DARIO CECCHINI

THE SINGING BUTCHER OF PANZANO

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.
The 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 head and greets me with smiling blue eyes. His Italian charm is conveyed in an instant.

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 dariocecchini.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

\[\frac{1}{2} \text{ cup white raisins} \]
\[\frac{1}{4} \text{ cup plus 2 tablespoons sweet white wine} \]
\[\frac{1}{4} \text{ cup pine nuts} \]

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
Preheat oven to 325°F.

In a small saucepan, 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