

TASTES^{of} ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SUMMER 2021

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TALKS!

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HIDDEN TREASURES

A TOWN WITH A PAST

ANCIENT AND POETIC,
MONTEPULCIANO HOLDS
HISTORICAL AND
CULINARY RICHES.

TEXT: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

PHOTO: GASPER JANOS/SHUTTERSTOCK





A winding rural road near
Montepulciano in Tuscany.

HIDDEN TREASURES

The drive curves along a narrow Tuscan road that's lined with verdant Cypress trees standing tall. When you arrive at Porta al Prato, the Medieval gate, everything becomes surreal. Inside the ancient walls is Montepulciano, a poetic town peppered with cobblestone walkways, hidden courtyards and the scent of salty pecorino and earthy fine wine. From my window in the villa, I peer out onto the town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in the distance, fields of butter yellow sunflowers and infinite vineyards fade in the distance.

This is Montepulciano, land of pici pasta, Brunello and the Etruscans who built and ruled the greater part of Tuscany starting in the late 4th century BC with the Roman-Etruscan Wars. The town is perched on a ridge 1,800 feet above sea level and overlooks the Val di Chiana on one side and Lago di Trasimeno on the other.

Dotted with palazzos, Montepulciano is forever beautiful. Enoteca, trattorie, cantine spill out onto piazzas — cars are not allowed — and the church bells of San Biagio ring in the distance.

Located just a little more than an hour drive south of Florence and a two hour drive north of Rome, Montepulciano is a must-stop on every traveler's journey.

The town is often called the "Florence of the South" thanks to its classical Renaissance architecture. The most important example is the Tempio di San Biagio (dating back to 1518 with its cream-colored travertine facade) as well as the many arched and triangular Renaissance moldings on all the buildings in town. When you meander along Montepulciano's quaint stone streets, you too will fall in love.

Say the word Montepulciano and certain dishes come to mind: Pici all'Aglione, thick spaghetti-like pasta in a spicy garlic tomato sauce; Ribollita, a slow-cooked hearty vegetable soup; and grilled Bistecca alla Fiorentina from the Chianina cow are a few examples. Precious wines including Brunello and Nobile will have you sipping and swirling in any one of Montepulciano's famous cantinas.

While you can soak up a lot from a stroll through town, the best way to experience a region and learn about its food and wine is to befriend a local. My friend in Montepulciano is Chef Massimo, I call him a *buongustai*, translating to a person who loves to eat and knows everything there is to know about food and wine. I am on my way to meet him at the Piazza Grande and I invite you to come along. He is a native chef who has been churning out delicious everything for more than twenty years. Passionate and in-the-know, his preparation is traditional with a touch of modern elegance.



Aerial view of the medieval town of Montepulciano.

He has also been leading my cooking classes and wine tastings for many years.

"*Buongiorno!*" he says in a heavy Tuscan accent. Since it is morning, I ask him how the day of a chef begins.

"My day during this season begins like any other day — searching for excellent produce from trusted local purveyors, and then using these ingredients in my kitchen. I have my trusted butcher, vegetable and fruit farmers and fish monger — where even in Tuscany we have fresh fish every day. I personally shop for my ingredients every day," he says.

In Montepulciano, the high season begins around Easter and runs to November.

"During the winter, the town becomes quieter and there are less activities, but Montepulciano remains a beautiful place to visit," he says.

Plus, each season has its harvest. "Springtime gardens bring beautiful asparagus and artichokes. Fava beans and peas are plentiful as well. As it warms up and we head into summer, many tomato varieties will be available, along with eggplant, zucchini and pumpkin," he says.

The town hall at the Piazza Grande in Montepulciano.



HIDDEN TREASURES

“Seasonally speaking, Tuscan meats do not change, but the recipes we use them in do. In summer, we use vegetables to make antipasto, gnocchi and ravioli, and serve them alongside the famous grilled Bistecca alla Fiorentina,” he says.

He also uses a variety of Tuscan beans including cannellini, chickpeas, fagioli nero, and fagiolina del Trasimeno, the white noble bean from Umbria.

His favorite recipe is one that is never absent from his kitchen — Pici Toscana, a pasta made with flour and water by hand, and served in a garlic tomato sauce. Sauces change depending on the season. In June, Pici ll’Aglione, aglione, meaning garlic from Valdichiana, is the protagonist. This garlic is even registered as a PAT, a Traditional Agricultural Product. Pici is also served in a white sauce with garlic, chili pepper and extra virgin olive oil, or tossed in a wild boar or duck sauce.

“My kitchen is never without piccione, pigeon,” he says. Properly raised pigeon is served in a salsa di vin santo e caco, sweet wine and chocolate powder sauce, and it’s his specialty. He calls it “a very particular recipe.”

“Vin Santo translates to ‘blessed wine’ because it was traditionally served at baptisms, weddings and special occasions,” the chef says. “It’s a sweet wine that’s served with cantucci, dry Tuscan biscotti. The cantucci are dipped into the liqueur and enjoyed at the end of every meal.”

I learn about Tuscan wines as Chef Massimo moves from espresso to aperitivo, a little midday drink. “Montepulciano is one of the most important wine regions of Italy,” he says. “We are known for our reds with the Sangiovese grape being the most prominent. I built my own cantina by hand and it stocks 400 bottles. I’ve selected diverse wine makers so there is a good variety. I continue to research and add to it — from the most important to the smaller wine makers — so guests can taste excellent local wine from Montepulciano.”

In this part of Tuscany, there are two towns: Montalcino and Montepulciano, and they both have the same Sangiovese rosso grape. In Montalcino, they make Brunello, and in Montepulciano, they make the Nobile. The Nobile is the more gentle and feminine version of a Brunello. It’s softer on the palate and doesn’t require five or so years of aging. The wine appellation of Montepulciano includes the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano DOCG with grape varieties of 85 percent Prugnolo Gentile and 15 percent Mammolo (both clones of Sangiovese grape). There’s also Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva DOCG and Rosso Toscana IGT Tignolo.

“Buon appetito,” says a tall Tuscan waiter carrying a platter of salumi and Pecorino, while a bottle of il Ciliegio, Val delle Rose breathes until ready. The scent of red wine is everywhere.

Chef Massimo pours the wine. Everyone toasts and tastes (including the waiter).

Since I first met Chef Massimo, he’s been welcoming to me in great Tuscan style. That’s why I call him my *buongustai*.

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PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Above: A server offers a sample of cheese and cured meats. **Opposite page:** Chef Massimo has been created delicious Italian food for more than 20 years.



FOODS OF MONTEPULCIANO

FRESH INGREDIENTS TURN SIMPLE
DISHES INTO SUMPTUOUS MEALS.



Pici Pasta alle Briciole

Originating in Tuscany, pici pasta resembles spaghetti, but is much thicker. If you can't find it at your local market, it is available online.

- 4 slices stale Italian bread
- 12 ounces dried pici pasta
- Sea salt, for the pasta cooking water
- 8 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
- 2 garlic cloves
- Red chili pepper, to taste
- Tuscan Pecorino cheese, to taste
- Parsley, chopped, for garnish

In a food processor, blend the bread until chopped to a coarse consistency (not too fine).

Next, bring a large pasta pan filled with salted water to boil, then drop the pasta in. Stir and let cook for 15 minutes or until al dente.

While the pasta is cooking, add 4 tablespoons of the olive oil to a sauté pan and place over a medium heat. When the olive oil has heated, add the breadcrumbs and toast until golden brown. Set aside.

In a separate sauté pan, large enough to hold the pasta once it is cooked, add 4 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, the garlic and chili pepper, to taste. Sauté the ingredients, watching the heat and making sure the garlic and oil do not burn. When the garlic is golden, remove it. Reduce heat to low.

Drain the pasta and add to the large sauté pan along with the garlic and mix well, making sure the olive oil, garlic and chili pepper are dispersed. Add the toasted bread and toss. Serve with grated pecorino cheese and garnish with parsley.

Makes 4 servings.



Mushroom Risotto

A creamy Tuscan risotto made with dried porcini or fresh wild mushrooms with lots of Parmigiano cheese makes this recipe a favorite for all.

- 7 ounces fresh porcini mushrooms or 1/2 ounce dried porcini mushrooms or 4 ounces fresh wild mushrooms
- 1½ ounces unsalted butter
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 14 ounces Arborio rice
- 4 ounces dry white wine
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1¾ pints chicken broth or good vegetable broth, heated
- ¾ ounce freshly grated Parmesan, plus extra to serve to taste

If using dried mushrooms, soak them in hot water for 30 to 40

minutes. Next, rinse well, squeeze out excess water, then chop coarsely. If you are using fresh mushrooms, wash well and chop coarsely.

Meanwhile heat the butter and oil in a large frying pan. Add the garlic and onion. Add the chopped mushrooms. Sauté gently until softened but not browned.

Transfer half the vegetable mixture to a plate and set aside. Stir the rice into the remaining vegetable mixture in the pan. Sauté for 5 minutes, stirring constantly to make sure the grains are well coated. Pour in the wine, and when it has been absorbed add salt and pepper to taste.

Add the hot broth to the rice, one ladleful at a time, waiting until each ladle is absorbed while stirring constantly. After 20 to 25 minutes, the broth should be absorbed and the rice should be tender.

Remove the pan from the heat. Stir in the rest of the vegetables and Parmigiano. Garnish with additional Parmigiano. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.



Spaghetti with Basil Lemon Pesto

- 12 ounces spaghetti
- 6 cups basil leaves
- ½ cup toasted pine nuts
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 garlic gloves, peeled and chopped
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¾ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon fresh lemon zest
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter

Cook spaghetti according to package instructions. In a food processor, combine remaining ingredients except the butter. Process until you've reached the consistency of pesto.

Chop the butter and stir into the pasta. Add the pesto, mixing well. Top with additional Parmesan cheese, if desired, and serve. Makes 4 servings.