

# MAMMA *Mia!*



Ravello



Mamma Agata

Overlooking Italy's spectacular Amalfi Coast, the cliff-top town of Ravello hosts one of the most unforgettable culinary experiences on the planet. *By Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo*

From the tantalizing aromas and ancient cobblestone piazzas to the charming people who ooze hospitality, the enchanting town of Ravello epitomizes life as it ought to be.

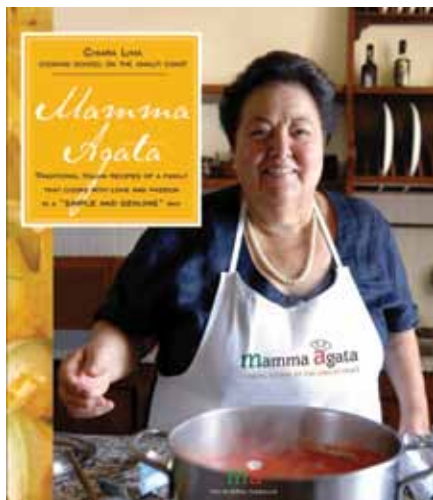
Just ask the jovial Mamma Agata who runs her eponymous cooking school there, with dazzling backyard views that stretch to Capri and beyond.

But, this isn't your ordinary school. It's your chance to be morphed into a large Italian family where you are hugged and fed and nurtured by the grandmother you never knew. For Italian Americans it signals a return to their roots and the indelible aromas of childhood.

Agata is her family's third generation of Ravello chefs and her culinary pedigree is impressive. She's been personal chef to both Italian Heads of State and American celebrities that frequented Ravello in the 1950s and 60s. The list includes everyone from Elizabeth Taylor, Jacqueline Kennedy and Humphrey Bogart to Fred Astaire and Federico Fellini. Bogart, reportedly had an insatiable penchant for Agata's signature lemon cake, while Jackie O insisted on helping wash dishes after being served meals in Agata's own kitchen.

"Launching the school in was a natural," says her English-speaking daughter, Chiara, who brings more than 20 years experience in the hotel industry overseeing all aspects of the school.

Chiara is joined by her husband, seasoned sommelier and hotel veteran, Gennaro, who demonstrates and explains the nuances of traditional Amalfi



Palazzo Sasso



Homemade Limoncello

region wines as well as dessert wines and grappas.

Together, they host a new generation of celebs and dignitaries. That list most recently included charismatic Irish actor Pierce Brosnan who came to Ravello and Mamma Agata's cooking school with wife Keely Shaye Smith and sons Paris and Dylan.

They, like all guests, enjoyed the day-long class in Agata's state-of-the-art home kitchen. Classes accommodate up to 10 guests who assist in preparing an assortment of homestyle southern Italian dishes using organic produce and herbs harvested from the cliffside garden that Agata's husband, Salvatore, takes special pride in overseeing. He also brings many years experience in the hotel industry to the family business although he is most at home in the garden. Well into his 70s, the handsome patriarch can be seen most mornings tending to the scores of produce that flourish in the fertile soil. On the same level is a small farm with free-range chickens, turkeys and rabbits, which he also oversees.

Sessions are completely hands-on — from chopping tomatoes and peppers to sampling dishes as they are prepared. Traditional special-

ties include antipasti, pastas, breads, seasonal vegetable and meat dishes as well as cakes and marmalades.

Gennaro is also Agata's star pupil and heir to the culinary throne. He plays sous chef to the family matriarch while Chiara lends her translation services for each class. Students also learn how to make limoncello — another family specialty — using homegrown organic lemons. The day's cooking compete, guests adjourn to the stunning seaside terrace for the meal of a lifetime, and where Chiara and Gennaro do the honors of serving each dish while recounting the highlights of how each one was made.

The Agata family recently was launched into the American spotlight with the release of their first cookbook, *Mamma Agata, "Simple and Genuine" Italian Family Recipes*, (available on Amazon, \$50). Complete with book signings and guest appearances on morning television shows, Chiara and Gennaro are now bringing a taste of Ravello and the school's signature dishes to a whole new market.

"More than food and recipes, we are sharing our modo di vivere," smiles Chiara. "Our way of life in the most beautiful place in the world."

I could not agree more.

## ROOM WITH A VIEW

Though most guests arrive by car, the school is a short, five-minute walk from Ravello's stunning five-star Palazzo Sasso hotel — named #1 Resort in Europe by *Travel + Leisure* magazine. Perched 1,000-feet above the shimmering Mediterranean it is a favorite among celebs and hon-eymooners looking for an extraordinary experience.

As the name suggests, the hotel was once a palace owned by the Sasso family in the 12th century, and many of its original Medieval and Baroque features have been retained.

The view from the Deluxe Suite is by far the most spectacular of Palazzo Sasso's 32 rooms and 11 suites, where oversized floor-to-ceiling windows open to drop-dead stunning views of the Amalfi Coast. Amenities span the imagination, from heated swimming pool and fully equipped gym, to cooking courses, helicopter service, and your choice of bed linens, pillows and Bulgari bath products.

The hotel is also home to Rossellinis, a two Michelin star restaurant and two other restaurants serving unforgettable cuisine led by Executive Chef Pino Lavarra. The talented chef has been creating gastronomical delicacies for decades. Prior to opening Rossellinis Lavarra worked as the Chef de Partie with Raymond Blanc at the world-

renowned Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Oxfordshire, England, and was Chef de Cuisine at Grissini's in London's upscale Cadogan Park.

In addition to his culinary duties, Lavarra's first cookbook made its European debut in spring 2011 with a U.S. launch slated for fall. A lovingly crafted homage to Ravello and the Amalfi Coast, the book showcases breathtaking photos of the region along with his signature recipes. With each chapter devoted to a regional specialty — from seafood and olives to lemons and citrus fruits — Lavarra takes readers on an unforgettable culinary odyssey.

In 2009, the hotel began offering a private beach club villa in the nearby village of Marmorata for its guests. From June through September a free private shuttle transports guests to the club where they can enjoy sunning terraces with lounge beds, salt water pool, private cabanas, and access to the sea. A small restaurant serves local favorites including fabulous pizzas and local seafood.

## WHEN IN RAVELLO

**DO:** The ideal walking village, Ravello is home to the palatial Villa Cimbrone and Villa Rufolo with its world famous outdoor classical concerts. Nearby towns include Amalfi, Minori, Positano and Capri as well as the stunning sights at Pompeii, Paestum and Herculaneum, which were destroyed on August 24, 79 A. D. when Mount Vesuvius spewed smoke, mud and burning stones from its summit, sending a rain of ash and rock that swallowed nearby farms, orchards and villas. (Note: Unlike Pompeii, many of Herculaneum's walls and ceilings stand intact, bringing breathtaking realism to the effects of the volcano.)

**EAT:** In addition to indulging in Chef Pino Lavarra's award-winning delicacies at Palazzo Sasso's Rossellinis, be sure to venture out into the town of Ravello where your first stop should be Cumpa Cosimo on nearby Via Roma. There, the brother and sister team of Antonietta (you can call her Netta) and Luca Bottone serve up an authentic Italian feast that you will never forget.

**SHOP:** Margherita DiPalma's ceramic store on Via San Francesco (which you passed on your way to Villa Cimbrone) features some of the world's best wares, which is why she enjoys a robust A-list clientele including Dustin Hoffman, Michael Douglas, Lauren Bacall, Susan Sarandon — and, or course, her neighbor Gore Vidal, who lives nearby.

**GETTING THERE:** From most major U.S. gateways you can fly to Naples or take the two-hour train from Rome before making the 90-minute drive to Ravello. A private driver for the duration of your stay is highly recommended and worth every penny, especially since the roads in and around Ravello are steep and narrow with hairpin turn after hairpin turn crammed with traffic that moves at a frightening pace. Thankfully, Amalfi native Claudio Lucibello at Amalfi Coast Car Service was on hand. Not only is he a superb driver and knowledgeable tour guide, but he does it all while navigating the treacherous roadways without breaking a sweat. [www.amalficoastcarservice.it](http://www.amalficoastcarservice.it); [claudiotaxiravello@virgilio.it](mailto:claudiotaxiravello@virgilio.it)

**HOW TO COOK ITALIAN:** Mamma Agata's classes are scheduled year round from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Cost is 200 euro per person, which includes lunch and wine; [www.mammaagata.com](http://www.mammaagata.com)

**WHERE TO STAY:** Palazzo Sasso's 32 rooms and 11 suites is Ravello's premiere hotel featuring stunning views of the Amalfi Coast. Rates from 224 Euros, depending on season and accommodation, and include full buffet breakfast. +39 098 81 81 81; [www.palazzosasso.com](http://www.palazzosasso.com) **{stb}**



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT TORTE DI LIMONE DI MAMMA AGATA (Serves 8)

6 ounces butter	3 cups all purpose flour, measured after being sifted
1 cup sugar	2 tsp. baking powder
4 eggs	1/2 cup milk
4 large lemons juiced to make 1/2 cup juice; grate the entire rind	1/4 cup water
Pinch salt	1/2 cup sugar
	Slivered almonds

**PRE-HEAT** oven to 350 degrees.

**IN A** large mixing bowl, cream together butter and sugar until light and fluffy — about five minutes.

**ADD** eggs one at a time, beating well between additions. Add lemon peel.

**IN A** small bowl, stir together the flour, salt, and baking powder.

**FOLD** in half the flour then stir in half the milk. Fold in the remaining flour and milk.

**POUR** into buttered and floured nine-inch bundt pan and bake for 40-45 minutes.

**WHILE** cake is baking, make syrup by combining the water and sugar in a small saucepan and stir over high heat until mixture boils and the syrup is crystal clear. Let cool before adding lemon juice.

**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 top of cake with skewer or toothpick and slowly spoon lemon syrup over the cake, allowing it to absorb before adding more. Reserve a few tablespoons for glaze.

**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.