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FALL 2021

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## NATIVE SOIL



PHOTOS: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

### PROFILE

## The Pope's Pastry Chef

*Known worldwide for his irresistible pastries, Salvatore De Riso's holiday delights are especially popular this time of year.*

TEXT BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

■ *“Questa e il Natale in Italia! This is Christmas in Italy. Christmas means sweets,”* confirms Chef Salvatore De Riso, executive chef and owner of Sal De Riso. He welcomes me to his bakeshop workshop and the tour begins.

The scene is delicious. Creamy butter is scented with vanilla, then sugar is carefully whipped in a silver mixer. As the butter transforms into a light and airy texture, a heavenly scent fills the air. In the far corner, a *pasticciera*, pastry maker, donning a tall white chef's hat, carefully weighs chopped candied orange that will be added to the batter. Another baker lays out rows of brown paper baking liners that will soon cradle the delicate batter. They'll be baked into beautiful panettone, an Italian sweet bread served at Christmas time.

Chef Salvatore tells me his story and how it all started. “I was born into a family where my mom was an excellent cook—she was from the town of Vettica. I loved to watch her cook, and she loved to bake both sweet and salty goods. I was always by her side watching and helping. My passion for cooking started in my mamma's humble

kitchen,” he says.

At 14, he enrolled at the Scuola Di Alberghi culinary school. He studied during the year, and during the summer worked at prestigious hotels on the Amalfi Coast such as the Hotel San Pietro, Hotel Palumbo and Hotel Carusso.

In 1988, at 21, he ventured out on his own. He started as the head baker in a tiny pastry workshop in Minori. It was located by the Basilica di Santa Trofimena, the local church named after saint Trofimena

“I started making traditional desserts and pastries. But I did not have all the tools and utilities that I needed, so I prepared all my ingredients in my small workshop, then went to the public oven in the afternoon (at one time, many towns in Italy had public ovens) and baked,” he says. He made *bignè* and *pane di Spagna*, among other pastries, then returned to the workshop to prepare creams, fillings and glazes to finish them

Chef Salvatore's business expanded when he started making pastries and desserts for local restaurants and weddings, followed by expanding his product line in the north, especially Milan. High quality ingredients,

his talent for delicious, beautiful desserts and pastries catapulted into a word-of-mouth reputation that brought him success.

Then the *profiterole al limone* was born, created by Chef Salvatore. His lemon *profiterole*, a spin-off the classic chocolate *profiterole*, became famous. The secret ingredient is the lemon cream and the protagonist is the *sfusato limone*, a precious lemon variety from the Amalfi Coast. Chefs copied his recipe trying to imitate the original creation, but Chef Salvatore's *profiterole al limone* always surpassed the others, thanks to his artful hands, technique, high-quality ingredients and the coveted *sfusato* lemon.

“I started selling the *profiterole al limone* in my father's small bar in Minori. From that moment, everyone wanted the lemon dessert and orders for them started to fl . At that time, I also started to experiment with the beautiful products of this area, and I developed the recipe for *pere e ricotta*. The iconic *pere e ricotta* pie is made with delicate ricotta cheese of Tramonti, pears from Agerola and hazelnuts from Giffoni

“I love to revisit traditional dessert and pastry recipes like the Neapolitan *pastiera*,



**Chef Salvatore De Riso** is known worldwide for his sumptuous pastries.

PHOTO COURTESY OF  
CHEF SALVATORE DE RISO

## NATIVE SOIL

*“Yeast is a living organism and every day you need to cut it, bathe it in pure water (no chlorine), and keep it at the right temperature. Flour must be added three times per day. The process takes a lot of care and attention...It takes four days to make the perfect panettone, and this slow rising process is key,” he says. “All of this in 33 years.”*

– Chef Salvatore De Riso

a golden crust filled with cooked wheat, eggs, ricotta cheese and orange flower water. I also revisited the recipe for melanzana al cioccolato, slices of flash-fried eggplant layered between chocolate sauce, cinnamon, and lemon zest. We call it Parmigiana di Melanzane al Cioccolato because it’s prepared just like lasagna,” he says.

While there are desserts for every occasion, Christmas time is the most festive time of year with panettone and pandoro, the chef says.

“We are making hundreds of these two Christmas cakes right now for the holiday period. Struffoli, the small rounds of flash fried sweet dough drizzled with honey, are another favorite.”

After 12 years of hard work, the chef’s business grew again, and he moved the entire operation from Minori to the small hilltop town of Tramonti where there was more space. Today, he employs 60 pastry chefs in Tramonti and 40 workers at the pastry shop caffè in Minori. He thanks modern technology’s advancements for freezer transportation allowing him to ship his artisan products to the USA, Europe, France and Qatar.

He also salutes his team of chefs and staff regularly during our tour. “They are a young and dynamic team. They work with their heart and hands. We are family—we’ve even had a couple of marriages between pastry chefs and a few beautiful babies too,” he says.

Chef Salvatore’s accolades include making the wedding cake and desserts for the Prince and Princess of Qatar’s marriage

(her father is Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani). He brought 10 pastry chefs and his wife to Qatar for the ceremony. They worked one week prior preparing eight elaborate dessert and pastry buff t presentations for the one thousand wedding guests. The crown jewel was the mega Delizia al Limone made up of one thousand small domed sponge cakes lightly soaked in limoncello, then filled and garnished with lemon cream.

Three years ago, a woman who was getting married in Ravello asked the chef to make Delizia al Limone on Vietri ceramic tiles. Knowing how heavy the ceramic tiles weigh, he instead created a chocolate square in the exact measures of the tile and hand painted each one with the pattern of the famous tiles. The idea was a success. Today, the chocolate tiles are sold in his shop and are wildly popular.

But his most honorable achievement includes participating in a national contest against 150 pastry chefs. He won the competition in 2000 and was invited to the Jubilee in Rome to bake the celebratory cake for Pope John Paul II. He met the Pope and was hosted at the Vatican in Rome for the event. He was again invited by the Vatican to bake the birthday cakes for Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. He’s been hailed as the Pope’s Pastry Chef ever since.

In Milan, homeland of the panettone, Chef Salvatore took fir t place for his panettone in a national competition, and he was awarded the prestigious Artist of the Panettone award. The Milanese loved him so much they made him a judge for this contest.

I compliment him on his panettone as the tour continues. With a charming Neapolitan accent, he explains the laborious process.

“I have my own technique,” he says, for lievito di impasto, the rising of the dough, which he learned in Lombardy many years ago.

“Yeast is a living organism and every day you need to cut it, bathe it in pure water (no chlorine), and keep it at the right temperature. Flour must be added three times per day. The process takes a lot of care and attention. Then, we go into production at 5 p.m. At that point, the dough needs to rise for 13 hours at 28°C. At 6 a.m., we add the other ingredients: flou , sugar, honey, vanilla, eggs and butter. The candied fruit, which we make here, is added last. At this point, the dough is cut into pieces, weighed, and worked another time by hand until it’s turned into *pagnotte*, rounds of dough. We let it rest for 45 to 80 minutes until it develops little bubbles on the surface, then the dough is worked again by hand. Next, we place the dough in a special baking dish and let it rise for another 24 hours at 18°C. It takes four days to make the perfect panettone, and this slow rising process is key,” he says. “All of this in 33 years,” he laughs.

“*Auguri maestro*,” I congratulate him. Celebrity chef is an understatement for this pastry maker extraordinaire.

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