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# The Bright Side Of Basilicata

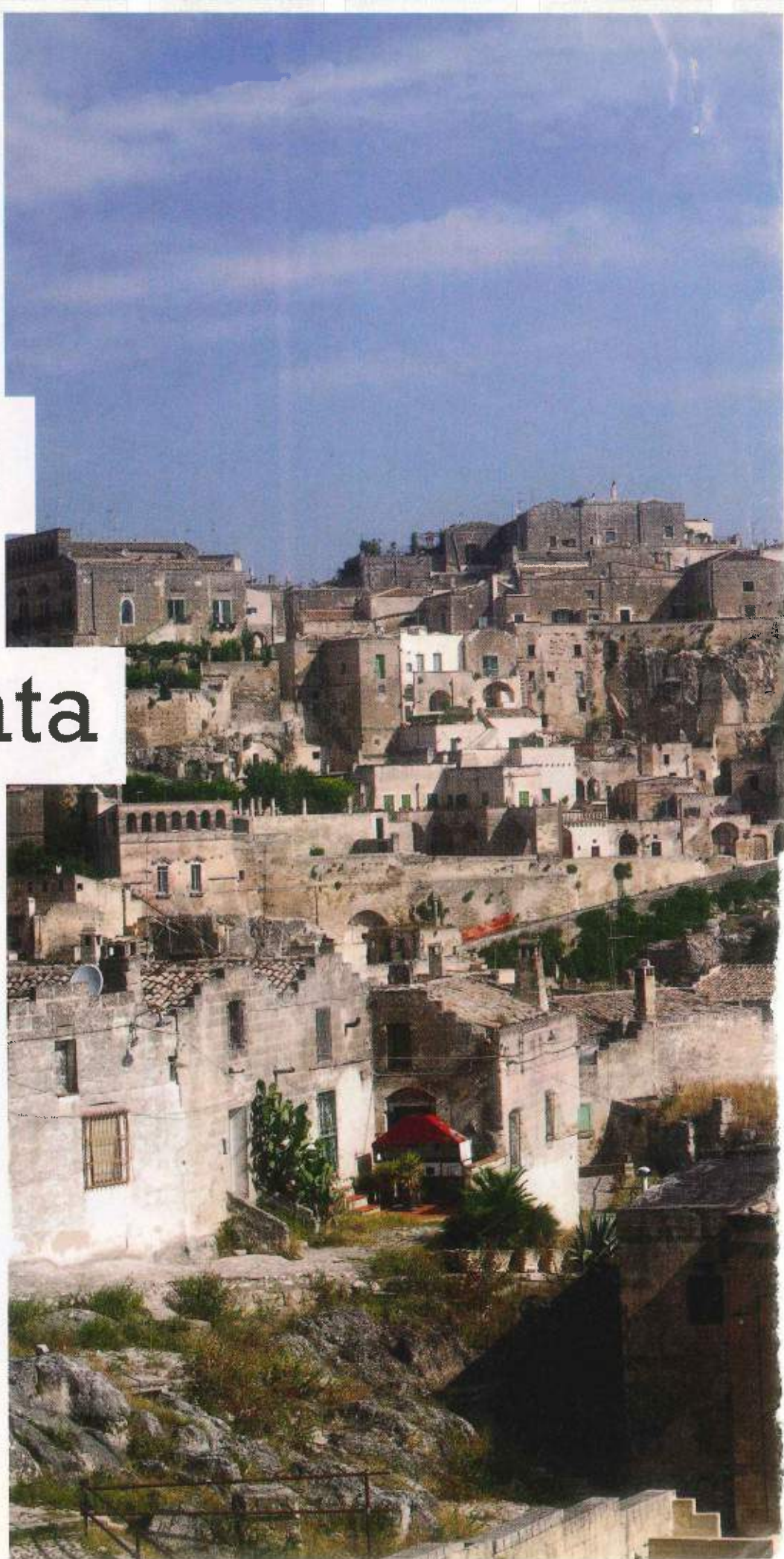
By Susan Van Allen

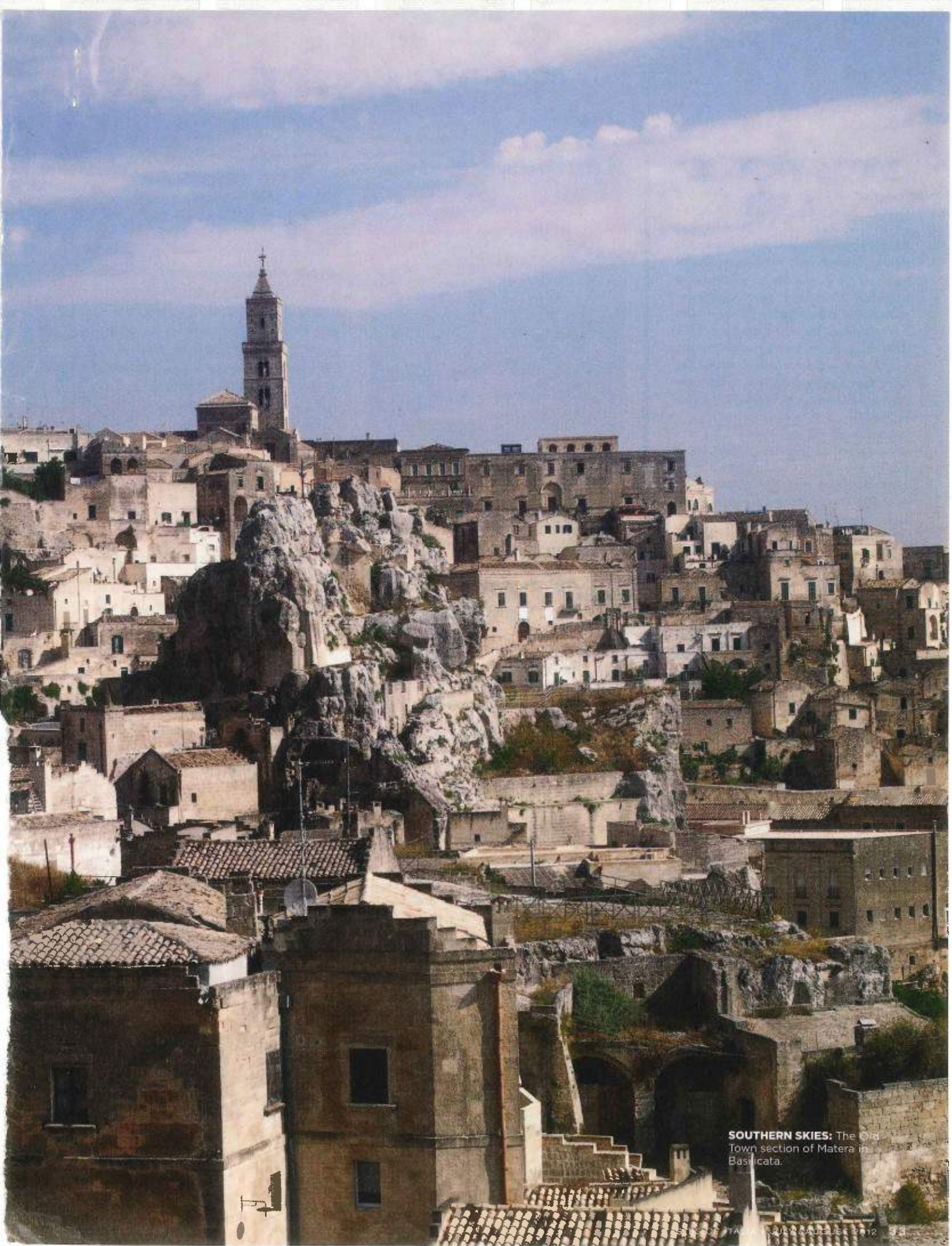
**A** bottle of Amaro Lucano, an herbal liqueur, always made an appearance at the end of Sunday dinners in my grandparent's dining room. As a child, I loved the bottle's label, which featured a smiling peasant signorina, with one hand on her hip and the other holding a basket of herbs.

I didn't realize how much this bottle must have meant to my grandfather. Papa was Lucano, the name given to natives of Basilicata - the southern region in Italy's instep that was called Lucania (meaning forest) in Roman times. He had left the region when he was a teenager in the early 1900s, leaving farm village poverty to pursue the American Dream.

Decades later, he sat surrounded by his loving family at his dining room table in Newark, New Jersey, and after presiding over abundant Sunday dinners, poured Amaro Lucano into fancy, tiny glasses. As a child, from where I sat, these dinners instilled in me a feeling that Italy was a happy, delicious place.

Even though guidebooks typically describe Basilicata rather grimly - as "one of Italy's poorest regions, made up of isolated mountain villages" - I went looking for the brighter side of the area. This meant saving Basilicata's major tourist attraction, Matera, for another





**SOUTHERN SKIES:** The Old Town section of Matera in Basilicata.

visit. Matera is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a town famous for its sassi—caves that were once Lucani homes—used by Mel Gibson for his “Last Temptation of Christ” set. Although friends described Matera to me as mysterious and uniquely elegant, it didn’t fit with the sunny Basilicata picture I was seeking. Instead, I headed to Maratea, a charming seaside spot on Basilicata’s Tyrrhenian coast, with lovely beaches, backed by soft green hills, dramatic cliffs, and not a tourist in sight. I soaked in some tranquil sand and sea time, then zigzagged up paths to the town center, where Antichi Sapori Ristorante beckoned.

Basilicata’s culinary specialties give a lively twist to cucina povera (poor kitchen) - a style of simple, peasant cooking that artfully uses what’s freshest and available. The region’s spicy pork sausage, Lucanica, is world famous.

The fertile soil around Monte Vulture, (a dormant volcano), nurtures Aglianico grapes for flavorful wines, olive and citrus groves, wheat and vegetable fields. Sheep graze here and their milk is turned into tasty pecorino cheeses. Hot red peppers, called diavolicchi (little devils); grow abundantly, and after harvesting they are strung up to dry, adding cheerful decoration to porches of humble homes. All this deliciousness makes for many variations of healthy options: pasta and seasonal vegetables are the base of Basilicata menus, with meat used sparingly.

I took my time with lunch on the terrace of Maratea’s Antichi Sapori. A bowl of olive oil sprinkled with dried diavolicchio stayed on the table from beginning to end. I dipped crusty bread in it, added a few drops to my tomato-sauced pasta, savoring the fiery spike of flavor.

As I finished a last sip of espresso, the mamma/chef of the whole operation, Marianna Pezzullo, peeked her head out from the kitchen. I praised her cavatelli, and couldn’t resist telling her about my Lucani roots. Marianna’s response was to bring over a bottle of her homemade amaro. Smiling, she poured it out for me into a little tumbler, looking so much like the happy peasant signorina on the Amaro Lucano bottle of my childhood...

You can embrace the delightful spirit of Basilicata during these warm summer days. Make life delicious, using these simple recipes, with sun ripened vegetables and fruit of the season, just as the Lucani do.

## Recipes



### Spaghetti with Uncooked Summer Tomato Sauce

- 3 pounds ripe tomatoes, diced into 1/4-inch pieces**
- 1 to 2 chopped garlic cloves**
- Pinch of dried red pepper flakes**
- Salt to taste**
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 1 pound spaghetti**

In a large bowl, mix together the diced tomatoes, garlic, dried red pepper, salt, and olive oil. Let stand while you boil the water for the pasta.

Cook the spaghetti in salted boiling water, according to package directions, until it becomes al dente. Drain the spaghetti, and stir it in with the tomato mixture. Cover the bowl, let sit for 15 minutes, then serve.

Makes 4 servings.

### Ricotta Stuffed Figs Dessert

- 3 tablespoons chopped pistachios**
- 3/4 cup fresh ricotta**
- 1 teaspoon grated orange zest**
- 12 ripe figs**
- 1/4 cup orange blossom honey**

Heat oven to 350°F. Spread out pistachios on a cookie sheet and toast until fragrant, about 7 to 10 minutes. In a bowl, mix pistachios together with ricotta and orange zest.

Wash the figs and pat dry. Slice each fig to open them for stuffing, by starting at the stem top, slicing each into quarters, cutting down almost to the base. Inside each sliced fig, spoon a generous tablespoon of the ricotta mixture. Arrange 3 figs each on individual plates. Drizzle each stuffed fig with a teaspoon of honey. Serve at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

### Ciammotta (Mixed Fried Vegetables)

- 1 medium eggplant**
- Salt, as needed**
- 4 medium green or red bell peppers**
- 5 medium ripe tomatoes**
- 5 new potatoes**
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 1 clove garlic, minced**
- 1 medium onion, diced**
- 1/2 teaspoon dried crushed red pepper**

Peel eggplant, cut into half-inch cubes, and sprinkle with salt. Place the salted cubes in a colander lined with a paper towel, so the bitter liquid can drain away in a dish underneath, for about an hour. Remove from colander and pat dry.

Remove stems, seeds, and ribs from peppers. Slice into 1/4 inch strips. Coarsely chop tomatoes and put them in a bowl with their juice. Peel and cut potatoes into 1-inch cubes.

In a large pan, over medium heat, saute the onion and garlic in olive oil until pale gold and fragrant. Add the sliced peppers and cubed eggplant and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 15 minutes, until peppers wilt.

Add tomatoes, salt, and crushed red pepper to taste. Stir and cook, lowering the heat to a simmer, for about 15 minutes. Add potatoes, stir, cover and continue simmering until the potatoes are tender when pricked with a fork, 20 to 30 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.