

TASTES of **italia**

SPRING 2026

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

LEMON TREATS

6 WAYS TO ADD ZING TO YOUR TABLE

CELEB CHEFS DISH THEIR FAVORITE PASTA

STANLEY TUCCI'S FAVORITE SPAGHETTI ALLA NERANO

SAVOR THE AMALFI COAST

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VISITING THE AMALFI COAST

EVER-BLOOMING ALONG THE TYRRHENIAN SEA,
LEMONS ARE A DELIGHTFUL AND REFRESHING PART
OF THE CULTURE IN THIS STRETCH OF COASTLINE.

The lemons of the Amalfi Coast are called sfusato lemons, and they were brought here by the Arab merchants via trade routes as far back as the 10th century. Torquato Tasso, a 16th-century Italian poet who was born in Sorrento, loved the citrus so much he wrote an epic poem called “Gerusalemme Liberata” and dedicated a part of it to the lemon: “Eternal flowers bear eternal fruits, as one is budding the other is ripening.”

The oval-shaped sfusato lemons are ever-blooming and grow along the Tyrrhenian Sea, blanketing fields and reaching hillsides. Other local varieties with curious names include *femminello* and *ovale*.

The *zagare* lemon piqued my curiosity, so I decided to visit the masters of the trade, Signori Mario Anastasio and Valentino Esposito. They are expert lemon growers who, with a glance and a sniff, can tell where a lemon was grown as well as its age and variety. They're also the kings of the lemon-infused liqueur, *limoncello*, and make it almost 365 days a year at their shop, *il Gusto della Costa*, which translates to “taste of the coast.” Their shop is in Praiano not far from our home.

I hop on my Vespa and drive to their shop on Via Gennaro Capriglione. It's an exhilarating ride along a stretch of winding road that curls like ribbon candy. Along the way, hairpin turns cut left and right, making me feel as if I'm going to fall straight into the cerulean sea 30 meters below. When I arrive at the shop, the signori welcome me with a steamy espresso with a slice of fresh lemon peel.

Valentino is tall and husky with silver hair. Mario is short and slender with black hair. Even though the two men disagree on almost everything, they share one thing in common: their love for lemons and passion for making organic *limoncello*.

Since living in Italy, I have studied lemons extensively. I've learned that while most people think lemons are Italian, they are not. The cultivation of lemon trees began when the Arabs started trading with the locals of Amalfi, sometime between the 10th and 12th centuries. Others claim that Alexander the Great carried lemons to Italy as early as 300 B.C. In fact, lemons are depicted in frescoes and mosaics dating back to 79 A.D. at the Casa del Frutteto in Pompeii.

The ancient Romans knew about lemons but considered them poisonous and used them for decoration only. By the 15th century, lemons were traded in Rome and exported to faraway destinations on merchant ships.

Although lemons grow everywhere in Southern Italy's Campania region, their origins trace back

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



A couple enjoys a stroll along the Amalfi Coast.

NATIVE SOIL

to India, China and Mesopotamia. The word lemon is derived from the ancient Persian word *limu*, which was first recorded in Arabic literature in the 10th century.

Lemons grow perfectly in the volcanic soil on the Amalfi Coast, thanks to the microclimate that exists between the sea and mountains. The salty sea air and winter rainfall provide necessary moisture, which is then locked in by the Lattari mountains. The combination of rocky soil and warm sun provides ideal growing conditions for the lemon trees along this protected UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The I.G.P., Protected Geographical Indication, certifies that lemons on the Amalfi Coast are grown according to specific standards in the territory between Positano and Vietri. The certification includes the *sfusato amalfitano*, *zagara bianca*, *zagara gialla* and *femminello* varieties.

Mario and Valentino follow strict rules set by the I.G.P. and comply with C.O.V.A.L., the consortium that regulates lemon production on the Amalfi Coast. They grow their lemons on chestnut wood pergolas or trellises, then cover them with green netting to protect them from extreme heat, rain and sun. This farmer's trick also ensures that they ripen slowly. When the lemons are ripe, they pick each one by hand without using machines. Most importantly, their lemons are certified organic.

Valentino points out that lemon skins vary depending on the variety.

"The major differences between the *femminello* and *sfusato* are the skin and size. The *femminello ovale sorrentino*, or *massese lemon* from Sorrento, has a smooth skin, strong flavor, oval shape and pale color. The *sfusato amalfitano* lemons from the Amalfi Coast grow larger and have an uneven skin, sweet flavor, oval shape and bright color. Both varieties are praised as the most precious and flavorful lemons in the world, with few seeds and twice as much vitamin C as an orange."

Mario holds up a plump, white-and-yellow lemon, identifies it as a precious *zagara bianca* which grows best in August.

"All of the lemons from the Amalfi Coast are precious because the growing conditions here can't be replicated anywhere else. Out of the over 60 varieties of lemons in the world, the *sfusato amalfitano* is the most sought after. In my garden, we even have *sfusato pizzo verde*, a rare yellow lemon with a green point," Mario says.

The men passionately exchange opinions — each one drowning out the other — and their knowledge is infinite. In addition to being expert lemon growers and limoncello makers, they are also artisan producers of organic marmellate and liquori.

We move toward their work area where baskets of lemons are waiting to be peeled, sliced, diced and turned into confections. Valentino starts the pro-



Lemon sorbet. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Lemons and other citrus fruits are abundant in Amalfi markets.

Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli





Ravello village overlooks the Amalfi Coast.

cess. “The main ingredient in limoncello is the amalfitano lemon; without this, it can’t be called limoncello,” he says.

“We start by peeling each lemon by hand — we never use machines. We keep the outermost layer of the yellow skin, not the bitter white pith. Then we place the peels in sterilized glass jars, cover them with grain alcohol and leave them to soak. The jars must be kept in a cool, dry place and gently shaken each day. Visitors always assume limoncello is made with lemon juice, but the secret is in their skin because that’s where the oil is. While the peels soak in the alcohol, their essential oils are extracted. After a week, the peels are removed and the lemon-infused alcohol is mixed with a simple syrup,” Valentino says.

While he continues to peel, Mario fills ice-cold frosted glasses with limoncello and explains the economic boom Italy experienced when the British arrived.

“The Italians became serious about lemon growing in 1795 when Britain’s Royal Navy mandated that all its sailors consume lemon juice to prevent scurvy. At that time, Italian families picked up their shovels and planted lemon trees everywhere. The demand for Amalfi Coast lemons became so great that it created jobs in this area. Women also played an important role in lemon harvesting. Mammams, nonnas, sisters and aunts picked the lemons and carried them on their heads in sporte, hand-woven

baskets from Positano and Praiano to Amalfi. Womenfolk were the workforce during that time and made a huge contribution to the growth of the lemon industry in southern Italy.”

Lemons are everywhere on the Amalfi Coast. They’re a traditional symbol of love and fertility — brides place them by the altar on their wedding day, lace-makers embroider them on aprons and tablecloths, and artists paint them on ceramic plates and tables. Lemons are a natural cure for colds, and Italian mammams use them to clean their silverware and pans.

Lemon zest and lemon essence are used in granita, cakes, pastry cream, beauty products and candles. Now you understand why Italians can’t live without lemons.

Today’s visit has turned into a history lesson, coffee break and limoncello-making class.

As I head to the door, Mario hands me the lemons he climbed 500 stairs to pick. Valentino gives me a bottle of limoncello and jars of marmellate.

“The jams go great with cheese and on morning toast,” Mario explains. “Deep freeze the limoncello before serving it — the glasses, too,” says Valentino.

We exchange kisses on each cheek, and I thank them for their time and gifts. I make several attempts to pay, open the door and leave, but the conversation continues. I call it the lemon lifestyle.

NATIVE SOIL

Tastes of the Amalfi Coast



PASTA WITH MUSSELS

- 1 pound pasta, such as linguine
- 2 pounds fresh mussels
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1/2 cup pasta cooking water
- Juice from 3 lemons
- 1/4 cup chopped parsley
- 1/4 teaspoon red chile flakes
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Cook the pasta according to the directions on the package. Reserve 1/2 cup of the pasta cooking water. Drain the rest and set aside.

Under cold water, scrub the mussels and remove their beards.

In a large pot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onion and sauté about 3 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté about 1 minute. Add the wine, water and juice from the lemons. Bring to a boil.

Stir in the mussels. Place a lid on the pot and cook 3 to 4 minutes. Stir

the mussels and remove the ones that have opened. Discard those that have not opened.

At this point you may leave the mussels in their shells or remove the meat from the shells, as in the photo.

Add the pasta to the pot you cooked the mussels in. Add the chopped parsley and red chile flakes and toss to combine. Add the mussels back in and toss. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Makes 8 servings.



FISH IN CRAZY WATER

- 2¹/₄ pounds of Pezzogna, or sea bass or cod**
- 11 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed**
- 1³/₄ 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