

INSIDE AN ITALIAN CORK FACTORY

# Tastes *of* Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

APRIL 2018

## The Pasta Issue



**TASTES OF  
SORRENTO**

**23**

**FAMILY FAVORITE  
PASTA RECIPES**

# DARIO CECCHINI

## **THE SINGING BUTCHER OF PANZANO**

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In the rolling green hills of Tuscany, halfway between Florence and Siena, is a small sleepy town called Panzano. After much planning, and not eating for a week, my husband, Rino, and I are about to meet Signor Cecchini at his world-famous butcher shop, Antica Macelleria Cecchini.

**By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli**





**Dario Cecchini**  
at his shop.



**T**he sign outside reads: *orario al pubblico, lunedì a domenica 9 alle 16* — open to the public Monday to Sunday, 9am to 4pm. Closed only on Christmas. Located on via XX Luglio, across the street there's a statue of a blue cow painted with large yellow sunflowers, blue margheritas and violet honeysuckle.

A welcoming door is left open and, upon entering, the song *Volare* by Domenico Modugno plays on. A small crowd has already gathered inside. There's a party atmosphere: everyone is sipping Chianti wine and it's only 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning. A group of Americans, a couple who came all the way from Australia, and 15 Italian men who make the pilgrimage every year are conversing and making new friends.

Along the back wall is a long banquet table draped with a red and white tablecloth. The table is set with large oval platters holding toasted Tuscan bread, whipped lard, black olives with fresh orange zest and slices of salumi. Several Chianti wine bottles in straw jackets are left for guests to pour freely, while a young Italian named Elena circles the room passing out more wine.

"Buongiorno! Scusa," I say to the man behind the meat counter whose head is bent downward. Even though he works center stage on a raised wooden platform behind the meat counter, the only thing I see is the top of his big white straw hat.

He stops cutting the meat, lifts his head and greets me with smiling blue eyes. His Italian charm is conveyed in an instant.

He holds up a pork roast and announces, "It's stuffed with herbs and spices. Bellissima!"

This celebrity butcher not only has the best meat on the planet, he is a showman. He wears a red bandana tied around his neck, matching red pants and a white apron with the words "Antica Macelleria Cecchini" in red, too. He often recites verses of Dante and also hits a few high notes of *La traviata*.

A natural storyteller, he says to me, "I started 43 years ago — solo — in this little paese, Panzano in Chianti, in the heart of Toscana. It's the center of my world. I was born at home just 10 meters from the butcher shop. I'm the first-born son in my family, the Cecchini family: eight generations of butchers."

Dario set off for the University of Pisa at an early age to study veterinary science, but he returned home when his father became too ill to take over the butcher shop. The rest is history. He has taken this country butcher

shop and made it famous all over the world.

"The idea is to have guests start in the butcher shop — a simple little shop — then go to the restaurant, where we cook the meat. We use all of the parts from the nose to the tail. Everything is good, if you know how to cook. The filet isn't the only best part — even the feet and tripe are good. As long as there is a good butcher and a good cook, everything is good!" he says.

He tells me about Chianina, the local breed of cow, and his philosophy on raising them. "Our little farm raises Chianina; our beautiful cattle are noble and antique. They live well here on my farm, and have a good long life for many years. We accompany them on the road of life and we all grow old together," he says.

After our tour of the butcher shop, we pile in his jeep for a giro of Panzano. First stop is the Cecchini team of artisans who prepare the salts and herbs that are used on the meat.

"The perfume of Chianti is the essence of our land. It's a sea salt and herb mixture, an old recipe from the contadini, farmers. The farmers crushed the salt and mixed it with wild and aromatic herbs — herbs didn't cost much, while salt cost too much! In Toscana salt was so expensive and taxed so excessively that it was once boycotted. Today, our bread is still made without salt to respect the men of times past. These wise farmers used their intelligence to increase the quantity of salt by adding the herbs, and we carry on this tradition today," he says.

He speaks in a sing-song voice, not pronouncing his Cs, in the language of Dante. He hands me an oversized envelope. "Take this, it's the *profumo del Chianti* — perfume of Chianti. Try it next time you grill a Fiorentina! It's something I give to special friends."

The writing on the back of the spice bag reads *per ricordarvi di noi se sarete lontani*, so you will remember us when you are far. Even unopened, I can smell the aroma of this salt and herb mixture. Its scent is heavenly.

Next we visit the slaughterhouse where cutting meat is an expertise. A team of 15, maybe 20 men, lift, hang, cut, then put away sides of Chianina beef in deep walk-in fridges. It's a sterling clean organization running like a Swiss clock.

After the tour, we pile back in the jeep and return to the butcher shop and restaurant where lunch is about to be served. Guests can opt from his three restaurants: Solociccia, Officina della Bistecca and Dario Doc.

Solociccia is the butcher's kitchen and lunch is served at 1 p.m., dinner at 7 p.m.

or 9 p.m. It offers the butcher's menu, which consists of six meat courses, seasonal vegetables, beans with extra virgin olive oil, Tuscan bread, wine, olive oil cake and grappa.

The Officina della Bistecca, where we dine, is an event and it's recommended for guests with appetites. "The Officina's grill is always lit, to enjoy good food, good wine, friendship and lots of beautiful steaks. The prix-fixe menu includes roast beef, bistecca Panzanese, bistecca Fiorentina, Tuscan beans, baked potatoes, burro del Chianti (his recipe for whipped butter with herbs), spring or fizzy water, olive oil cake, grappa Cecchini and cordiale dell'Esercito Italiano.

"At the Officina and at Solociccia we serve everything family-style, and each guest is invited to eat as much or as little as they wish from our prix fixe menu. Like at the theater, you pay for the seat. We have convivial tables where guests meet new people and celebrate life together. Lastly, Dario Doc is a concept lunch spot and features butcher shop meats cooked on the grill. "My family has carried on the tradition of la bottega Antica Macelleria Cecchini. Today, I follow the traditions of my parents and grandparents. My philosophy is to respect and be responsible for these animals. We give them a good life, good food, and guarantee they have a free-range space. We thank them for the good meat they give to us," Dario says.

"Hospitality is sacred. Everyone who visits is welcome and we give them a little something to eat and a good glass of Chianti wine in the butcher shop because, before they are clients, they're guests. This is our tradition," he says.

"Saluti," he adds, and throws me a kiss.

See [darioceccchini.com](http://darioceccchini.com) for Essence of Chianti and other products that will help you bring the flavors of this beautiful land to your table.

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## Olive Oil Cake

- ½ cup white raisins
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons sweet white wine
- ¼ cup pine nuts
- Nonstick cooking spray or a small amount of butter and flour for the baking pan
- 2 medium oranges, organic and unwaxed
- 2 large eggs, organic
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup sugar, organic
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil
- $1\frac{3}{4}$  pastry flour or unbleached all-purpose flour
- 2 rosemary sprigs
- $\frac{1}{4}$  confectioners' sugar for dusting

Preheat oven to 325°F.

In a small sauce pan, place raisins and sweet white wine, and simmer over a medium heat. Remove from heat and let sit for at least 30 minutes or more.

Spread the pine nuts on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and toast for 8 to 10 minutes or until golden brown. Shake the nuts around making sure they toast evenly. Once done, remove and let cool.

Increase the oven temperature to 400°F.

Meanwhile, spray a 10-inch round cake pan with nonstick cooking spray or pat with softened butter evenly, and dust lightly with flour.

Cut the oranges in half, next cut into  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick slices, then chop the slices into  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick cubes keeping the size uniform. Set aside.

Place the eggs, baking soda, baking powder and sugar in a bowl and mix well at a fast speed. Slowly add the olive oil. Reduce the mixing speed and slowly add the flour and the raisin mixture.

Gently fold in the chopped oranges. Let the batter rest for 10 minutes. Pour the batter into the baking pan and sprinkle with the toasted pine nuts. Also sprinkle with a little sugar and rosemary needles. (Chop the rosemary needles finely if desired.)

Bake for 10 minutes, then rotate the pan and set the temp at 325°F and bake for another 35 minutes, or until the cake is golden brown. Remove and let cool.

Makes 10 servings.

- Recipe adapted from Dario Cecchini

## Grilled Bone-In Ribeye

- 2 bone-in ribeye steaks, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pounds
- 4 teaspoons Essence of Chianti, divided, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, of Tuscan origin, if possible

Prepare a grill. Remove the steaks from the refrigerator and bring to room temperature. Do not salt. Cook over red hot coals, about 5 to 8 minutes per side. Let stand 15 minutes before serving.

At the table, sprinkle with Essence of Chianti herbs and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve with a bold Chianti wine.

Makes 2 servings.

-Recipe adapted from Dario Cecchini

