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A zest for life: Savouring Italy's lemons and the Mediterranean lifestyle

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Narrow streets in Sorrento, Sicily, are lined with shops and cart vendors selling items crafted with lemons. PHOTO BY KEVIN HANN/Toronto Sun

When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade, right?

Well, in the coastal city of Sorrento, outside Naples in southern Italy, some of Europe's most remarkable chefs are transforming the famous fruit, grown widely on the charming Amalfi coast, into profoundly refreshing pasta dishes.

Likewise, in Catania, Sicily, where the lemon is king. Its narrow streets bustle with retail shops, food carts and restaurants offering bright yellow concoctions crafted from the powerful citrus: soaps, lotions, perfumes, sweet treats and the ever-popular limoncello liqueur.

Revered for their juiciness and high Vitamin C content, lemons from Sicily and the Amalfi coast are packed with antioxidants and citric acid, extending health benefits such as aiding in digestion and boosting the body's immune system. Not to mention, heralded for taste complementing and enhancing a broad spectrum of dishes.

Sarah Bua, public relations manager for O.P. La Deliziosa, an organization representing producers based in Sicily, said the region benefits from an ominous landmark — Mount Etna.

Bua, whose uncle Giovanni is the umbrella agency's president, says volcanic ash from the active volcano is spread across fields below it and acts as a fertilizer.

Bua's family harvests prickly pears in the shadow of Etna.

"It's rich, fertile soil thanks to Etna," she says.

La Deliziosa is a member of the "I Love Fruit & Veg from Europe" program, aimed at encouraging the purchase and consumption of seasonal European horticultural products, including organic and quality-labelled produce. The campaign, also promoted by producer organizations Agritalia, A.O.A., Meridia and Terra Orti. It's co-financed by the European Commission, targets markets in Canada.

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Well-travelled, Italian-born chef Dario Tomaselli, an instructor at George Brown College in Toronto, says "lemons are freshness, purity and a symbol of the Mediterranean culture."

Italian-born chef Dario Tomaselli, an instructor at George Brown College in Toronto, checks out lemons at the outdoor market in Catania, Sicily, in March 2025.

Italian-born chef Dario Tomaselli, an instructor at George Brown College in Toronto, checks out lemons at the outdoor market in Catania, Sicily, in March 2025. PHOTO BY KEVIN HANN/Toronto Sun

Tomaselli and his partner Anita Heidema, hosts of the YouTube program O'Live Your Life, focusing on Mediterranean living, recently travelled to Italy and Sicily to savour produce promoted through the "I Love Fruit & Veg from Europe" program.

Strolling through a mile-long outdoor market in Catania, Tomaselli marvels at the array of vibrant fruits, vegetables, cured meats and fresh fish on offer.

"It just blows my mind," he says. "Whatever is picked in the morning ends up here. Chefs come early to pick the best of the best."

Lemons find their way into a dish Tomaselli and Heidema seek out at L'Antica Trattoria each time they visit Sorrento.

"It's fresh pasta cooked in a citrus sauce with lump fish and prawns, served inside a large lemon from the Amalfi coast," says Tomaselli.

"It's absolutely delicious — fresh, creamy and quite different from the classical pasta with fresh San Marzano tomatoes and basil."

The tart and refreshing lemon sorbet is a palate pleaser, and profiteroles topped with lemon curd and lemon zest make a perfect one-bite dessert.

Heidema starts each day with lemon-infused water as a body cleanser. Tomaselli recalls a time when lemons were used to straighten hair.

Today, lemons are an important staple in his kitchen and culinary repertoire.

"For myself, there's nothing better than a fresh piece of fish, lightly grilled and dressed with some good quality olive oil or a squeeze of lemon," he says.

Tomaselli will be guest chef at the I Love Fruit and Veg From Europe Culinary workshop, on April 28 from 3:30-5 p.m., at Eataly in the Manulife Centre, 55 Bloor St. W., Toronto.

For more information and recipes, visit ilovefruitandvegfromeurope.com/ca

Chef Dario Tomaselli's lemon risotto with mortadella and pistachio

Prep Time: 10 minutes

Cook Time: 17 minutes

Total Time: 27 minutes

Equipment

Food processor, wide sauce pot, wooden spoon

Ingredients

- 330g mortadella cut into cubes
- 120g fresh ricotta
- 200g grated Parmigiano Reggiano
- 110ml heavy cream
- Grated nutmeg
- 1 litre of light chicken stock
- 80g unsalted butter
- 1 small white onion, minced
- 550g carnaroli riso
- 150ml dry white wine
- 1 large egg yolk, lightly beaten
- 1 lemon (zest and juice)
- 100g honey-preserved chestnut
- 100g toasted and crushed pistachios
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste.

Instructions

For the spuma (foam/mousse), in a food processor, add the cubed mortadella and pulse it gently until finely ground. Add the ricotta, Parmigiano Reggiano and cream and process until smooth.

Transfer into a clean bowl and fold in half of the toasted pistachio and the nutmeg, season and set aside in the refrigerator. (Best to prepare the spuma at least one hour prior).

Heat a large heavy wide pot over a medium heat, add 30 grams of butter and some olive oil until butter melting.

Add the onion and cook until translucent (no colour).

Add the rice and gently toast until the fat has slowly coated the rice and it turns opaque. Add the wine and continue stirring until all the alcohol has evaporated.

Ladle the hot chicken stock (normally, for the first pour of liquid is double the volume of liquid to the rice) and continue stirring.

As soon as the liquid has evaporated, keep adding un cup of hot stock and stirring constantly.

Allow the rice to cook for approximately 17 minutes, always allowing the rice to have sufficient liquid.

After 17 minutes taste a few grains of rice, you should have an al dente consistency. At this point remove the pot from the stove.

Add the remaining butter, the egg yolk, lemon zest and half of the lemon juice, adjust the seasoning.

Add the Parmigiano Reggiano grated, some of the honey from the chestnut and plate on a warm, flat plate. Pipe the mortadella spuma and garnish with slivered chestnut and remaining crushed pistachio.

Lemon turkey meatballs

Courtesy "I Love Fruit & Veg From Europe"

Prep time: about 30 minutes

Cook time: about 20 minutes

Total time: about 50 minutes

Ingredients

- 2 pita breads
- 500g turkey thigh mince
- 85g finely grated Parmigiana
- 1 egg
- 1 lemon separated out into its zest, and its juice
- 2 spring onions, finely chopped
- 120g wild rocket, or other fresh rocket leaves
- About 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Instructions

Soak the pita or bread in water (or a combination of water and milk) to soften a few minutes, then squeeze dry and crumble into small bits.

Mix with the turkey mince, the Parmigiana, egg, lemon zest, 1 spring onion; season to taste.

Roll into small meatballs.

Heat a heavy saute/frying pan (non stick preferable) and add a tablespoon (or more as needed) of the olive oil.

Add the turkey meatballs gently to the hot pan, keeping the heat around medium, enough to brown the meatballs gently, and to cook them through.

When the bottoms are browned, gently turn each meatball over onto one side, then a few minutes to another, cooking on three sides.

If you turn them too often in an effort to cook too many sides they could fall apart (though are still delicious).

Cook for about 20 minutes, until meatballs are cooked through and lightly browned.

Remove from heat and drizzle with about half the lemon juice. Set aside a moment while you prepare the rocket spring onion salad.

Combine the remaining spring onion with the rocket leaves, toss with remaining olive oil and lemon juice.

Season to taste.

Arrange the hot turkey meatballs on top of the salad, and pour any pan juices over the salad and meatballs as well.

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