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MELLOW YELLOW

THE ANCIENT ITALIAN VILLAGE OF RAVELLO TOASTS THE SWEET TASTE OF TRADITION AND INNOVATION WITH ITS WORLD-FAMOUS LEMONS.

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDWARDO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KURT ARRIGO



I'M IN RAVELLO OVERLOOKING THE mesmeric Amalfi Coast, sharing the final hours of a crisp spring afternoon. And Secondo Amalfitano, the 53-year-old mayor and native son of this cliff-top village, is emphatically underlining the importance of lemons in life. "They're part of our culture and history, our agriculture and gastronomy," he says. This is where lemons, the best lemons, come from.

The scientific community agrees: A study conducted from 1988 to 1997 by the University of Naples found that Amalfi Coast lemons have an elevated number of oil glands compared to other coastal varieties, giving them superior aromatic potency and vitamin C content. Something the locals have known all along.

About 35 miles south of Naples, where its bay meets the Gulf of Salerno, the coast's legendary hairpin turns and dramatic drop-offs create a breathtaking joy ride along the Mediterranean. Ravello is three and a half hours by car from



Rome, mostly on the Autostrada. After exiting at the town of Angri, it's another 30 minutes through varied terrain, including stunning vistas above jagged earth and sapphire water.

Amalfitano, a Robert De Niro look- and charm-alike, smiles broadly between sips of espresso. "We do everything with the lemon," he continues, while his English-speaking friend, Milanese actor Enrico Bertolino, interprets. The two men will hold a press conference later that day, announcing the creation of a new performing-arts center. If approved, it will be Ravello's newest venue for its annual Wagner music festival, which is nearly as world famous as its lemons.

"They're unique, like precious pearls in an extraordinary necklace," says Amalfitano. "For a fever my mother placed lemon slices on my forehead; for a sore throat or stomach problems we drank the juice. To people who say there's no difference between our lemons and those on Capri, that's not true."

The Ravello jewels are botanically known as the cultivar Sfusato Amalfitano and are identified by their elongated, irregular, pearl-like shape; thick skin; exceptional sweetness; and low acidity. This lemon has historical significance. In the late 1500s, Ravello's lemons were coveted around Europe: Sea merchants would crowd the Sorrento harbor to load their holds with the teardrop-shaped fruit, and sell them throughout Europe. They also provided sailors with precious vitamin C to prevent scurvy.

Although the Ravello lemon is used in everything from pasta and cakes to salads and marmalades, it's best known in the form of limoncello—a distinctively sweet liqueur. In the 1400s, according to lore, limoncello was called *liquore dei poveri* ("liquor of the poor") because it was made and consumed by those who couldn't afford wine. Residue alcohol was collected from local stills and blended with the lemon's outer skin, or zest, which was painstakingly peeled by hand to separate out the bitter white underlayer, or pith, to make the tangy, sweet beverage.

Little has changed since then. It wasn't until the 1990s that limoncello production found its way out of private kitchens and into local factories, where it's mass-produced, to be exported abroad. Today, there are 24 limoncello factories on the Amalfi Coast.

The glistening, oil-rich zest is soaked in pure alcohol for several days, then cooled and blended with a sugar-and-water mixture and allowed to steep for four to five more days. The lemon skins are retrieved, and the residue oil is siphoned off and used for perfumes, soaps, and other products.

But not all limoncello is created equal. The chief drawback to factory-made limoncello is its tendency to become bitter. Machines are used to shave the yellow zest from the lemon without regard for variances in the skin's thickness. As a result, pieces of the bitter white pith get into the mix and taint the flavor. In addition, factory-made limoncello, which represents more than half the region's production, has a much shorter blending time than the handmade variety and is usually filtered, diminishing its potency and rich yellow color.

"The machine can't do what the hand can do," explains Valerio Di Riso, who in 1991 opened Ravello's first limoncello factory, where the original recipe is held as sacred. Two more factories have opened in town since then. He's speaking through an interpreter while poised over a 200-gallon vat of limoncello in his modest, 600-square-foot seaside facility, where two employees, one of whom is his father, peel the lemons by hand. Bottles are filled two at a

RESOURCES

GETTING THERE

From New York, Newark, Boston, Miami, and Chicago, you can fly to Naples on Alitalia via Rome and Milan (800-223-5730; www.alitalia.com); from New York and Atlanta, you can fly Delta Air Lines via Rome and Milan (800-241-4141; www.delta.com). It's a 90-minute drive from Naples to Ravello. The better hotels provide luxury car service for \$175 each way, and it's worth every penny. Taxis from Naples are generally unreliable and nightmarish to deal with, and the bus service operates on a mercurial schedule from Naples to Amalfi and then Amalfi to Ravello. Bus fare is \$8 per person each way.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

There are 11 hotels in Ravello, two of which are I've-died-and-gone-to-heaven, five-star gems: The Palazzo Sasso (800-225-4255; www.palazzosasso.com; rates \$400 to \$2,550) and Hotel Palumbo (39-089-857244; www.hotelpalumbo.it; rates \$820 to \$1,315) are right next to each other and possess a couple of the best views (and restaurants) in the region.

HOW TO COOK ITALIAN

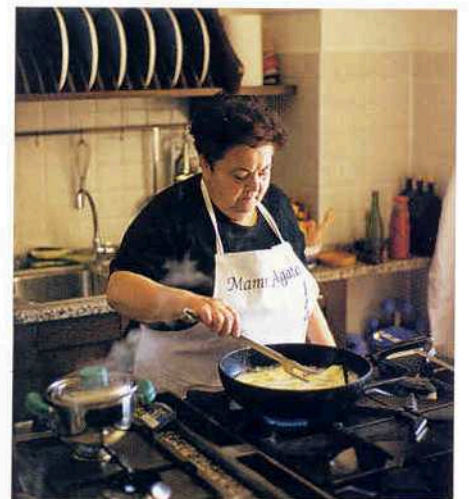
Mamma Agata's four-hour class, during which you'll prepare local entrées and desserts in the kitchen of her cliff-side childhood home, costs \$240 per person, including lunch (39-089-857019; www.mammaagata.com). Enroll at least two to three months in advance of your visit since space is limited. And be sure to take some lemon cake home with you. There's nothing quite like it.

YOUR LIMONCELLO CONNECTION

Valerio Di Riso of I Giardini di Ravello is your man for the best handmade limoncello you'll ever taste. Prices (not including shipping) range from \$4 for a 3-ounce bottle to \$12.50 for a 17-ounce bottle (www.ecostieramalfitana.it/giardinidiravello).



Pages 20-21: Ravello's low-hanging, high-quality fruit. Opposite page: Life handed Valerio Di Riso lemons, so he made limoncello. This page, clockwise from left: spring harvest in Mamma Agata's lemon groves; Ravello's Palazzo Sasso; Mamma Agata preparing a dish during a private cooking class. Next page: I Giardini di Ravello's sweet-not-sour limoncello.





time, after which labels are carefully pressed into place. Unlike that of his mass-market, coastal competitors, Di Riso's product at I Giardini di Ravello, a thriving \$750,000-a-year business, is pure; he forgoes using additives or preservatives to prolong the limoncello's 12-month shelf life or augment its bright yellow color.

Good thing Ravello has a bountiful supply of lemons: It takes three to five lemons, mixed with alcohol, water, and sugar, to make one quart of limoncello. Di Riso produces about 120,000 bottles a year, which are sold throughout Europe. But there's a downside, as Di Riso discovered after attending an international gourmet food show in New York. His current production volume is half what's needed for broader distribution, which is expected to be remedied this year when he moves to larger quarters and modernizes his bottling process without compromising his winning recipe. For now, he's content with selling to European markets. Being the best is reward enough.

"We think Valerio's limoncello is the best," says Marco Vuilleumier, a native of Ravello and the fourth-generation Swiss-Italian owner of Ravello's oldest hotel. The charming, five-star Hotel Palumbo opened in 1875. "It's all we serve here, along with many other dishes that use only locally grown lemons." The subtle smoothness and flavor of Di Riso's limoncello evoke powerful memories for Vuilleumier of his own parents' recipe. It's a

distinction that the people who grew up here say is quite profound.

Local shops pay homage to Ravello's ubiquitous lemons with equal gusto. Lemon-scented and -shaped candles and soaps and lemon-flavored candies abound alongside every conceivable size and shape bottle of limoncello. The local bakery does its part, too, with a jaw-dropping array of lemon-filled, -coated, -topped, and -glazed cakes, cookies, and rolls that will weaken even the most stalwart dieter.

Not to be outdone, Vuilleumier's father, in 1929, created Ravello's popular Soufflé Palumbo (lemon and chocolate soufflé), which has been altered only slightly since. The enchanting 22-room hotel's namesake, Pasquale Palumbo, would be pleased to know that it remains a staple menu item and point of pride from chef Antonio Sorrentino's kitchen, which produces a slew of lemon-infused creations, including a house favorite, Linguine al Limone della Costiera (linguine with lemon sauce).

Among Ravello's 11 hotels, the Palumbo's neighbor, the 32-room, 11-suite Palazzo Sasso, also has five-star status and spectacular coastal views. Its celebrated executive chef, Giuseppe Lavarra, integrates lemons into everything from traditional pastas, salads, and cakes to innovative meat and fish recipes. Filetto di Dentice Impanato al Pane Nero Servito con Saltata di Molluschi al Sentore di Limone Amalfitano e Chips di Limone (fillet of red snapper coated in black bread crumbs with salted shellfish, Amalfitano lemons, and lemon chips) is among his favorite creations, along with Provola Affumicata Arrostita in Foglie di Limone, Bruschetta di Melanzane e Gamberoni Arrostiti (smoked provola cheese roasted in lemon leaves, served with aubergine bruschetta) and Filetto di Vitello Avvolto in Buccie di Limone e Ripassato al Pan di Limone, Ciambotta Napoletana Spolverata al Limone (fillet of veal coated in roasted lemon peels and served with lemon bread crumbs and traditional Neapolitan ratalouille with fresh grated lemon peel).

"As a child I loved eating lemon slices dipped in sugar," says Lavarra, whose passion for sweet lemons prompted him to embellish the hotel's

Delizia al Limone Amalfitano, a traditional lemon and cream cake. "Instead of having the one cake, I created five little cakes by alternating layers of biscuits with three different textures of cream and lemon jams," he happily proclaims. "I also like to experiment using lemons in place of salad vinegars and marinades. The lemons here are so different that we, as chefs, have a wider range of options to create from."

Ravello's chefs aren't alone in their zeal for lemons. Angela and Bernard Johnson, a handsome couple from England enjoying their 18th visit to the Palazzo Sasso since it opened in 1997, cart kilos of lemons home with them to flavor their favorite dishes. "At home, the only ingredient I can't acquire is 100 percent undiluted alcohol to make limoncello, so I use vodka instead," says Angela, grinning.

She and I enjoy a half-day cooking lesson at Mamma Agata's modest, in-home culinary school, a short five-minute walk from our hotel. There, amidst lush terraced gardens and lemon groves overlooking the sea, we learn to make Mamma Agata's limoncello and famous Torta di Limone (lemon cake).

Although lemon cake is a traditional recipe passed down from mothers to daughters throughout the Amalfi Coast, there's a special buzz about Mamma Agata's version. Veteran food critic Arthur Schwartz included her recipe in his *Naples at Table: Cooking in Campania* (HarperCollins, 1998) after sampling a slice.

"People try reproducing my mother's cake, but it's never as soft and juicy," says her daughter Chiara, who helps promote her mother's business. "We sell it on request to people who rent private villas in Ravello. But we mainly serve it to our cooking-school guests and to friends."

Mamma Agata represents her family's third generation of chefs; she's been a personal chef to everyone from Elizabeth Taylor and Humphrey Bogart to Fred Astaire and Federico Fellini during their extended stays in Ravello.

Four hours and seven entrées later, our to-go bags bulging with jars of her lemon marmalade, Mamma Agata disappears into the kitchen to serve up seconds of cake and limoncello. And I may never leave. □

SWEET AND SOUR

LIMONCELLO DI MAMMA AGATA (Makes 3 quarts)

- 8 lemons
- 4 cups pure alcohol
- 5 cups water
- 3 cups sugar

1. Peel the lemon skins, careful to include only the yellow zest. Place into a jar with alcohol, cover, and leave at room temperature for seven days.
2. When skins are ready, boil the water and sugar,

then remove from stove and let sit until the mixture reaches room temperature.

3. Remove lemon skins from alcohol, add water-and-sugar mixture, and pour into bottles. Chill and serve.

TORTA DI LIMONE DI MAMMA AGATA (Serves 8)

- 6 ounces butter
- 1½ cups sugar
- 4 eggs
- 4 large lemons juiced to make ½ cup juice, grate the entire peel
- 3 cups all-purpose flour, measured *after* being sifted
- Pinch salt
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ cup milk
- ¼ cup water
- Sliced almonds

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. In a large mixing bowl, cream together butter and 1 cup of sugar until light and fluffy—about 5 minutes.
3. Add eggs one at a time, beating well between additions. Add lemon peel.
4. In a small bowl, stir together the flour, salt, and baking powder.
5. Fold half the flour into the butter mixture, then stir in half the milk. Fold in the remaining flour and milk.
6. Pour into a buttered and floured 9-inch Bundt pan and bake for 40 to 45 minutes.

7. While cake is baking, make syrup by combining the water and remaining sugar in a small saucepan and stirring over high heat until the mixture boils, the sugar dissolves, and the syrup is crystal clear. Let cool before adding lemon juice.

8. When the cake tests done, remove from oven and let cool on a rack for 15 minutes. While cake is still in pan and warm, make holes in the top of the cake with a skewer or toothpick and slowly spoon lemon syrup over the cake, allowing it to be absorbed before adding more. Reserve a few tablespoons for glaze.

9. Turn the cooled cake onto a serving plate. Boil the extra tablespoons of syrup until thick. Brush outside of cake with the thickened syrup to form a light glaze. Press almond slivers into glaze.

PALAZZO SASSO'S DELIZIA AL LIMONE AMALFITANO (Serves 6)

- Lemon Cream
- 5 gelatin sheets
- ¾ cup lemon juice
- 4½ ounces heavy cream
- 7 egg yolks
- 3½ Tbsp. sugar

1. While gelatin sheets soak in cold water, combine lemon juice and heavy cream and bring to a boil.
2. Cream together yolks and sugar. Stir into the boiled liquid and bring to boil. Mix in gelatin and set aside.

- Italian Meringue
- 3½ Tbsp. water
- ⅔ cup sugar
- 7 egg whites, whipped

1. Combine water and sugar, and heat to 250 degrees.
2. Slowly pour mixture into the whipped egg whites, and whisk by hand for 20 minutes until cold.
3. Fold meringue into the lemon cream. Place into 6-by-12-inch glass dish and refrigerate for at least 6 hours, then cut into six pieces and serve.



SOUFFLÉ PALUMBO (Serves 6)

- 5 sour cherries
- 2 eggs
- 5½ Tbsp. sugar
- Juice and grated peel of one lemon
- 1 Tbsp. cocoa

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Butter 6-inch soufflé dish and line bottom with cherries.
3. Separate egg whites from yolks; cream yolks and 4 Tbsp. of sugar until pale yellow.
4. Beat egg whites until stiff, then add a few drops of lemon juice, grated lemon peel, 1½ Tbsp. sugar, and yolk mixture.
5. Pour half the mixture over the cherries in the soufflé dish.
6. Add cocoa to remaining egg-and-sugar mixture and layer over mixture in soufflé dish.
7. Place in oven for 30 minutes, then serve immediately.