

Cooking in Campania

The cuisine of this region of Southern Italy is echoed on the menus of restaurants throughout the U.S.

by Deborah Grossman

On the Isle of Capri, Italy, every view overlooking the Bay of Naples is magnificent. At the White Restaurant in the JW Marriott Capri Tiberio Palace Resort & Spa, the unusual flat, tubular paccheri pasta with tiger prawns and pork belly is artistically appealing and delicious. But in true Neapolitan style, everything has a boisterous back story.

"Paccheri is native to Naples," explains executive chef Manuele Cattaruzza. "When the thick tubes of pasta collapse and hit the plate, it sounds like a slap, the meaning of 'paccheri.' The inside is grooved to hold the juice from the seafood and tomatoes."

In San Francisco, Nate Appleman serves paccheri with fresh sardines, olives, capers, garlic and breadcrumbs at A16. When the chef/co-owner ran out of the paccheri recently while his supplier was in Italy, he shopped the nearby gourmet ghetto in vain to find the pasta. "Our customers aren't familiar with paccheri unless they know Southern Italian food well," Appleman says. "But they love the dish, and personally, it transports me to Naples and the Amalfi coast."

The stories about paccheri reflect the spirit of Naples and surrounding region—boisterous, lively—and practical. What is it about Campania that grabs the gastronomic imagination?

Marlena Spieler, an author, newspaper columnist and frequent visitor to Campania, reflects on the cuisine of the region's metropolis. "The chefs in Napoli show an exuberance and insane passion for local and seasonal foods. They love their dried pasta from nearby Gragnano, their San Marzano tomatoes, spring squash blossoms and fall pumpkin. This cucina povera, or food of the poor, is their ingenious and creative response to their hardships."

Appleman compares the egg pasta served with rich and hearty meals of Northern

Colatura di alici, anchovy sauce—the liquid captured from salted anchovies fermenting in barrels—is made according to traditional methods in Cetara on the Amalfi coast.



At Tra Vigne, almost every table orders the mozzarella made à la minute by Nash Cognetti and his staff.



Mad about mozzarella

Nash Cognetti is obsessed with mozzarella. While working in Italy, the executive chef of Tra Vigne in St. Helena, Calif., saw a group of businesswomen lunching on six-ounce balls of mozzarella with bread and extra virgin olive oil. “I was puzzled to see so many women eating cheese for lunch. I asked the bartender why the mozzarella was so popular. He said it was so incredibly fresh they couldn’t resist it. A light bulb went on about serving mozzarella à la minute. I decided then to influence our female customers in Napa Valley to switch from salads for lunch to freshly formed mozzarella balls.”

It took several trials, but the executive chef/partner knew when he’d dialed up

the right recipe. While walking through the dining room, he saw 10 women at the bar all eating mozzarella.

A local cheese producer supplies Cognetti with cow’s milk mozzarella curd. Cognetti began making mozzarella twice a day. As demand grew, he renewed his quest to stretch it to order. He and his staff streamlined the production for à la minute production. During the summer season, he purchases 350-400 pounds of mozzarella curd a week.

“Mozzarella is our staple. Almost every table orders it. We are unique in pulling the cheese to order, and my wait staff knows that I’m crazy about consistency.

They tell me directly about the quality, because they—and the customers—are so keen on it. I don’t hear this much feedback on our other menu items,” says Cognetti.

Yet at Tra Vigne’s sister restaurant a few yards away, Pizzeria Tra Vigne, chef David Lugo bakes his pizzas with mozzarella di bufala Campana DOP (protected designation of origin). “We like to make our pizza in the authentic Neapolitan style. We couldn’t keep up with demand by hand-stretching,” says Lugo, who is quite content with using real Italian cheese.

Italy, where historically there was more wealth, to the basic pasta of Southern Italy. “In Campania, pasta is made only from flour or semolina and water. In dishes like ragu, the meat in the dish is stretched to become the second course.”

With Mount Vesuvius across the bay and a tumultuous political history, the area is known for periods of feast and famine. The trading seaport has impacted Campania’s culinary history. Arab traders brought in New World tomatoes, ideally suited to the volcanic terroir, beans, chiles and potatoes. Culinary influences from France during Bourbon rule led to new sauces, meat ragu and desserts.

From early Italian-American adaptations to today’s fine-dining innovations, Neapolitan specialties from pasta and pizza to mozzarella and ragu have informed chefs in the U.S.

According to chef Arturo Iengo at Pascalucci, a well-known restaurant in the Benevento province northeast of Naples, there are several reasons why the food in the region is exceptional. “First is the seafood. Then, in our inland area, we have fresh porcini and mushrooms, and cheeses such as provolone del Monaco (smoked provolone) and caciocavallo, a local cheese similar to provolone, and, of course, mozzarella di bufala made with water-buffalo milk.”

Maccaronara and more

Many culinary scholars believe that the origin of tube-shaped macaroni was Campania. Gragnano, a city of 27,000 southeast of Naples, is known as the City of Pasta for the namesake company. Nearly 10% of Italian dry pasta is made in Gragnano.

But paccheri most commonly evokes Campania. As Appleman comments, paccheri is sturdy enough to hold up to meat, but most chefs associate it with the seafood from the area. At Da Gemma in the town of Amalfi, paccheri is filled with burrata cheese and basil pesto in seafood and cherry tomato sauce. Though the pasta sauces of Campania are often tomato-based, the burrata (mozzarella filled with cream and cheese curds) adds creamy body to this dish.

Cheese is stuffed inside pasta in Campania—and sometimes mozzarella di bufala is stuffed with pasta. At Le Colonne in Caserta near the epicenter of mozzarella di bufala production, the *palla di mozzarella* is deep-fried breaded mozzarella stuffed with basil taglierini, a unique blend of texture and taste.

Campania wines to know

The volcanic and limestone soils in Campania make for expressive wines, both white and red. The traditions of viticulture go back 3,000 years. Here is a sampling of the better-known varieties to pair with Neapolitan pasta, pizza, seafood and meats.

White wines

- Falanghina: fruit-forward, deep-straw colored, honey and almond nose with high acidity and a bright finish

- Fiano di Avellino: honey-scented, full-bodied wine similar to Chardonnay
- Greco di Tufo: brought to Campania in the 6th century B.C. by the Greeks; aromatic with bright acidity; best consumed young
- Other whites, such as Biancolella, are blended with other grapes. Casa D'Ambra's Calitto label on the Isle of Ischia is a blend of Biancolella with Greco and Fiano. Calitto refers to a small winegrowing region on Ischia.

Red wines

- Aglianico: from deep-red, thick-skinned grapes, styles vary from medium to full-bodied; age-worthy with big tannins; includes well-known wines from the Taurasi village. Falerno Del Massico Red Camarato from Villa Matilde is a blend of Aglianico and Piediroso with a big body and structure that pairs well with mozzarella di bufala.

At many restaurants in Campania, such as Poseidon in Naples, fried pizza balls are a popular item. Ristorante Bracconiere on the Isle of Ischi offers fried pizza. And in the U.S., chef Anthony Strong at Pizzeria Delfina in San Francisco offers fried pizza-dough specials.

Pizza aficionados

If one food is widely associated with Naples, it's pizza. As Strong describes the pizza menu at Pizzeria Delfina, "We don't put chicken or asparagus on our pizzas. We are very picky about what goes in them and on them."

This spirit of Neapolitan purity is found in many parts of the U.S., including Il Villaggio Osteria in Jackson Hole, Wyo. Chef Roger Freedman makes pizza dough with only "00" Italian wheat flour, brewer's yeast, salt and water. After hand-forming and baking in a stone oven, he adds San Marzano tomatoes from Salerno in Campania, mozzarella di bufala in traditional styles such as marina and Margherita, and Italian toppings such as prosciutto, mushrooms and olives.

Freedman gets specific about the spirit of Neapolitan food: "Guests love the simple, fresh combinations. Also, there is a palpable difference in energy among

guests at tables with pizza versus guests at tables that didn't order pizza. There is more laughing, jovial conversation and sharing. This observation leads me to believe that pizza has a unique way of bringing people together."

In Vico Equense just outside Naples, Pizza a Metro serves pizza in a unique way—by the meter. Pizza featuring local specialties such as pizza *marinara con scarole* (escarole), olives and capers is especially popular. Bestsellers include the Margherita with mozzarella di bufala and pescatore with shrimp, clams and mussels.

Colatura di alici

One of the ingredients sparking pizza interest from Campania is *colatura di alici*, anchovy sauce. Made according to traditional methods in Cetara on the Amalfi coast, *colatura di alici* is the liquid captured from salted anchovies fermenting in barrels. The salty, savory condiment is reminiscent of Roman garum and Asian fish sauce.

"We use *colatura di alici* like water," says Strong. Redolent of the Mediterranean, the sauce livens up Pizzeria Delfina's *fagiolini alla Chinese*, a nod to Szechwan-style

Chinese-style beans, made with green beans, red peppers and *colatura di alici*. In Strong's baked pasta dish, *conchiglioni* with ricotta filling is layered with anchovies and perfumed with *colatura di alici* at the finish.

Another Pizzeria Delfina favorite is grilled swordfish with pesto Amalfitana. The pesto is made with classic Southern Italian ingredients: salt-packed capers, pine nuts, lemon olive oil from Sorrento and *colatura di alici*. "The nutty, rich, salty sauce marries well with the buttery fish," says Strong.

Ragu and rabbit

At George's in the Grand Hotel Parker's in Naples, ragu is crafted by chef Vincenzo Baciotterracino, who takes his ragu-making seriously.

"There is a saying in Naples, '*Non ce Domenica senza ragu*'—'There is no Sunday without ragu,'" explains Baciotterracino. "That's because it took most of Sunday to prepare and cook the beef, pork and sausage. The braised meat was eaten in big pieces for the second course, not chopped up Bolognese-style."

At A16, the most popular pasta on the menu is macaronara with ragu alla Napoletana



Deborah Grossman

These Aglianico grape vines grow on a lemon tree on the small volcanic Isle of Procida, where good soil is hard to find.

and ricotta salad. Breaking from tradition, Appleman serves the ragu sauce with maccaronara, a long noodle narrower and thicker than tagliatelle, and reserves the braised pork shoulder and pork belly cooked in the ragu for other preparations.

Inland provinces of Campania generally serve more meat dishes than in Naples. But on Ischia, the larger of the islands in the Bay of Naples along with Capri and Procida, rabbits thrive in the dense underbrush of the volcanic terrain. At Ristorante Bracconiere on the mountaintop of Ischia, rabbit ragu is a specialty of chef Giovanni De Meglio, who shares this anecdote: "Tradition dictates that the rabbit's head is presented in the serving bowl in order to prove that a cat, with similar bone structure to a rabbit, was not substituted in the kitchen."

After dining on rabbit and pizza, a nice, cooling dessert is always welcome. The most popular draw on the dessert menu at George's is mozzarella ice cream. Deconstructing the Caprese concept of mozzarella and tomatoes, Baciotterracino serves the ice cream with tomato marmalade on top. The ice cream's rich flavor—and name—derives from the star ingredient, buffalo milk/cream. The tart

marmalade and the sweet, full-flavored ice cream meld into an unusual taste sensation.

Pastiere is a local pastry with an actual cheese base. Moist and smooth, it's a ricotta egg custard cake with a pleasing creamy finish. This rustic dessert is served at the nouveau-style Ristorante Les Barrique on the isle of Ischia, where chef Salvator Molettieri serves *pastiere* with candied orange rind on a short crust pastry made from soaked wheat kernels.

But at Ristorante Mattozzi L'Europeo in Naples, the dessert to order is baba. A multicourse dinner at Mattozzi may feature escarole sautéed and stuffed with olives, *pasta e fagiole*, paccheri with veal *polpette* (meatballs) and pizza. But most diners complete their meal with baba yeast cakes soaked in rum and served with shots of limoncello. Although rum baba were brought to Campania during French rule, local chefs co-opted the sweet cakes and offer them in large- or mini-mold sizes.

At the heart of trading in Southern Italy, Naples and environs continues to evolve and adapt its pasta, tomato and mozzarella di bufala traditions. And in the U.S., chefs are recreating and adapting this simple yet flavor-packed cuisine for their menus.

At Pizzeria Delfina, Anthony Strong serves *mozzarella in carrozza* (mozzarella in a carriage—the bread is the "carriage" that holds the mozzarella). It is lightly battered and fried, and drizzled with anchovy brown butter.

At Pizzeria Delfina, Strong brags that his rum baba is better than the ones in Naples. His version has the light texture of brioche and is saturated, but not overpowered, with rum—and filled with a touch of pastry cream.

Strong riffs off the Neapolitan tradition of fried dough in the dessert arena. He stretches pizza dough, fries it until crispy and chewy, and serves it with mascarpone pastry cream.

In Campania, says Strong, "Chefs don't approach cooking with a rigid philosophy. It's all about a seasonal, fun way of making food. It's contagious. Once you experience the thin, charred pizzas, the fried squash blossoms, the cannelloni beans, you can't help but cook for your guests this way."

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