

TASTES^{of} ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

WINTER 2022

THE WINTER TABLE

SOUPS, STEWS AND MORE



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NATIVE SOIL

EXPLORING THE

A DREAMY LANDSCAPE IS PUNCTUATED WITH EQUALLY



ITALIAN RIVIERA

PLEASING CUISINE. BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



**The Church of St.
Peter** in Porto Venere
along the Ligurian coast



NATIVE SOIL

Colorful buildings in
Genova give this
seaside town an
upbeat look.

I'M DRIVING ALONG THE ITALIAN RIVIERA, a gorgeous stretch of marine coast from Genova to La Spezia, peppered with sea, mountains, vineyards, quaint villages and craggy cliffs holding on for dear life. The scene is surreal, like peering through a kaleidoscope with reflections of color and light. It's a dreamy landscape — from the Golfo Paradiso (the gulf of paradise), to Via dell' Amore (the walk of love) in Cinque Terre, all while cascading pastel houses tumble to the sea.

I start my visit in breathtaking Genova, the capital of Liguria set in the northwestern part of Italy on the sea. The landscape is varied — there's the Maritime Alps and Apennines Mountains bordered by France to the west, Piedmont to the north, and Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany to the east. It's a land of pesto, focaccia and Vermentino wine.

Genova is home to the Mercato Orientale, and that's why I'm here today. Although food is my passion, Genova's rich

past is an interesting weave of kings, rulers, invaders, and doges, starting from the Grimaldi family. It was the most powerful maritime republic from the 11th century to 1797. During the 12th to 15th centuries it was the largest naval power, making it the wealthiest city in the world. It's also home to the oldest state deposit bank, the Bank of Saint George, dating back to 1407.

I'm joined by my friend and English-speaking guide, Francesca. She's a local Genovese, and in a few minutes we'll start our Food Lover's Tour of Genova with a taste of focaccia.

Speaking English with a Ligurian accent, she explains: "Focaccia is a Genovese street food and is everywhere. Traditional focaccia, made with flour, water, salt and good olive oil, is baked in a square pan. When locals order focaccia, they ask for a *slertu*, or strip."

Tradition continues as grandparents start their shopping early at the Mercato Orientale and end by 11 a.m. with a white

The village of Camogli is located on the west side of the Peninsula of Portofino along the Italian Riviera.



NATIVE SOIL

RENAISSANCE POET FRANCESCO PETRARCA CALLED GENOVA *LA SUPERBA* (THE SUPERB ONE) BECAUSE OF THE CITY'S BEAUTY, CULTURE AND CUISINE.

wine and focaccia, while afternoon guests order an *u gianchettu*, a slice of the dimpled bread, with a glass of Vermentino at 6 p.m. Locals have it with their morning cappuccino.

"The history of Genovese focaccia started during the time of the Phoenicians who simply mixed flour with water and baked the dough in a pan," says Francesca. Then, in the 16th century, the Genovese of the ancient Republic began to make their own focaccia and added olive oil, she explains. "Over time, it became a tradition to serve focaccia in the church during weddings and even during funerals. Then came a time when Bishop Matteo Gambaro forbade its use in the church. But Genovese focaccia continued to be baked from Renaissance times to today. Focaccia is the symbol of Genova, and bakers make 1,600 tons of it per year," she says.

Francesca offers me a sampling of the beautifully baked bread. "In addition to classic focaccia, it's topped with caramelized onions, where it's called *fugàssa co-a çìdule*, or olives or sage."

At the Mercato Orientale, vendors are selling vibrantly colored fruits and vegetables of the season: winter broccoli, pumpkin, dark green Swiss chard, dried figs, and artichokes. Artisan cheeses, such as Pecorino and Parmigiano, for making Ligurian pesto line counter tops while wooden bins brim with fennel, anise, cinnamon sticks, and vanilla beans. The colors are mesmerizing and the scents intense.

We discover an olive oil maker doling out samples of Ligurian oil. Not only is he selling limited edition D.O.P. oil, he's offering samples of the precious Taggiasca olives in shades of green and purple. We stop for a handful.

Francesca continues to the Old-World chocolate maker who has been making chocolate with vintage machines and molds since 1871. The tastings are endless.

We follow narrow winding streets to the Palazzi dei Rolli, a collection of ornate 16th and 17th century palaces where guests of the State were once hosted. "Follow me," she says, and we land at a wine bar and order two glasses of Vermentino.

Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca called Genova *la Superba* (the superb one) because of the city's beauty, culture and cuisine.

Next, I am off to cooking Ligurian with Elisa, a talent in the kitchen who considers herself a home cook rather than a chef.

"*Benvenuto nella mia cucina*, (welcome to my kitchen)," says Elisa in Ligurian dialect.

The scent of fresh basil diffuses the air. It's a cozy space with kitchen tools of every kind — a mortar for making Ligurian pesto, an artisan wooden stamp for making croxetti, coin-shaped pressed pasta — and a sharp cheese grater next to an oversized wedge of Parmigiano cheese.

Elisa is a *locavore*, meaning she's one who eats what is available



A lion guards the entrance to the Cathedral of St. Lorenzo in Genoa.

locally. The climate and style of cooking depends on where in Liguria you are.

“The sea has always played a big part of our lives — for travel and as a resource; we cook lots of fish. The nearby mountains also provide meat such as rabbit and chicken, but traditional recipes are called *recette magre*, literally meaning thin recipes or light, because the main ingredients include cheese, vegetables, eggs and aromatic herbs grown by the sea: oregano and marjoram, laurel, rosemary, lots of garlic and onion,” she says.

Ligurians use a lot of *pane bagnato*, day-old bread soaked in soup broth or milk. Farmers and common folk soaked bread to create volume in recipes stretching portions in poor times.

“We’ll start with zucchini imbotti,” she says.

I follow her as she carefully cuts the zucchini in half, then tosses them in salted boiling water only for a minute or two. She removes them with a slotted spoon, lets them cool, and we remove the inside and put it in a bowl. Pane bagnato, creamy ricotta, eggs, garlic and marjoram are mixed with sea salt and pepper to taste. One by one we stuff the shells, then bake for 20 minutes until golden brown.

“Let’s rinse the anchovies that are stacked under sea salt in this container. The salt preserves the fish during summer so we can enjoy them during the winter until we have no more and start fishing for them in spring and preserving again in summer.” She smiles as she toasts thin slices of bread, garnished with the small silvery fish which have been seasoned with olive oil, garlic, oregano and red chili pepper. Elisa has created a savory bruschetta.

While we’re nibbling on bruschetta, Elisa holds up a pumpkin. “*La bella zucca!*” She calls it beautiful.

Ligurians use a lot of pumpkin during the winter, making pasta ripieni, ravioli stuffed with cooked pumpkin, ricotta, eggs and nutmeg. We roll the dough and pipe the filling into plump sealed pockets that will be boiled in salted water.

Next, we’ll make a winter pumpkin cake. This pumpkin is so sweet that she adds marjoram, oregano, garlic and capers to lessen the sweetness. The capers add a delicious contrast. Chestnuts are also used in many recipes, thanks to abundant chestnut trees in the nearby hills.

She pours a mound of chestnut flour on the work area, adds a little white flour, water and salt, then rolls the dough and cuts it into



A view of Camogli
as the sun sets.

tagliatelle with a sharp kitchen knife. After boiling in salted water, the pasta is drained and tossed in pesto. The Parmigiano and Pecorino cheese add a sharp, salty flavor. Another round of tastings follow.

Frittelle, made with flour, eggs, baking powder, pignoli, raisins that have been soaked in liqueur, and small pieces of apple are mixed in a bowl. Any liqueur can be used. The batter is blended with a tablespoon, then gently placed in boiling sunflower oil. After a quick flash-fry, they are served piping hot.

Lastly, we prepare Ligurian pesto. Folklore says it was first made as a pesto (pesto comes from the word *pestare*, to mash) with garlic only. Genovese sailors made and used it as an anti-nausea remedy against sea sickness. The garlic cream was served on dry salty biscotti, but even on a cracker it was too strong, so basil was added.

She guides me through the steps. “Traditional pesto is made with a mortar. You start by making a cream of garlic and pignoli, then basil leaves and three or four grains of coarse sea salt are added. The salt helps break down the basil. Parmigiano and Pecorino Sarde is added, and the olive oil is poured in last. Once creamed, it’s ready to use.

“You can keep the pesto in a glass covered jar topped with a layer of olive oil (stored in the fridge) or freeze it in an ice-cube tray. One little cube of pesto adds a big taste to minestrone soup. Never cook the pesto, just add it to the hot pasta. Potato gnocchi and trofie, thin twists of pasta, are served with pesto,” Elisa explains.

Ligurian cuisine is rich and varied. Try the recipes that follow.

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TASTES OF THE RIVIERA



FRESH CHESTNUT PASTA

- 1 ½ cups flour
- ½ cup chestnut flour
- ½ cup water at room temperature, divided
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 teaspoons salt

Put both flours in a bowl and combine. Pour the flour onto a solid surface and make a well in the middle. In the well, add 80% of the water, 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, and the eggs. Start kneading.

If necessary, add some more water from time to time

until the dough is firm and homogeneous, but still very soft.

Take the dough out of the bowl and continue kneading with the lower part of your palm for 5 to 10 minutes on a surface well dusted with flour. Add some more flour if you need. Brush 1 tablespoon of olive oil onto the dough. Cover with plastic wrap and let it sit 15 minutes.

Roll out the dough with a rolling pin on a well-floured surface until you get a disc of about a millimeter thick. Take a knife and make a slice as “tagliatelle.”

Boil water, add the salt and cook the pasta for 3 minutes. Serve with pesto, butter or other sauce.

Makes 8 servings.



TROFIE WITH PESTO

- 8 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- ½ cup pine nuts
- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- Pinch of salt
- 12 cups fresh spinach, basil or parsley
- ½ cup grated Romano cheese
- 1 pound trofie, cooked and drained
- Basil leaves for garnish, if desired

In a skillet over medium heat, add 4 tablespoons olive oil, the pine nuts, garlic, vinegar and salt. Sauté until pine nuts are lightly toasted. Remove from heat.

In a blender, add the spinach, basil or parsley, remaining olive oil and pine nut mixture. Purée until the greens are well blended. Add small amounts of water if the mixture becomes jammed in the blades of the blender.

Toss with freshly cooked trofie. Sprinkle with Romano cheese and garnish with fresh basil, if desired.

Makes 6 servings.