“Questo 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 pasticciere, 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 bigné 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 flow. 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.”

“Love to revisit traditional dessert and pastry recipes like the Neapolitan pastiera,
Chef Salvatore De Riso is known worldwide for his sumptuous pastries.
"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 ciocolato, 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. "Christmas time is the most festive occasion, Christmas time is the most festive"

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: flour, 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 pagnottone, 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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