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SAVORING POSITANO

CLOSE-KNIT SIBLINGS STAY TRUE TO THEIR FAMILY'S POSITANO RESTAURANT, GREETING CUSTOMERS, SERVING SPECTACULAR DISHES, AND SHARING THE HOSPITALITY OF THE AMALFI COAST.

TEXT: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

“WHEN THERE WERE A FEW FISHERMEN, the three sisters cut the lasagna in big pieces and when there were more fishermen, they cut it in smaller ones. My father would retell this story always ending with, ‘After all, they had to feed everyone,’” says Giovanna Pisacane, the granddaughter of Giovannina, one of the three sisters who started Le Tre Sorelle Osteria in Positano in 1953.

Tre sorelle translates to three sisters. Today, Giovanna and her brothers, Alfonso and Luigi, carry on the family business, keeping with tradition. Chef Alfonso is at the helm of the kitchen in charge of the pastas, while Luigi, sommelier, manages the dining area and staff. Giovanna manages their two enotecas. It is Giovanna who tells me her family's precious story.

“The women began in a very simple way. They cooked at home in the morning using simple ingredients. They baked lasagne and pasta al forno, made parmigiana di melanzane, and fried fish, then they carried the food to the restaurant where they reheated it in the pizza oven. At the time, they only had one pizza oven and a table or two outside. After a few years, they added a small kitchen and began frying fish caught by the fishermen in the restaurant. In 1953, Positano was a quiet fishing village where pescatori, fishermen, worked hard to make a living,” she says.

“The women and men of the village were ambitious, hardworking people. After World War II, the women of Positano created a work force of merlettaie, lace makers, and used their hands making lace into tablecloths, curtains, and wedding dresses. Another group of women united and sold flowers while the men of the village were fishermen,” she adds.

“The three sisters were Giovannina, Adelina and Nannina Russo. Giovannina was my father Michele's mom. My father's family was from the beach in Positano while my mamma Theresa is from Chiesa Nuova, the upper part of Positano,” Giovanna explains.

“As travelers started to arrive in Positano after the war, the family added more tables for guests, and in 1960, they added pizza to the menu,” she says, almost whispering with gentle eyes. Giovanna's two children, Therese and Francesco, arrive at the table. They wrap her in a hug and kiss her on both cheeks.

The iconic, colorful shoreline of Positano at sunset. Photo by Boris-B.







Signora Theresa, the mother of
Giovanna, who helps carry on the family
restaurant. Photo courtesy of Tre Sorelle

INSIDE ITALY

WRITERS, ARTISTS AND STARS

Above Tre Sorelle is the house where the well-known American writer, John Steinbeck, lived. He first came to Positano in 1953. Salvatore, one of the older fishermen in Positano, once told me Steinbeck dined at Tre Sorelle often and always ordered a sea bass. Today, a ceramic plaque with the words “John Steinbeck lived here” is displayed outside this house. He stayed in Positano while writing *Positano*, the legendary paperback best-seller.

“There were artists and stars who came to Tre Sorelle — Franco Zeffarelli, Italian stage and film director, producer and politician; Elizabeth Taylor; and Diego Armando Maradona, Argentinian soccer player who played for Naples — he was my father’s dear friend,” says Giovanna. “There were many famous people who came and went, sometimes we didn’t even know who,” she adds.

A PASSIONATE BUONGUSTAIO

Michele Pisacane was the face of Le Tre Sorelle as it evolved during the ’60s, welcoming everyone and advocating tourism.

“He kept himself very busy and worked not only for the restaurant, but socially with the game of soccer — and politically for the town. He’d drive all the way to Naples to resolve a problem for Positano. When he was not working in the restaurant, he led efforts to keep the beach and sea clean. He looked after the town like it was his home,” Giovanna fills up as she tells the story of her father.

Signor Michele was not only a well-known personality, but was also a buongustaio—one who loves to eat—and he searched for the best food quality he could find. Even as his children took over, he was the first one to open and greet the fishermen with their daily catch very early in the morning. By lunchtime he was always holding court at his favorite table with a group of friends or guests.

“My father preferred traditional simple cooking using genuine ingredients, not only products from the sea, but lots of vegetables and meat. He was passionate for pecore, sheep. When he cooked a sheep, he fed everyone,” she laughs.

Le Tre Sorelle’s menu has remained the same throughout the years, featuring traditional home-cooked food using the three sisters’ recipes.

“The menu is based on fish. Antipasti: octopus, sautéed shrimp and totoni e patate, mollusks and potatoes. Traditional fresh pasta is made in-house daily: ravioli filled with ricotta and pumpkin, gnocchi alla Sorrentina, and many types of dry pastas cut on bronze made in the village of Grangano served with shellfish — clams, mussels and shrimp or totani. The restaurant has a large ice bed displaying the catch of the day brought in by the local fishermen,” Giovanna says.

“Daily catches might include pezzogge, ricciola, and San Pietro (local Mediterranean fish), which is used to make zuppa di pesce, fish soup, and pesce all’acqua pazza. Guests select their fish from the ice bed before sending it to the kitchen. There’s also small local red shrimp and bait fish flash-fried and served with wedges of sfusato lemons (the DOP lemon variety). Our signature recipe is Pesce Sotto Sale, Fish Baked in a Crust of Sea Salt. The salt



The Positano home of American John Steinbeck above Tre Sorelle. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

firmly encases the fish and transmits the heat, keeping it soft while baking. This method of baking gives the fish a true taste of the sea. Alfonso uses a spigola or pezzoga for this recipe, which is always made for two. It’s delicious and simple garnished with just a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil,” she explains.

“What is the secret to your Neapolitan ragù and meatballs? Are they made with love?” I ask.

“Absolutely! We use classic ingredients in our meatballs: bread, ground beef, parsley, garlic, Parmigiano Reggiano, egg and a pinch of salt. This was my nonna’s recipe for meatballs and Napoletano ragù con rigatoni, Neapolitan sauce with pasta tubes. We make this ragù in the restaurant just like we make it at home every Sunday — with pork, sausage, meatballs and tomatoes simmering for the entire morning,” she says.

Neapolitan desserts are treasures on the Amalfi Coast, and Tre Sorelle makes their dolce inhouse. There are many to choose from, including delizia al limone, sponge cake filled with cooked lemon cream; torta Caprese, chocolate almond flour cake; babà al rum, sponge cake soaked in rum topped with whipped cream and fruit; panna cotto, cooked cream topped with red berries; classic tiramisù and gelato.



Women outside Tre Sorelle in 1953.
Photo courtesy of Tre Sorelle

TRADITION, FAMILY AND WINE

“Tradition is our mark. It’s our house. Our kitchen follows traditional cooking using fresh seasonal ingredients and simple recipes. It’s healthy Mediterranean cuisine,” says Giovanna.

Luigi and Alfonso exit the kitchen and join the conversation. The three siblings are also the driving forces behind Tre Sorelle Wine Room, an interesting wine concept store where you can order a wide variety of local wines, regional Italian and international wines by the glass. The wine bar is located at Piazza Mulini. Although the emphasis is on wine, raw oysters, prosciutto, salumi, cheese and bruschetta are served. The Tre Sorelle Wine Shop is just a few doors down.

“The Amalfi Coast wines that we serve and sell here are Costa d’Amalfi — white, rosé and red. White wine varieties of the region are Falanghina, Biancolella and Ginestra while red varieties are Aglianico, Piediroso and Tintore, a precious grape variety found only in Tramonti. Our local wines are predominately from Campania — Ravello, Tramonti and Ravello as well as Ischia, Avellino and Benevento,” Luigi explains.

I ask Luigi what osteria means.

“In the past, an osteria was a place where people stopped for

a small bite and glass of wine — the focus was on the wine more than the food. In time, food took on a bigger role and that’s why we keep the same name Osteria Le Tre Sorelle. In the old days, menus were not very large and the food was simple and inexpensive. When the restaurant started, there were only a few wines on the menu. Thirty years ago, I extended the wine list and added wine from different areas and different countries, thinking if it’s good, why not have it on the menu. Today, there is also more interest in wine. During the years and even though times have changed, Tre Sorelle remains a casual place with traditional food,” he says.

TOURISM, A SON’S RETURN, AND THE POSITANO WAY OF COOKING

Luigi talks about tourism of yesteryear and how it has changed today. “In the old days, the season in Positano was very short and very busy, and Italian families came and stayed the whole summer renting houses and villas. Now the season is longer, and visitors are more international, but they mainly stay just three nights.”

Alfonso agrees tourism has changed and he sees the difference since his return to Positano after living in California for 15 years. He’s the oldest in the family. Today he’s in the kitchen leading the team of chefs, supervising, and keeping everyone happy.

“I grew up on the beach. Since I was a little kid, I learned all these recipes which are very typical of southern Italy. It’s very simple cooking focused on the fresh local ingredients from the garden and sea.

“While in the USA, I learned a lot about the American way of the restaurant business, management, and organization. Everything was new to me, and it was challenging. In the past, restaurants in Italy were only focused on cooking and serving wine and didn’t have a sense of business,” Alfonso says.

“Even though I also traveled a lot for work, I always kept my way of cooking and the Positano way of doing things. It’s great to be back in Positano, but, of course, I miss some of the American ways of life. In America, you can find everything, but you don’t find the same flavors and variety of seafood like we have on the Amalfi Coast in Positano,” he adds.

I ask the Pisacanes about their favorite food.

“My favorite pasta is spaghetti con frutti di mare with clams, mussels and seafood,” says Giovanna, while Luigi loves scorfano all’ acqua pazza (Mediterranean red fish), and at home he loves pasta with beans or pasta with lentils. Alfonso is passionate about anything with pasta, but especially spaghetti and clams.

There are many great restaurants in Positano, but my favorite is Tre Sorelle. From the very first time I dined here many years ago, Luigi welcomed me and became my friend. I love their story, the food and this family.

Giovanna calls Tre Sorelle “A Casa.” It’s an expression that means being at home.

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FISH IN CRAZY WATER

- 2¼ pounds of Pezzogna, or sea bass or cod
- 11 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1¾ cups cherry tomatoes, washed and smashed
- 4 potatoes, peeled and sliced to about 1/4-inch pieces
- Sea salt to taste
- 1 cup fresh parsley, washed and chopped, plus more for garnish
- Water for poaching

Fillet fish or leave whole as desired. In a large pan, add olive oil and heat. Add crushed garlic cloves and sauté until golden. Add the washed and smashed cherry tomatoes. Add the fish, potatoes, sea salt and parsley. Add a generous amount of water (just enough to poach). Cover and cook until the fish is soft.

Serve hot with a generous garnish of fresh parsley.

Makes 4 servings.

– Recipe courtesy of *Le Tre Sorelle, Positano*



SPAGHETTI WITH BABY SHRIMP AND CHERRY TOMATOES

- 11 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic
- ¾ cup small shrimp, cleaned and shelled
- ¾ cup cherry tomatoes, washed and quartered
- Sea salt to taste
- ½ pound spaghetti
- Fresh parsley, finely chopped

Heat olive oil in a frying pan, then add garlic and sauté until golden. Add shrimp and toss together. Add the cherry tomatoes and salt and cook over medium heat.

In the meantime, cook the spaghetti in salted boiling water until al dente. Drain the pasta and add to the frying pan with the shrimp. Toss together over high heat for a minute or two before serving.

Serve with fresh parsley sprinkled on top, as desired.

Makes 2 servings.

– Recipe courtesy of *Le Tre Sorelle, Positano*

