

Executive Pastry Chef Nick Malgieri Article



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Nick Malgieri is the national spokesperson for the Switzerland Tourism Gastronomy and Wine program. After culinary school in the United States, he apprenticed in Switzerland and has maintained close ties with the country ever since through frequent visits. A frequent traveler to other destinations, he collects recipes everywhere. Below is a sample of some of the recipes from his book, *A Baker's Tour: Nick Malgieri's Favorite Baking Recipes from Around the World* (HarperCollins, October 2005).

Additional information on Nick Malgieri: www.nickmalgieri.com 

Florence



I've spent a fair amount of time driving around Italy and it's always amusing to arrive at the outskirts of some little town and to see a sign that proclaims something like: Sant'Ugo, Città d'Arte" (Saint Hugo, City of Art). Well, in the case of Florence, a billboard would be more appropriate and certainly deserved. One of the best places worldwide to savor outstanding architecture, painting, and sculpture, especially of the Italian Renaissance, Florence is the ultimate Città d'Arte.

Founded by Julius Caesar in 59 BC as a retirement community for his faithful soldiers (each received a parcel of land to farm), Florence prospered because of its fertile location and became an important trading stop. Early on, it was a center of the medieval wool industry. The rise of the super-rich Medici during the Renaissance turned Florence into a center for the arts. Unfortunately, the disastrous flood of the mid-sixties left so many works of art and rare books damaged, that some are still awaiting restoration to this day.

Florence is a great walking city, so bring comfortable shoes. It can be a bit confusing to navigate, but fortunately English has become so widespread in Italy, you never have to fear becoming hopelessly lost. And excellent food is to be found almost around every corner, so visit churches and museums, walk, get lost, have a little something to eat, and than start all over, my favorite way to enjoy the ultimate city of art.

What the "R" means

Many addresses in Florence follow this format: Via Novella, 59/R. Now don't go to Via Novella and look for the street number with an R after it, whatever you do. The "R" (or "r") stands for rosso, the word for red in Italian. And you'll quickly notice on any street that some of the numbers are painted in black and others in red. Red numbers are mostly used to designate businesses, though as with almost everything else in Italy, there are certainly exceptions. Most of the restaurant addresses below have an R, just be aware that black and red letters are not in sync with each other, and Via Novella 59 (black number) might be nowhere near 59/R..

Florentine and Tuscan Dishes Not to Be Missed

Here's a very casual list of some classics with translations of the names. You don't necessarily have to use it as a checklist, but it would be fun to check off the ones you've tried.

Baccelli e Pecorino: Springtime specialty of raw young fava beans eaten with lots of coarse red wine, crusty bread and pecorino cheese.

Crostini: Slices of grilled or toasted bread with a topping.

Crostini di Fegato are topped with a chicken liver spread, Florence's answer to chopped liver.

Fettunta: A large slice of Tuscan (usually salt-free) bread grilled and anointed with olive oil.

Pinzimonio: Olive oil-based dipping sauce for raw vegetables, often raw baby artichokes.

Nudi, or ravioli nudi: Ravioli filling poached on its own as little dumplings without the outer wrapping of pasta dough, therefore "nude.". The Enoteca Pinchiorri originated "Gnudi" where gnocchi and nudi meet head on.

Pappa al Pomodoro: Tuscan tomato and bread soup.

Pasta e Fagioli: White version of pasta with borlotti or cannellini beans, usually flavored with rosemary.

Ribollita: Originally made from leftover minestrone reheated with pieces of stale bread, nowadays ribollita is deliberately made to be so. The ultimate thick soup, it's sometimes actually served in a frittata shape on a flat plate.

Papperdelle sulla Lepre: Wide ribbons of egg pasta with wild hare sauce, VERY rich and usually only available in winter.

Panzanella: Tomato and bread salad (see recipe, below).

Trippa alla Fiorentina: Tripe Florentine style with a touch of tomato and lots of carrots to sweeten it.

Stracotto: Literally, "overcooked," beef braised in red wine and aromatics.

Bistecca alla Fiorentina: A thick porterhouse grilled rare.

Arista: Roast pork loin.

Fagiolini all'Uccelletto: Beans (Tuscany's favorite vegetable) in a light tomato sauce.

Schiacciata con le Uve: A kind of focaccia with a baked-on topping of fresh grapes.

Castagnaccio: Coarse chestnut focaccia/cake.

Bomboloni: Spherical yeast-risen doughnuts filled with custard cream or jam.

Quaresimali: Crisp almond biscotti.

Zuccotto: Dome-shaped cake said to be modeled after the dome of Florence's cathedral.

Restaurant suggestions

These are the classics, plus some casual places to fill in the gaps. Be aware that restaurants in Florence close after lunch and sometimes don't reopen until 8PM. If you've been sightseeing or shopping and realize that it's 4 in the afternoon and you haven't had lunch, stop in at a bar or wine bar for a panino and a glass of your favorite.

La Giostra

The name means the Carousel in Italian and a veritable carousel of treats awaits you here. Right in the center of Florence, a few steps from the Duomo, La Giostra can still be difficult to find since it doesn't have a sign. Don't be discouraged, the restaurant gets consistently high ratings for both food and service. Enjoy fresh crayfish salad, crostini with rabbit liver, or sole with 12-year-old balsamic vinegar, or any of the creative, but tame pasta selections. The owners claim to be descended from the Habsburgs, so there is a sprinkling of imperial Austrian dishes throughout the menu. Reservations essential, dressy.

La Giostra

Via Borgo Pinto 12/r

Florence

E-mail: info@ristorantelagiostra.com

Phone from the US: 011 39055 24 13 41

www.ristorantelagiostra.com 

Il Latini

For traditional Florentine food in an elegant setting Il Latini can't be beat. Originally a fiaschetteria or bottled wine store, the restaurant has hosted many of the greats of the Italian literary scene. In 1982 they began awarding an annual Premio Amici del Latini (prize of the friend of Il Latini) for contemporary poetry.

This is a perfect place to try stracotto or ribollita, or many of the other traditional dishes on the list above. Closed Mondays.

Il Latini

Via dei Palchetti 6/r

Florence

E-mail: info@illatini.com

Phone from the US: 011 39055 210 916

www.illatini.com 

Alle Murate

The style of cooking here blends specialties from all over Italy with antique and contemporary recipes on its menu. You might try a soup of chickpeas and cod, or simply grilled fish with polenta. Open only for lunch, Alle Murate is also closed on Mondays. Dressy.

Alle Murate

Via del Proconsolo 16/r

Florence

Phone from the US: 011 39055 240 618

www.caffeitaliano.it 

Osteria De' Benci

This is the place for Bistecca alla Fiorentina, and it's the real thing. Here you'll be rubbing elbows more with locals than with tourists, so you know you'll be getting the real thing. By the way, real Florentines start the meal with the steak, which can be enormous, then fill in with a few smaller dishes afterwards, rather than filling up on appetizers and having no room left for the glorious steak... Closed Sunday and between lunch and dinner on other days.

Osteria De'Benci

Via de' Benci 3

Florence

Phone from the US: 011 39055 234 4923

Harry's Bar

Stop for a drink where the likes of Hemingway and Elizabeth Taylor once relaxed, it's still a great place for people watching in a fun setting. Though this one has no connection to the equally famous Harry's in Venice, Arrigo Cipriani (the Harry of both bars' name) advised the owner to call it so when he opened in Florence in the early fifties. The signature Cipriani cocktail, the Bellini, made from white peach juice and Prosecco is also available here. Dressy casual...

Harry's Bar Firenze

Lungarno A. Vespucci 22/r

Florence

Phone from the US: 011 39055 239 6700

www.harrysbarfirenze.it 

Le Fonticine

Named for the 16th century della Robbia fountain (fonte) in its entry this restaurant occupies the site of a former convent. Silvano and his wife Gianna Bruci (a native of Bologna) joined Gianna's mother Bruna Grazia in a venture that would combine the best of both Florentine and Bolognese cooking. The delicate bean dishes and formidable grilled steak of the former blend seamlessly with the lasagna, flat, and filled pastas of the latter. Closed Sunday and Monday and between lunch and dinner.

Le Fonticine

Via Nazionale 79/r


Florence

E-mail: info@lefonticine.com


Phone from the US: 011 39055 282 106

www.lefonticine.com 

Try the following links for additional restaurant listings and suggestions:

NY Times Travel Section: Lots of reader suggestions, with plenty of cross-talk seconding the suggestions. Good selection of places right outside the city as well as reasonably priced ones within. 

Yahoo Travel: Suggestions sometimes accompanied by consumer reviews. Maps provided. 

Florence by Net: A couple of dozen listings with descriptions of the food and décor. 

My favorite pastry shop in Florence

More than twenty years ago I was trudging around Florence with a couple of friends, buying cookbooks and looking for interesting pastry shops. A market produce vendor we asked sent us to Robiglio, Via dei Servi location – I think it was the only one at the time. Pier Luigi Robiglio greeted us in perfect American English (his wife is from California) and proceeded to spend most of his busy morning giving us tastes of the Florentine specialties they prepared. We left with an enormous zuccotto which we took to a casual restaurant for lunch and shared it with most of the customers there at the time. Since then, Mr. Robiglio has retired and left the business in the hands of his son Edoardo who has expanded it to 5 different locations. Stop by for a snack, some cookies or a plain cake to take home, or a fancy dessert if you are invited to a Florentine home for a meal.

Pasticceria Robiglio

Via de Servi 112/r

Via Tosinghi 11/r

Viale S. Lavagnini 18/r

Via dei Mille 12/r

Gelateria Robiglio

Via Viale Strozzi 8/r

Going to the market

I love visiting food markets when I travel, though I confess it can be frustrating to see the most beautiful artichokes in the world and have nowhere to cook them. I still go and pick up some fruit or a piece of cheese to keep in my room.

The following link will take you to a couple of pages of information about food, antique, flea, leather goods and straw markets:

www.aboutflorence.com/typical-markets-in-florence.html 

Cooking classes in Tuscany

I knew that my old friend Pamela Sheldon Johns was running cooking classes in Tuscany, but I didn't realize until I tried looking her up that she has been living there with her husband and daughter for almost 8 years. Check the website for a variety of one-day and longer classes.

Pamela told me that they'll meet people coming for a one-day class at the train station in Chiusi, about an hour outside Florence. For longer stays, Pamela and her husband operate an agriturismo or country inn at Montepulciano.

Website:

www.foodartisans.com 

A note about Tuscan wine

It's a long time since the straw-wrapped Chianti bottle was the Tuscan wine with which most people were familiar. Here are a few of the stars of the Tuscan vineyards, easily available wherever you might live:

Vernaccia di San Gimignano: a delicate dry wine, perfect with fish and seafood

Galestro: a white that's more fruity and pronounced than Vernaccia

Aleatico: A sweet red wine from the isle of Elba

Brunello di Montalcino: Aged for a minimum of 4 years, this is a perfect choice with red meats and with cheeses. Brunello Riserva is aged for an extra year.

Chianti: A light red wine that blends perfectly with almost any food.

Chianti Riserva: Aged at least 3 years, a Chianti Riserva is full bodied and needs to breathe for an hour before being drunk.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano: Another champion of the table, perfect with grilled and roasted meats.

Vinsanto: Sweet white wine often served with biscotti or plain cake in Tuscany.

Recipe: Panzanella, Tuscan Bread, Tomato and Onion Salad

Of course the best panzanella is made during the summer with vine-ripened tomatoes. Traditionally the bread is soaked in water – this does soften it but adds nothing to the flavor. Then I learned a wonderful trick from a Marcella Hazan recipe – she puts a couple of tomatoes through a food mill (you can also grate them) over the bread, so the bread is moistened with tomato juice, not water.

About 6 servings

1 pound 2-day old French or Italian bread, cubed

2 1/2 pounds fresh tomatoes, divided

1 small red onion, peeled, halved and sliced from stem to blossom end

1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons wine vinegar

Salt and pepper

20 large leaves Italian basil, rinsed, dried, and torn

1. Place the cubed bread in a mixing bowl and puree or grate a couple of the tomatoes over it. Toss with a rubber spatula so that all the bread is evenly moistened.

2. Crumble the moistened bread into a serving bowl; dice the remaining tomatoes and add to the bowl along with the onions. Toss to mix.

3. Sprinkle on the oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper and toss again, tossing in the basil leaves.

4. Cover and keep in a cool place, but not refrigerated. To serve, mound on a platter and garnish with more basil leaves.

VARIATIONS: You may add a couple of any of the following to the panzanella, making it more substantial but a little less authentic:

Half of a finely sliced red or yellow bell pepper

A small cucumber, peeled, seeded, and diced

A couple of anchovies mashed with the oil

A couple of tablespoons of capers

Half cup of pitted oil-cured olives

A handful of chopped parsley.