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Italian Lemon
Tarts with
Fresh Berries
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La Sfogliatella Santa Rosa from Pasticceria Pansa in Amalfi tracks its origins to a convent.

CAMPANIA

From the Hands of Monks and Nuns

Some of Italy's most famous pastries, sweets and elixirs originated in convents and are still popular today.

—
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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An Italian morning ushers in the scent of lemon and orange flowers, a sign from the culinary gods that spring is here. With a few lemons in hand from the trees in my garden, it's apropos to share the stories of Campania's most important monasteries and the monks and nuns who created delicious desserts, liqueurs and elixirs—and even perfume—in spring.

My mom, Maria Lucia, always reminds me that “the most delicious desserts and liqueurs were made by the monks and nuns in the ancient monasteries.”

She says that many villages, like that of my grandmother in Prata Sannita, were religious and wealthy havens due to the monasteries and churches that existed in them.

“In Prata Sannita, there were the convents of Sant’Agostino built in 110 A.D. and San Francesco built in 1460, and the churches of Maria delle Grazie and San Pancrazio. During this prosperous time, the monks of Monte Cassino governed Prata from 500 to 1062 A.D., and the dedicated nuns and monks baked and produced the finest pastries and liqueurs, which they gave to

noblemen in exchange for donations to keep the churches and monasteries solvent,” she says.

Traditional dolci first created in the monasteries from the Campania region include anise biscotti, lemon and orange biscotti, pastiera (a custard pie), and susamielli made with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. Another classic is the roccocò whose secret ingredient is pisto, a fragrant blend of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, star anise and coriander.

Pastiera is made in the spring leading up to Easter. Its secret ingredient is orange blossom water made from orange petals. It was first baked for Maria Theresa of Spain, the austere second wife of King Ferdinand II of Naples, to sweeten her mood. There are many stories on the pie's origins; however, the nuns at the Convento di San Gregorio Armeno in Naples are said to have “perfected it with love.”

The roccocò, rounded cookies, date to the 13th century. The Baroque name and shape come from the French *rocaille*, meaning a rounded wreath. The nuns were making them as far back as 1320 in the convent of Santa Maria Maddalena. The cookies are baked to a hard crisp and dipped in cappuccino, vermouth or Marsala wine.

Mostaccioli, another important cookie, was first made by the nuns in the 1500s. Originally there were two versions of the recipe: the rich man's version with almonds and the poor man's version without. At that time, only the upper class could afford almonds. The diamond-shaped mostaccioli are made with honey and candied fruit, then covered with chocolate glaze. Chef Bartolomeo Scappi, Pope Pius V's private chef, reputedly baked mostaccioli in the Vatican kitchen during the mid-1500s. Chocolate didn't arrive in Italy until the end of the 1600s, so the first mostaccioli were made with a cinnamon glaze.

Susamielli, the most famous Neapolitan biscotti, are also known as *sapienza* and were first made by the Clarisse nuns in the Convento Santa Maria della Sapienza in Naples during the 1600s. Susamielli are made with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves and are baked in the shape of the letter S. During ancient Roman times, the confections were made three different ways: a recipe for the noblemen using high-quality flour, honey, almonds and candied fruit; another for the bagpipers who traveled door-to-door playing music at Christmastime (without almonds); and the version made by monks and priests who cut the dough into circles, filled the centers with cherry jam, then folded them into half-moons.

On the island of Capri, the monks and nuns were creating healing elixirs and recipes at the



LEMON AND ROSE PETAL LIQUEUR

Rosolio al Limone

Rosolio takes its name from the Latin *ros solis*, meaning dew of the sun, and was originally made by the nuns during the Renaissance. It's served at weddings to toast a long and happy marriage. This delicate liqueur is always made in May when the roses are in full bloom. The nuns and monks were masters at turning petals into healthy healing elixirs.

- 1 organic lemon**
- 360 ml grain alcohol**
- 1 vanilla bean**
- 1 handful of organic perfumed rose petals (free of fertilizers, pesticides or other chemicals)**
- 300 ml (about 1 1/4 cups) sugar**
- 240 ml (about 1 cup) spring water**

Wash the lemon well and remove the peel, taking care to peel only the outer yellow part, not the white pith. Pour the grain

alcohol into a sterilized Ball jar. Add the lemon peel, vanilla bean and rose petals. Close the jar and store in a cool, dry place for 5 to 7 days. When 5 to 7 days have passed, drain the mixture through a sieve, keeping only the alcohol mixture. Next, heat the sugar and water in a pan and bring to a boil, stirring constantly to ensure the sugar completely dissolves. Continue to boil for a minute or so, then remove from heat and allow the syrup to cool. Once completely cooled, mix the alcohol mixture with the syrup. Stir well and let it sit for a few minutes. Pour into a tall clear glass bottle, then cork the bottle. Store in the refrigerator for at least 1 week before using. Serve ice cold.

Alternatively, you can use one cinnamon stick and three cloves, replacing the vanilla bean, for a more pungent flavor.

Makes about 4 cups.

— Recipe courtesy of Lauren A. Birmingham

NATIVE SOIL



Above: Signor Luciano in the lab at Carthusia.
Below: La Certosa was built in 1371.



monastery of La Certosa di San Giacomo hundreds of years ago. They were the most important producers of herbs, flowers and elixirs with healing powers, and provided a place and remedy for healing.

La Certosa, which translates to charterhouse, was built in 1371 by Giacomo Arcucci on a large parcel of land donated by Queen Giovanna 1st of Angiò. It is the oldest historic building on the island and defines Capri's skyline, resembling a royal crown pointing up to the Mediterranean sky.

This monastery tells a tale of privilege and wealth, pirate invasions, confiscations, abandonment, and eventual revival. It was even used as a Red Cross base in World War II.

Then in 1380, an unexpected visit by Queen Giovanna d'Angiò harked the monks to prepare a bouquet with the most beautiful flowers picked for the sovereign on the island. The water that they were immersed in acquired a beautiful and mysterious scent, and the monks called it acqua di fiori, floral water, *Garofilium Silvestre Caprese*. From this point on, the monastery continued to grow flowers and herbs making elixirs and floral waters.

In 1948, the original formulas were brought back and the Prior of the monastery, with a special license issued by the Pope, shared them with a chemist from the Piedmont region who created the smallest perfume workshop in the world—Carthusia which is still fully functioning today. In the same year, painter Mario Labocetta produced a floral mermaid in Liberty style which became the brand icon. The mermaid has remained the symbol of Carthusia ever since.

During my visit to Carthusia, Signor Luciano, head perfume maker, explains, "In 1380 when the monks were here making perfumes and elixirs, there were over 860 flowers on Capri. Today, although the varieties of flowers on Capri have decreased significantly, Carthusia continues to blend and bottle by hand beautiful floral fragrances unmatched anywhere in the world."

He says a list of flower perfumes include *Gelsomini di Capri*, inspired by the jasmine petals of Capri; *Carthusia Lady*, in which 80 noble flower essences come together to create an all-feminine sensation: rose, gardenia and camellia with their flowery notes evoking pleasant emotions; and *Via Camerelle*, where lemon and bitter orange combine with the notes of sea moss and cedar wood to create a fragrance of sea, flowers and life.

Signor Luciano explains the process of distillation to bottling while sniffing and filling each bottle by hand. The scene and scents blend to offer a peaceful haven of calm.

After the visit, I visit the boutique, and at check out I discover Luciano has left a canvas bag for me imprinted with the pastel floral mermaid by Mario Labocetta and a Mediterraneo diffuser. A thoughtful gesture from a soft-hearted artisan.

The monks and nuns were the masters of making elixirs and liqueurs. Lemon water was used to increase vitality. Wild rose elixir was used to open the heart, quiet the mind and soothe the soul. The monks are no longer present at the monastery, but their spirit and scents remain.

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