mixture and add the chocolate. Let it rest in the refrigerator.

Cut the panettone around the dome. Carefully scoop out the interior, then combine it with the mascarpone cream.

Brush the sides and bottom of the panettone with the liqueur.

Stuff the panettone with the cream mixture. Take the rest of the liqueur and brush it inside the top of the panettone, which has been cut off, and re-attach the lid back on.

Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 days.

Makes 8 servings.

Note: Excellent with a Lugana Reserve from Lake Garda's Patrizia Cadore Winery.

Risotto with Pears, Gorgonzola Cheese and Walnuts

- 1 cup Gorgonzola cheese
- ½ cup mascarpone cheese
- 3½ tablespoons of butter
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ⅛ teaspoon sea salt, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon of Anna's mix of spices: equal parts of minced garlic, rosemary, and chile pepper
- ½ shallot, chopped
- 2 cups risotto rice, such as Vialone Nano or Carnaroli
- ½ cup sparkling white wine
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1 medium pear, chopped
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese, grated
- 1 teaspoon of butter
- 10 walnuts, crushed
- Chopped parsley, for garnish

In a pan, over a low heat, add the Gorgonzola and mascarpone cheeses. Stir well until blended and creamy.

Take another pot and melt the butter slowly, then add the extra virgin olive oil, a pinch of salt, Anna's blend of spices and the chopped shallot. Add the rice and toast it for a moment until it starts to crackle. (Anna's kitchen trick: touch the top of the rice with your hand; when the rice grains are hot, it's ready.)

Next, add the white wine and keep over a low flame, stirring slowly until it evaporates. At this point, you can start to add the broth, stirring continuously and adding broth as it absorbs over low heat. After 8 to 10 minutes, add the melted Gorgonzola and mascarpone. Season with salt to taste. Cook for another 2 minutes, stirring constantly.

Add the chopped pear and cook for another 4 to 5 minutes. Allow to rest for 2 minutes, then add the Parmesan cheese and 1 teaspoon of butter. Garnish with crushed walnuts and fresh finely chopped parsley.

Note: Excellent with a San Martino della Battaglia white wine from the Cadore Winery by Lake Garda

Makes 4 servings.



Risotto with Pears,
Gorgonzola Cheese
and Walnuts