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BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SPRING 2022

THE SPRING TABLE

LUSCIOUS DESSERTS, TASTY PASTAS,
VINEYARD COOKING AND MORE

Spring Cheesecake
with Blueberries
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VISITING CINQUE TERRE

CHARMING AND BEAUTIFUL, EACH OF THE FIVE VILLAGES ALONG THE ITALIAN RIVIERA HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE CHARACTER.

TEXT: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

“BUONGIORNO, COME VA?” Signora Francesca greets me with her Genoese accent. She is a local guide who has studied the history, food, wine and culture of Liguria her entire life. Tall, blonde, she knows everything about her homeland.

“Bene, tu?” I reply in my Neapolitan accent, letting her know that I am well. It’s 7 a.m. and we will soon visit the Cinque Terre, but not before having an Italian caffè.

Cinque Terre, translating to five lands, is a stretch of the Italian Riviera that connects the centuries-old fishing villages of Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore. The villages are laced by footpaths, a coastal train and a boat service.

Although each village of the UNESCO protected area has a vibe of its own, there are a few commonalities. First, there’s an unsurpassed beauty where land meets sea. Narrow houses painted in shades of buttery yellow, lime green and raspberry red resemble a rainbow of multi-colored taffy—stacked on top of each other almost tumbling to the sea.







Mussels with lemon is one of many seafood dishes found in the Cinque Terre.

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Vineyards in the Cinque Terre produce quality white wines such as Vermentino, Bosco and Albarolo.

There's a surreal feel as one meanders the narrow footpaths peppered with artisan shops selling Taggiasca olives, Ligurian olive oil, big lemons, Vermentino wine D.O.C. (local white wine) and Sciacchetrà, a sweet limited production wine. Locals love to drink Sciacchetrà with anchovies and a warm slice of focaccia for breakfast or as an aperitivo. It's a tradition that dates to the ancient Romans and has not changed through the centuries. As we trek along the footpaths, we are about to discover Ligurian traditions.

Discovering the Cinque Terre is best done with a local guide who knows the landmarks and good restaurants. Francesca knows both and she's a *buon gustaia*, a person who enjoys and knows a lot about good food and wine.

"Monterosso is the best village to start in. It's the largest of the five villages, and the only village with a long sandy beach. The sea is dotted with local fishermen who cast their nets from small wooden fishing boats used since the Middle Ages. They are fishing for the small silvery blue fish that we call *acciuge* in local dialect," Francesca says.

Monterosso was one of the first places from where the Salt Trails started. Crystals of salt were transported from the seaside

up to the hills, she explains.

Francesca continues the tour, feeding me stories about the local anchovies, which vary with the depth of the sea.

"The sea is very deep between Genova and Monterosso, making it full of nutrients that attract the fish to feed here. The same nutrients give them their good taste. It's the same reason that we have so many dolphins and whales here, because they feed on the delicious anchovies," she says.

As we continue our walk through Monterosso, Francesca shares classic recipes of the village. "Ravioli with local fish, seafood salad, and, of course, anchovies prepared any way. If you visit Monterosso in mid-May, we celebrate the beautiful Sagra del Limone, the lemon festival," she says. During the festival, chefs prepare each course with an infusion of local lemons.

"Our lemons are big and bloom two times per year (May and November). We also make limoncino, a sweet liqueur," she adds, noting that the Ligurian recipe is different from the one in Amalfi.

Aside from the food and festivals, I learn that Monterosso is home to San Francesco's convent set high on Salita Cappuccini. The convent dates back to the 16th century. Today, there is only friar who lives there, and he cultivates lemons and grapes turning

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them into products.

Speaking of grapes, Francesca translates the rules of the wine roads.

“Vino a Denominazione di Origine Controllata means that the wine’s domain of origin is controlled. There are three grape varieties in this region: Vermentino, Bosco and Albarolo. These grapes are often mixed using not less than 40 percent of each one, by law, to make our D.O.C. wine,” she says.

The largest wine maker is Cantina Sassarini located in Monterosso. Francesca says the most important wine is Sciacchetrà.

“It’s precious, expensive, and made in small quantities. It takes one kilo of grapes to produce a little less than one liter; however, it takes 10 kilos of grapes to produce one liter of Sciacchetrà because the grapes are left to dry in the sun (leaving less water) and more sugar. Another important wine

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maker is Possa, a vineyard with sea-view steep slopes,” Francesca says, encouraging me to try the Possa wine while here.

Possa Winery is the brainchild of Signora Samuele Heydi Bonanini, an artisan producer. The locals in Riomaggiore call him the gladiator. Determined and strong, he bought abandoned and neglected vineyards and reconstructed the terracing starting from the sea to the highest hill. He revived the vineyards and recovered varieties that had almost disappeared. There is no space for machines on the steep and narrow paths, so all work is done by hand. Today, he produces high quality wine including Sciacchetrà. He cultivates lemons and is a beekeeper, too.

The wine business in Cinque Terre is important, even for the smaller vintners who bring their grapes to Manarola because there is a main cooperative there. Manarola’s wine’s production is branded by the National Park and UNESCO, giving the



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Above: Colorful homes and buildings dot the hillside of Manarola, one of the five villages of the Cinque Terre. **Below:** Local guide Francesca is well versed on the region.



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



STUFFED MUSSELS LA SPEZIA STYLE

For the sauce:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 garlic clove
- ¼ cup basil
- ¼ cup white wine
- 1¾ cup peeled tomatoes

For the mussels:

- 2 pounds mussels
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- ¼ cup white wine (for steaming)

For the stuffing

- 1 cup day-old breadcrumbs, without the crust
- Milk, enough to moisten the bread
- 2 ounces mortadella
- 1 egg
- 2 teaspoons grated Parmigiano Reggiano
- ¼ cup chopped parsley
- ¼ cup basil, torn
- Black pepper to taste

Prepare the sauce: Heat the olive oil in a pan and add the garlic. Sauté until golden brown. Once browned, remove from the pan. Add the basil, white wine, and tomatoes, and cook over a medium heat for 20 to 30 minutes.

Prepare the mussels: Clean the mussels well, removing any seaweed and sand with a sharp knife. Rinse well several times in cold water. Place olive oil in a pan and sauté the chopped onion until soft. Place the cooked onion to the side (it will go into the stuffing)

Add white wine and mussels to the pan. When the mussels start to open, remove from the heat and place on a platter. When cool, separate the big mussels from the smaller ones, keeping the smaller ones for the stuffing

Prepare the stuffing: Dip the bread in milk, then squeeze it out and place in a mixing bowl. Add the remaining stuffing ingredients and the smaller mussels cooked in wine. Mix well.

Take the larger mussels and stuff with a generous spoon of stuffing. Place each mussel in a pan side by side. Spread the sauce across the mussels. Cover the pan and cook over medium heat 15 to 20 minutes, removing the cover for the last few minutes until the sauce reduces, or bake for the same time in an oven at 350°F. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

smaller makers support and recognition.

Having sampled some wine, Francesca and I return to the topic of food.

“Between Cinque Terre and Porto Venere, you’ll discover the most delicious stuffed mussels, and they are only served here. The two towns are known for their mussels, a small black variety, because the mussel farms are located here. We stuff them with a mixture of egg, local herbs, a little bit of fish and bread dipped in milk, then cover them with fresh tomato and olive oil. They are either baked or stewed in a casserole. You’ll find stuffed mussels in only the few miles between Monterosso and Porto Venere. Our local white wine pairs well with them because of its salty taste. Vintners say that the sea salt in the air is absorbed in the soil, which is absorbed by the roots of each grapevine, giving the wine its unique structure,” Francesca says.

After a taste of stuffed mussels and Vermentino, we continue to Vernazza, often called the most picturesque village of all. The village is painted in hues that range from tangerine to lemon, with an amphitheater-shaped bay and one tiny piazza.

Francesca says the restaurants in Vernazza are superb. “I highly suggest that travelers arrive at sunset or after sunset when the crowds have subsided. Stay for dinner and visit the Medieval castle on the cliff. My favorite restaurant is Ristorante Belforte overlooking the sea,” she says.

The view is spectacular from the terrace at Ristorante Belforte. The restaurant has a table for two called *tavolo dell’amore*, table of love. It’s suspended on a terrace cut into the cliff overlooking the sea.

Moving on, we visit Corniglia, a village set high on the hill, surrounded by chestnut trees. It is the only village of the Cinque Terre without a port and fewer tourists.

There’s also the village of Manarola, which has a tiny port and tiny piazza.

Riomaggiore is the steepest of the five villages. Known to be the quietest village, its beautiful harbor is chiseled into craggy rocks sprawling onto the sea. It’s home to Rio Bistrot, a trattoria on the port where the chef uses only fresh fish brought in daily by the local fishermen

Our six-hour tour of Cinque Terre ends at sunset. Francesca has reserved a table at Belforte in Vernazza. Now, we’ll do as the Romans do. We raise our glasses of Sciacchetrà and bite into a warm slice of focaccia.

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