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BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SPRING 2019

SPRING TREATS!

DESSERTS BY THE SPOONFUL



**Lemon Cream Tarts
with Blueberries**
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PIZZA PARTY

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Chef Antonello Sardi puts the final touches on a dish at La Bottega del Buon Caffé in Florence.

RISING STAR

Earning his first
Michelin star,
Chef Antonello Sardi
makes La Bottega
del Buon Caffè
in Florence his home
away from home.

**Text and Photography by
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli**

HOME GROWN

I swing open the French doors of my hotel room and am greeted with a royal view over Florence's rooftops. The color of cinnamon terracotta stretches as far as my eyes can see. You can almost reach out and touch the Duomo, the cathedral designed by Brunelleschi. Below in the *piazza*, local Florentines are bustling—buying their daily bread, sipping early morning *caffè* and exchanging *boungiornos*.

After a steamy breakfast *caffè*, my leisurely walk begins across the Ponte Vecchio, along the Oltrarno to Santo Spirito di Firenze, and up to Piazzale Michelangelo. In the afternoon, I'll enjoy lunch at La Bottega del Buon Caffè. Executive Chef Antonello Sardi heads up the kitchen and he's recently been awarded a Michelin star. Today, he's invited me to experience his tasting menu.

The morning air is warm and the scent of Florentine white irises is everywhere. Unhurriedly, I soak up all of Florence's beauty. At *mezzogiorno* the church bells ring reminding me of the time and I quickly head over to Lungarno Benvenuto Cellini, 69/r at the Buon Caffè.

A well-dressed receptionist wearing a smart navy dress welcomes guests and shows them to their table. An elegant dining room set under vaulted red brick walls is decorated with muted tones of beige and pewter. Black-haired male waiters speaking Florentine dialect pepper the room and wait on your every request. The open kitchen gives guests the occasion to watch Chef Sardi orchestrate masterful food preparation up close.

Chef Sardi sees me with my camera and notepad in hand and quickly comes over. "*Boungiorno. Benvenuti. You must be Lauren.*"

We quickly exchange greetings and he brings me to the kitchen.

"Congratulations on your Michelin star, Chef," I say.

"I had no idea I was going to be awarded a star," replies the young chef.

Tall, dark and tan, he is confident at his craft. He talks while he works with pincer in hand placing yellow tortellini in a straight line on a plate.

"I was invited to the press conference for the Michelin Guide in Milan, and even though it was an important event, I didn't give it much thought. I simply enjoyed the experience. Then, they called me up and I was awarded a Michelin star. Wow! It was a very exciting moment and an important achievement. I wasn't expecting it. Although everyone in our kitchen worked hard, it was a surprise," he explains.

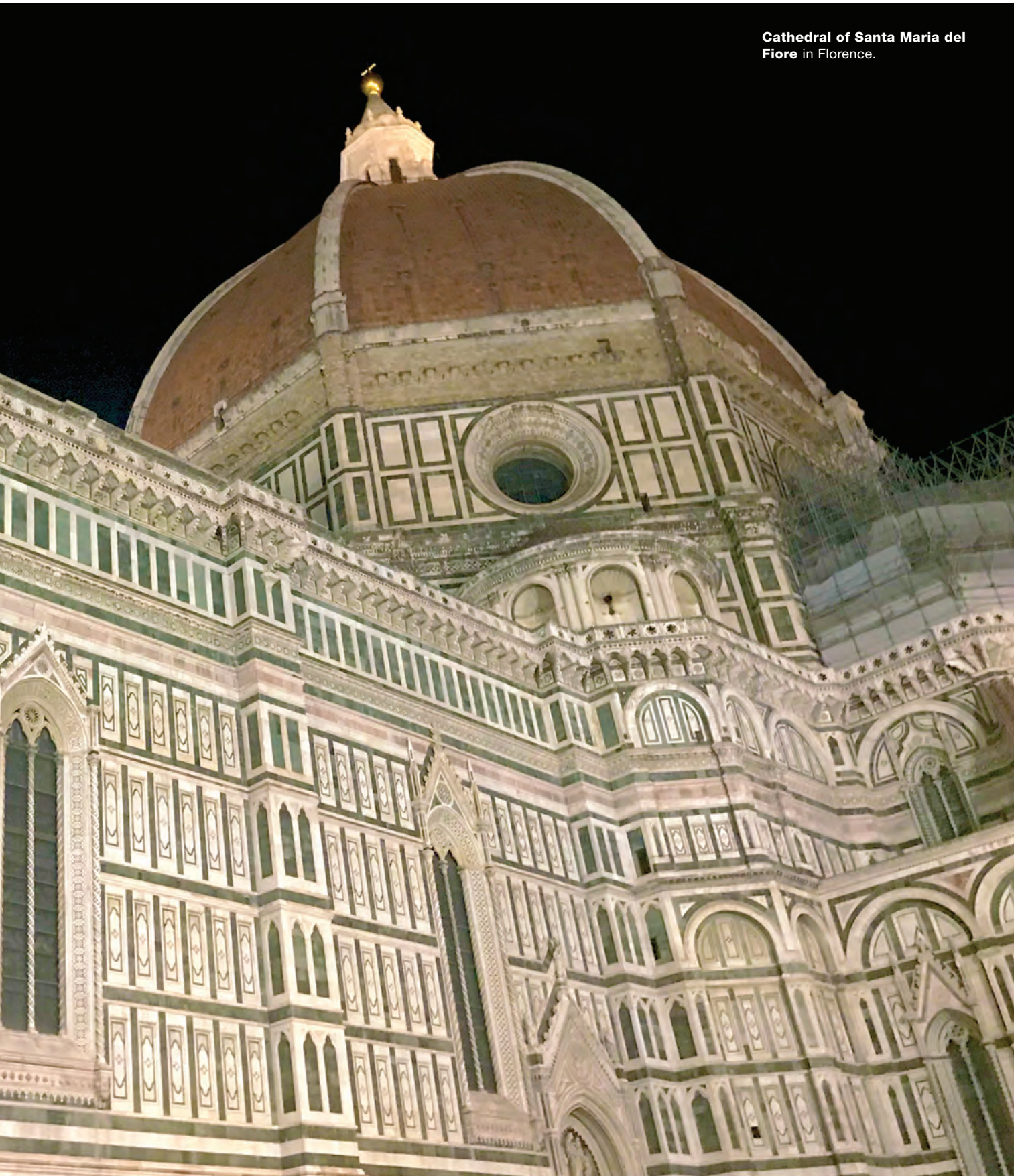
Since winning the star, his skillful hands are attracting international attention. Food art best describe his cuisine. Not only are all of the products organically grown at the property's *borgo* near Siena, but his presentation of farm fresh ingredients—from serving it on black stones (as plates) to oversized ceramic platters and Tuscan pewter—elevate his food styling to a natural high.

Antonello Sardi calls La Bottega del Buon Caffè his "home away from home."

He works very long hours every day, shopping from the best purveyors, then prepping his nouvelle-Tuscan cuisine while giving equal attention to meat and fish.



**Cathedral of Santa Maria del
Fiore** in Florence.



HOME GROWN

A pre-antipasto, compliments of the chef, consists of a warm creamed potato with a hint of vanilla garnished with a slice of dehydrated carrot and violet petals. A second pre-antipasto includes a tepid cream of cannellini beans dusted with a scant amount of whole and toasted cannellini and a faux cherry tomato made of tomato puree. When you bite in, there's an explosion of tomato juice. How did he get the juice to stay inside, I wonder. The main antipasto is a medley of artichokes prepared several different ways: fried, creamed, raw, grilled and stuffed

My main course is stellar: *ricciola*, *pesce azzurro*, which is a silvery blue fish with virgin-white meat served with a rainbow of white, pink, ruby red and deep purple beets that have been pickled, steamed, creamed and ground to *polvere*, a dust. A poached apple nestled in an apple-gel spaghetti with apple ice cream, a sparkle of vanilla bean and dehydrated apple ribbon is dessert. A chilled 2016 bottle of Fiorfiore, white and homemade bread sliced on a hot stone with the property's Tuscan Leccino olive oil, make it an over-the-top chef's tasting lunch.

Chef Sardi tells me that he started his career as a kitchen assistant. Not long after, his career soared.

"I started cooking for fun. I moved out on my own at 22 years old, so I had to learn to cook for myself. I liked cooking so much that I started cooking for friends. At that point, I decided to work in the restaurant world, first as a dishwasher at 25 years old. At 27, I worked at La Bottega del Buon Caffè under Francesco Gasbarro and remained for the next two years. Following, I worked at Fuor d'Acqua and learned every aspect of fish and seafood. I was also fortunate to work with great talents such as Chef Enrico Bartolini at Cavenago di Brianza. Then, I had the chance to move to Milan where I worked under Enrico Bartolini. It was a world of extremely long hours and very hard work. It was an excellent experience to meet and exchange ideas with important chefs. Milan changed my life and I loved it. Following that experience, I was offered the chance to move back to

Tuscany and open a restaurant in Val d'Orcia, near Bagno Vignoni. After all of my travels, I returned to Florence and to La Bottega del Buon Caffè. I guess you can say that I've come full circle," he says.

"In all of my experience, I've learned how to use fresh and natural ingredients sourced from local farmers and prized butchers, and the freshest possible fish from old-fashioned fishermen. My philosophy is clean, organic and seasonal along with putting my imagination on the plate. I respect our Florentine tradition, seasons, and the products that we are so blessed to have here in Tuscany."

La Bottega del Buon Caffè also has an extensive wine cellar under the direction of Vito Angelilli, master sommelier.

"Signor Angelilli has created an exceptional cellar with over 1,100 labels from artisan producers in Tuscany who have been hand-picked to reflect the local terroir, including Masseto, Sassicaia, Bolgheri, Brunello di Montalcino and Chianti Classico. There are also important labels from Langhe in Piemonte and Mount Etna in Sicily along with French Champagne and Bordeaux Rive Gauche, Spanish, Australian and U.S. labels too," Chef Sardi says.

Dining at La Bottega del Buon Caffè is a food lover's dream. Chef Sardi's four-course lunch tasting menu changes with the seasons. It includes an antipasto, first course, second course and dessert, priced at about 80 euros (\$90) per person (beverages and wine are not included). After my experience, I am certain a second Michelin star is on its way.

Lunch concludes, the note taking and photo ops end, and I ask, "Chef Sardi, what is your favorite food?"

He quickly replies, "Pasta. I just love pasta!"

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Felsina's Leccino extra virgin olive oil offers notes of wild herbs and fresh vegetables, perfect for many of Chef Sardi's dishes.



Risotto with Spinach

- 6 cups chicken broth
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
- ½ small onion, minced
- 2 cups Arborio rice
- 1 cup dry white wine
- ½ pound spinach, stemmed, washed, dried and coarsely chopped
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, divided

Heat the broth in a medium saucepan and keep warm over low heat.

Melt 3 tablespoons of the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. When the butter foams, add the onion and cook, stirring, until the onion is pale yellow and soft, 4 to 5 minutes.

Add the rice and stir until it is well coated with the butter

and the onion and the grains begin to whiten, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the wine. When the wine is almost evaporated, add 1 cup of the hot broth and cook, stirring, until most of the broth has been absorbed. Continue cooking and stirring the rice in this manner, adding a cup or so of broth at a time, for about 15 minutes.

Add the spinach and stir, adding small additions of broth, until the spinach is soft and the rice is tender, but still a bit firm to the bite, 3 to 4 minutes.

Add the remaining butter and about half of the grated cheese. Stir until the cheese and butter are melted and the rice has a moist, creamy consistency. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Divide the risotto into serving bowls and serve with the remaining Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese on the side.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.



Steak Florentine

- 1 porterhouse steak, about 1½ inches thick
- ½ cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons fresh chopped rosemary
- 2 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

In a small bowl, combine the olive oil, rosemary, parsley and garlic; set aside.

Heat grill to high. Place steak on grill and reduce heat to medium. Grill 10 to 12 minutes per side for medium rare. Adjust time for desired doneness. When steak is done, remove from grill, season generously with salt and pepper on both sides and let sit for 7 to 8 minutes. When ready to serve, slice the steak and top with the olive oil mixture to serve.

Makes 6 servings.