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Tastes of Italia

Cooking with Nonna

Nothing tastes better than nonna's special dishes.

By Susan Van Allen

As the holidays approach, thoughts turn to our favorite foods of the season and the most beloved cooks who make them: our nonnas. These family matriarchs, whether they live on in memories or take their place at the head of our tables, are who we have to thank for keeping culinary traditions alive from generation to generation. Nonnas are the stars of a popular web series, "Cooking with Nonna," hosted by the lovely Rossella Rago, a 20-something first generation Italian American. In each episode, a guest nonna from a different region of Italy tells the story of how she learned to cook in the old country, and then demonstrates how to make one of her specialties.

"My Nonna Romana was the whole inspiration for the show," says Rossella. Romana and Rossella's parents are from Mola di Bari, a fishing village in Puglia — the region that forms the heel of Italy's boot. They came to America and settled in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where they joined many other families from "Mola," as the natives call their homeland.

"Every summer from the time I was seven, my parents sent me back to Italy to be with my relatives in Mola," Rossella tells me. Her smile is infectious as she remembers great times — at the beach, eating gelato in the piazza, and "having the best focaccia on earth." Mola is famous for this





A BATCH OF Santa Lucia cookies (see recipe on page 36). Right: On the set of "Cooking with Nonna": Rossella Rago, right, with her own grandmother, Romana Sciddurlo — "Nonna Romana."

COOK & PHOTO BY VITO RAGO.

delicious flatbread, which local signoras would bring to community ovens that still were in use in the village until the 1980s.

Back in Brooklyn, Rossella grew up spending long hours in the kitchen with Nonna Romana. "Then I went to college, got a degree in Italian Literature, thinking I would become a teacher," she says. But when I was about to graduate, my father, sensing this was not my path, asked me, "What do you really want to do?" My answer came quickly: "I have my own cooking show!"

And so in 2008, "Cooking with Nonna" premiered. It's a family project, with her father Vito working as the videographer, and her mother Angela (who Rossella describes as "a true Renaissance woman — a painter, playwright, and actress"), taking on the job as casting director. Though many wonderful Nonnas appear on the show, it's really special when Rossella cooks with her very own Nonna Romana.

The show is in its fourth successful season, attracting more and more viewers with its warm and welcoming style. "I'm not a trained chef, so I'm learning just

like the viewers, and that makes 'Cooking with Nonna' more accessible than other cooking shows. It's not about fancy knife techniques or precise measurements — when nonna says an espresso cup of olive oil, that means about half a cup!"

Rossella has traveled the country and to Italy, performing cooking demonstrations with local nonnas, teaching at New York's Eataly, and leading a Culinary Tour to Sorrento for travelers to enjoy Amalfi coast specialties and classes.

A real triumph came to "Team Nonna" (Rossella, Nonna Romana, and Mamma Angela) in 2010, when they competed on the Food Network's "Battle Italiano" and won.

"Having my nonna with me on TV was essential," Rossella says. "It proved that women like her were not only still viable, they are the cornerstones of families everywhere. And no matter how old you are, there is still time to try something new."

The "Cooking with Nonna" philosophy is simple and heartfelt. In Rossella's words: "Cooking is not just about cooking.



PHOTO OF NONNA AND ROSSELLA BY MICHAEL GINGLEY

It's about family, community, and spending quality time together."

The La Famiglia spirit really comes alive for the Ragos on Christmas Eve. "It's mayhem," Rossella tells me. "Thirty relatives and friends in my nonna's basement, and plenty of food for all. Long ago, we abandoned the Feast of the Seven Fishes idea, which so many other Italian Americans do on Christmas Eve. Instead, we make a Pugliese specialty, frittelle, also known as panzerotti." Frittelle are smaller versions of calzones that are fried instead of baked.

The most common filling is tomatoes, mozzarella, and capers, but the Ragos also make one with green onions and olives. "It's always a sleeper favorite," says Rossella.

As the delicious night goes on, with baked clams eaten while frittelle are frying, the celebration turns into what Rossella describes as "A Fellini film — there is always a belly dancer and a Tina Turner impersonator." For dolce, they enjoy Nonna's sweets: Cartellate (a special lacy cookie flavored with vin cotto or honey) and Occhi di Santa Lucia (Saint Lucy's Eyes), cookies Nonna starts making on December 13, the Saint's feast day. Of course, there is limoncello, Amaro Lucano... "And then," Rossella says, "we all end up singing the Molese song, 'Down by the Marina.'"

Thanks to Rossella, who not only keeps traditions alive on "Cooking with Nonna," we also have Nonna's recipes so we can enjoy a delicious Buon Natale with flavors of Mola di Bari. Find more info, webisodes, and recipes on www.cookingwithnonna.com

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Frittelle

The pizza dough can be bought from your favorite pizzeria, Italian specialty shop, or in the frozen food section of a grocery store.

- 1 pound scallions
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup chopped, peeled tomatoes
- ¼ cup pitted black olives (Kalamata or Gaeta)
- Pinch of red pepper flakes
- ½ cup white wine
- Salt to taste
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmigiano cheese
- 1 pound pizza dough

For the filling: Prepare the scallions by cutting off the tip of the bulb and slicing the bulb in half lengthwise, continuing up through the stalk. Cut each scallion stalk into 3 or 4 pieces, about 2 inches each in length. In a skillet, combine extra virgin olive oil with the scallions and sauté over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes, olives, red pepper flakes and wine, then stir and salt to taste. Cook uncovered until the scallions are soft and the wine has completely evaporated. Remove from the heat and set aside to cool. Stir in the capers and cheese.

Prepare the Frittelle: Divide dough into 4 or 6 equal pieces, depending upon desired size. With a rolling pin on a smooth, lightly floured work surface, roll out each piece of dough to form a circle, about ¼ inch thick. In the half of the circle facing you, spoon 2 to 3 tablespoons of the filling. Fold the dough over the filling to create a half moon shape. Press the outer edges firmly to completely seal the frittelle. Run a ravioli cutter over the pressed edges to cut off excess dough. After you've finished filling each frittelle, place them on a lightly floured surface and cover with a towel so they do not dry out before frying. Fill a pot with about two inches of vegetable oil and bring to high heat (about 380°F). The temperature is right for frying the frittelle when a small ball of dough is put in the pot and the oil

bubbles. Immerse two frittelle in the oil at a time, being careful not to crowd them. Fry, turning, until they are golden brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Let cool a few minutes before eating. Serve warm.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Santa Lucia Cookies

- ¾ cup olive oil
- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 2 pounds (about 8 cups) flour
- ¾ cup water
- 1 pound (about 4 cups) confectioner's sugar

Preheat oven to 375°F.

In a standing electric mixing bowl, mix the olive oil and wine together. Add the flour gradually and continue to mix until the flour and liquids are completely blended and the dough is firm, about 15 minutes. On a smooth work surface, cut off a small piece of dough and hand roll it into a thin long strip, about 1/4 inch thick. Cut the long strip into 1 inch pieces. Shape each 1-inch piece into a ring (tarallini) by connecting the two ends and pressing them firmly together.

Place the tarallini on a baking sheet. Bake for 30 minutes.

To prepare the icing, combine the water and sugar in a sauce pan. Over high heat, let the water come to a boil. Once the water boils, continue to stir. Continue for about 5 minutes, so that when you stop stirring there are still bubbles rising to the surface. In a large stainless steel bowl, put 5 tablespoons of the icing. Add a handful of tarallini and tumble them around the icing with a wooden spoon until they are coated. Pour the tarallini on a wooden board. Repeat the process with the remaining cookies, pouring them on top of the iced tarallini as you go along. Let them dry for several hours until the icing is completely dry and turns white.

Tip: The smaller you make the tarallini the better. This is a good project to do with small children — small fingers can make small tarallini.

Makes 36 cookies.

Baked Clams

- 2 dozen little neck clams
- 1 cup plain bread crumbs
- 1 tablespoon grated pecorino cheese
- 4 cloves of minced garlic
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 500°F.

Wash the clams under fresh water and open them, leaving the fruit on the half shell, discarding the empty halves.

Combine bread crumbs, cheese, garlic, and parsley in a bowl and then stir in the olive oil. Mix well until the oil has been fully absorbed. The bread will look uniformly wet. Add salt and pepper as desired.

Place the clams on a baking sheet and spoon one teaspoon of the bread crumb mixture onto each clam. Bake for 5 to 7 minutes, then put in the broiler for 1 minute to brown.

Serve immediately.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

