

TASTE

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Capri to Calgary



Cooking up
a summertime
feast
for the eyes
and the palate

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CALGARY HERALD

From Perugia to Monaco, the Mediterranean has provided many a feast for food lovers drawn to its flavorful, varied and healthy cuisines.

Among all the region's culinary destinations, Capri has slipped by virtually unnoticed. Which is a shame, for few people can resist summer with so much pizzazz as the Caprese.

Winter is cold, damp and dreary on this rocky island on the verge of the Bay of Naples. But from May to October, Capri comes to life, bursting with brightly colored bougainvillea, scented with wild herbs and contrasted by beaches of well-toiled tourists who need to be fed — and

The local chefs rise to the challenge, despite the difficulties of producing food on a narrow island of limestone that has no natural springs and is an expensive go-kilowatt-hour from the mainland.

Consider here, like those throughout the rest of Italy's islands and nearby continental coast,

have become adept at making the most of what grows locally and doing without pricey imports.

It is cooking "bella simplicità," says Stefano Albertino, chef and owner of the Buca di Bacco (Bucco's) Wine Cellar, just off the main square in Capri Town. For more than 20 years, Albertino's family has welcomed guests to the tiny buca, for 100 years before that, in an inn that housed everyone from the Romanic poets to Clark Gable.

"Basically, it's very simple because we use basil, garlic, olive oil, no mayonnaise or cream, and as you can see, all sorts of vegetables," Albertino says.

Zucchini and eggplant grow in profusion here, as do the most remarkable sweet, juicy tomatoes. They bend under the weight of plump, spicy figs and sweet lemons as big and heavy with juice you need two hands to hold one.

Truffle herbs that we may carry into life in Calgary — oregano, marjoram, basil, rosemary, lemon dill — grow like weeds in the Italian Mediterranean sun.

And while there is still some gruff on the island — the "gruff" the wild grasses for which Capri is named, are long gone, but there are still a few hips and rabbits to be had — most meat, dairy and poultry must be brought in from Naples at not inconsiderable cost.

So, the locals turn to the sea, where they harvest flavorful fish such as sea bream and snapper, as well as squid, ray claws and a variety of spiny, excellent table shellfish, which are then tossed with peas or risotto.

At Marina Piccola in Anacapri, Capri's other town, chef Pinaia-Giulietta prepares some (also known as gilo-head bream), grilled scabbia, then heated at the table, where the waiter creates a simple sauce of olive oil,

lemon juice, garlic and parsley.

Like the other chefs on the island, Giulietta makes the most of Capri's most bounteous crop — marinated — in a heavenly, if unusual, dish of homemade pasta tossed with tiny clams and marinated flowers.

For gardeners struggling to cope with an overabundance of the productive green squash, Capri is an inspiration. You can find marinated artichok, grilled, baked, marinated, battered and fried; its flowers make late fritters as stuffed with cheese and deep-fried; the fruit tossed in a myriad of ways with pasta and chicken.

And there are the antipasti here. Unlike antipasti in Italy's northern regions, where it is usually a small selection of cold cuts and cheeses, the antipasti here of Capri offer dozens of items, many of them some variation on eggplant, marinated and tomatoes.

Albertino's antipasti bar is a testament to culinary creativity. For her, "bella simplicità" doesn't mean boring or easy — her most famous dish is a good stuffed with lemons and sausage.

The antipasti counter has a bewildering variety of marinated and fried vegetables, seafood, cheese, cold cuts and more, including a delicious eggplant fritter stuffed with basil and cheese.

But the biggest antipasti bar has to be at Pinaia's near Marina Grande, which offers at least 30 platters, maybe more, of everything from fresh buffalo ricotta to eggplant dumplings at least in different ways, marinated anchovies, baby artichokes, spicy wine-soaked tomatoes with fresh mozzarella and olive, mildly sweetened salmon (the fish crabs only available, we decided).

Pinaia's bar has not necessarily been the most successful in place so it cannot fall on an unimpressive chef's head — and a good thing too, for these are just the beginning here.

It is not just the food that would send this island to heaven. There is something else.

lemons appear in everything here, from scones to icy granitas, refreshing "aperitivo" (freshly squeezed drinks) and limoncello, a powerful liqueur that is impossible to escape as the hospitable Caprese press it upon you at every turn.

At Il Paradiso, named after the island's second most famous attraction next to the Blue Grotto, Antonio Russo takes a break from serving tables and explains how to make limoncello.

Take a liter of alcohol such as vodka, Brandy, rum, and put in the peels of six lemons.

"After five days, you take one liter aqua (water) and two grams sugar and you put on top, you put everything in, and in a week it is clear and then you put it in the bottle."

And then, of course, you drink.

Or you could stick to the local wine, which is light, slightly acidic, perfect for hot summer days and cool nights on an island with no natural water supply, although 30 years ago pipes were built to bring water from the mainland.

"That was a good thing," says Rosanna Altigola, our guide from the tourist board. "Or we would only be drinking wine."

There are classic Caprese dishes, of course, on this island that has been influenced by everyone from the Greeks to the Theatricals, the Sardinians, Romans and right up to today's celebrity culture.

There is the island's most famous dish, insalata caprese, tomato and fresh mozzarella salad. There is the pasta caprese, a chorizo and almond cake, and seafood, fig tarts and lemon granita, and more.

But Capri makes its funniest for one thing above all.

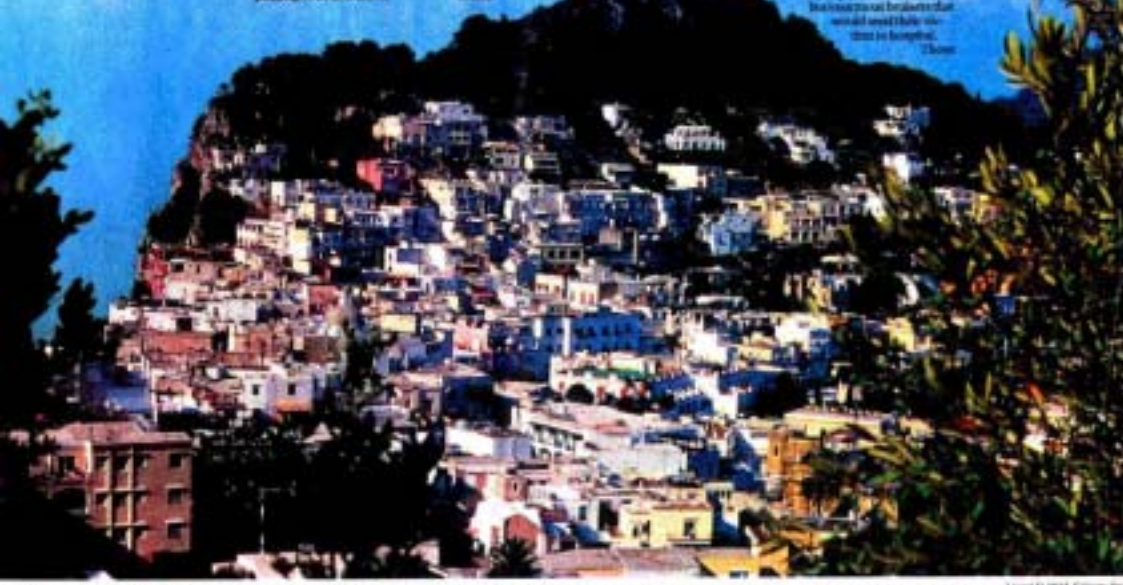
As Albertino says: "We distinguish ourselves for our hospitality and kindness."



Love it? Well, Capri's finest Chef Stefania Albertino shows off locally grown tomatoes.

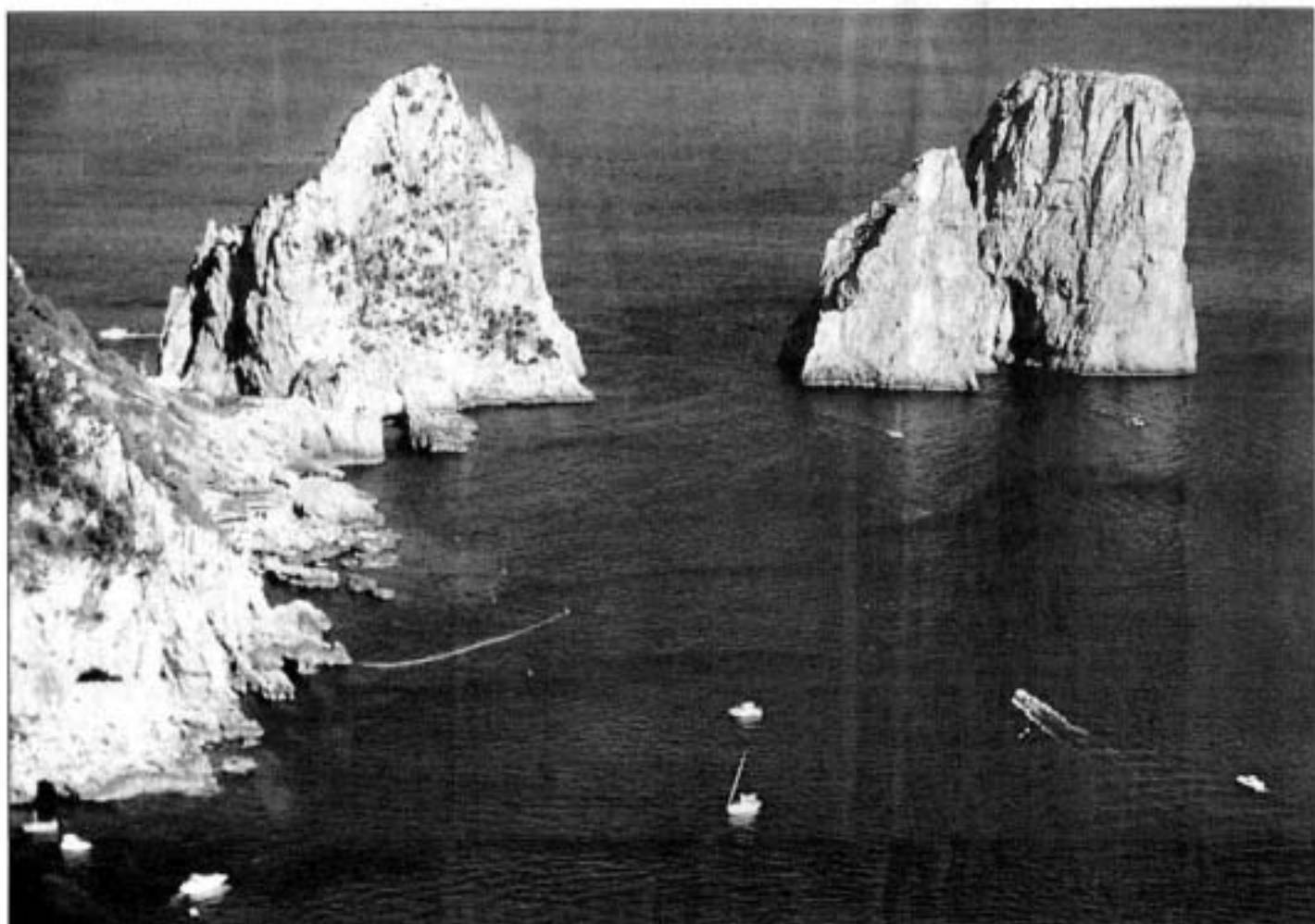


Love it? Well, Capri's finest Al Matera, a waiter prepares prosciutto at the table.



Black tumble down the hillside toward Capri's Marina Piccola. The summer paradise rains on limoncello, a potent, lemon-based liqueur that is, of course, freshly made.

Love it? Well, Capri's finest



A view of the Faraglioni rocks, with cruise ships scattered on the water like sugar on a torta caprese.

Lionel D. Wild, Calgary Herald

CAPRESE SALAD

This salad is so easy, it really doesn't need a recipe. Basically, take some ripe tomatoes and slice them about 1/4 in. (0.5 cm) thick. Then, take some fresh mozzarella and slice it, too, about 1/4 in. (0.5 cm) thick. Layer tomatoes and cheese in an attractive pattern. Tear fresh basil leaves and scatter them on top, then drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil and sprinkle with salt and fresh-ground pepper to taste. A splash of balsamic vinegar is lovely, too, though not authentic.

But like anything very simple, a good caprese salad is tricky to pull off.

First of all, the tomatoes have to be perfectly ripe and sweet, ideally fresh from your garden, still warm with the rays of the sun. Failing that, organic tomatoes or hothouse tomatoes on the vine make an acceptable substitute, but never, ever those pale-fleshed, cardboard-flavoured supermarket tomatoes.

Then, the mozzarella must be fresh — never the pre-packaged rubbery stuff used for pizzas — and ideally should be made from the milk of the water buffalo, not cows' milk.

Also, the basil must be fresh, crisp and of excellent quality. And, finally, the olive oil should be sweet and fruity, the best quality you can afford. Same goes for the balsamic vinegar, if you use it.

Peranio Gianluca, chef of Materita Restaurant in Anacapri, serves scialatielli, a fresh, homemade pasta traditional to Capri. It is cut into two-by 1/2-inch (5-by 1-cm) flat, rectangular pieces. You can substitute fresh store-bought pastas or a good quality dried pasta, such as farfalle. Serves four.

MATERITA'S SCIALATELLI WITH CLAMS, ZUCCHINI FLOWERS AND FRESH TOMATOES

FROM D8 RECIPES: Follow the Caprese's lead and get fresh



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When it comes to tomatoes, only the freshest, sweetest ones will do for the Caprese.

1/4 cup (250 mL) of olive oil, or enough to cover the bottom of a saute pan

1 to 2 cloves garlic, chopped fine
30 zucchini flowers.

1 to 2 tbsp (15 to 25 mL) parsley, chopped fine

8 small tomatoes, diced

24 fresh clams still in the shell, scrubbed very clean

fresh scialatielli pasta, recipe follows

While the water is boiling for the pasta, saute garlic in oil over medium heat until soft, but not browned. Turn down heat and stir in zucchini flowers, parsley and tomatoes. Then, add clams, cover and cook until they are opened.

Boil the scialatielli, strain and mix with the sauce in the pan, add more parsley. Garnish with more zucchini flowers if you wish.

SCIALATELLI DOUGH

4 cups (1 L) cake flour

2 eggs

1 cup (250 mL) whole milk

1/4 cup (50 mL) freshly grated pecorino cheese

Mound flour, then make a well in the centre. Crack eggs into the well and pour milk over. Using a fork, stir egg mixture slowly into flour.

Add grated cheese and, working with your hands, bring dough together and knead eight to 10 minutes to form a smooth dough. Cover in plastic wrap; allow to rest 15 minutes.

Set up a pasta-rolling machine and cut off a piece of pasta dough the size of a tennis ball. Roll pasta through the rollers on the widest setting, then fold into thirds and run it through again on the same setting.

Repeat three times. Run pasta through the next two thinner settings. It should be quite thick.

Lay sheet of pasta on a floured cutting board. Cut crosswise into 1/2-inch

(1-cm) strips, then cut lengthwise into 2-inch (5 cm) pieces. Cover cut noodles with a kitchen towel. Roll and cut remaining pasta.

Bring 6 quarts (6 L) of salted water to a boil. Drop pasta into boiling water and cook until al dente, about three minutes.

Materita's chef, Peranio Gianluca, shares his version of the classic dessert of Capri, a dense but simple chocolate cake.

TORTA CAPRESE

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) almonds, ground very fine

1 cup (250 mL) granulated sugar

3/4 cup (175 mL) unsalted butter

7 oz. (200g) semi-sweet chocolate, cut into small chunks

1/3 cup (75 mL) all-purpose flour

6 eggs, separated

confectioners sugar to sprinkle on top

Preheat oven to 350° F (180°C).

Grease and flour a nine-inch (1.5L) round baking pan.

In a double boiler, melt chocolate and cool slightly.

In a large mixer, cream together butter and sugar until soft and fluffy. Mix in egg yolks, one at a time, then the finely ground almonds and flour, then the melted chocolate.

In a separate bowl, beat egg whites until they form soft, glossy peaks. Slowly and gently fold egg whites into chocolate mixture until thoroughly mixed.

Pour into prepared pan and bake in centre of oven for 45 minutes, or until centre is firm when pressed with a fingertip.

Cool and sprinkle decoratively with confectioner's sugar.