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Sisters Share Their Private Puglia

Born and raised in *Puglia*, *Marika* and *Cinzia Rascazzo* operate *Stile Mediterraneo*, a hands-on Italian cooking and wine school housed in a historic palace with a subterranean *frantoio* in *Squinzano*, near the baroque city of *Lecce*. The siblings are passionate ambassadors of the true Pugliese cooking and culture absorbed from their 97-year-old *Nonna Vincenza* whom everyone knows as *Nonna 'Nzina*.



Cinzia (left) and Marika

gist. When she speaks — in fluent Italian, English or French — about the healthfulness of the Mediterranean way of eating and living, she has the authority to back up her message.

Cinzia holds an M.B.A. from Harvard University and has experience in international marketing and finance. She is a certified extra-virgin olive oil taster and expert on Pugliese wines.

With their flowing dark tresses, slender figures, and glowing olive complexions, the sisters look like poster children for the Mediterranean way of life. They are all that — and so much more.

First-born Marika, a talented amateur photographer, is a practicing cardiolo-

The pair advocates the Slow Food philosophy that honors locally grown foods prepared in traditional ways. *'N Capriata* (pureed cooked fava beans with wild chicory), *ciceri e tria* (fresh *tagliatelle* with chickpeas) and *polpette di melanzane* (eggplant fritters) are indicative of the recipes they learned from *Nonna 'Nzina*. "For our

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Hotels and Apartments to Come Home to in Florence



I don't understand those who say that where they stay doesn't matter — "We leave early in the morning, so we are never in the room, all we do is sleep there, etc." For those of us who still have a romantic view of travel, a wonderful room in a hotel is one of the most important parts of a trip. In a strange place, it's where we call home — a place to relax and recharge.

A hotel doesn't have to be grand or pretentious. It can be simple and charming. It should have a friendly and caring staff. The linens should be fresh and crispy, the towels fluffy. There are also other advantages: though I always go through my files and make long lists before I leave, if the hotel concierge is good, it means I will find out about "insider places" that I might have missed.

In some hotels, the food alone is worth the stay (the *Hotel Cipriani* in *Asolo* in years gone by comes to mind), although in Florence this is not a consideration, because there are so many outstanding places to dine. In any case, you should choose a place you will absolutely love coming home to. Here are some of my favorite places to stay in Florence:

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There are 50 million olive trees in Puglia.

nonna, the most important thing is food," Cinzia says. "She'll spend the whole day cooking — maybe four hours just to prepare a *minestrone*."

Marika is quick to add, however, that it is more than food alone. "People here don't eat just to feed themselves. Food brings people together. Food is a social thing. We generally go home for lunch from 1 to 5 p.m. to slowly eat small portions of everything with our family and to rest. At Sunday lunch, we have soooo much food and we stay at the table for many hours but it is not just about eating. It is about being together."

For their *Stile Mediterraneo* (Mediterranean lifestyle) class and specialty tour groups, Cinzia and Marika deliberately keep the number of attendees low (usually no more than six) so they are able to personalize each visitor's experience. *Le due sorelle* (two sisters) share recommendations that go deeper into the food, glorious nature, folk

music, cultural and religious celebrations that comprise the Rascazzo's mosaic of their beloved homeland.

Pasta and Pizzica

Sagra delle Orecchiette, the festival celebrating Puglia's signature pasta, is held in the small town of *Merino*, just south-east of *Lecce*, usually the second weekend in July. Local cooks set up open-air stalls, preparing and cooking *orecchiette* to sell to visitors who then dine at tables set up on the streets.

The pasta is prepared from *grano duro*, the hard durum wheat that is a major agricultural product of the region. Unlike fresh egg pasta of *Emilia-Romagna* and other northern regions, the fresh Pugliese pasta is a paste of flour and water. To shape the *orecchiette*, which means "small ears," cooks break off tiny balls of the dough and, with a thumb, press a dimple into each one. The concave

surface is ideal to cradle sauces. In the area around *Lecce*, *orecchiette* are served with tomato-basil sauce and a sprinkling of either goat or sheep *caciocotta* cheese.
(www.viaggiareinpuglia.it)

Pizzica. As *orecchiette* is the pasta of Puglia, so *pizzica* is the defining folk dance and music of the region's *Salento*



Peninsula. The spasms of people bitten by poisonous tarantulas are said to have inspired this intoxicating music which can include drum, tambourine,

flute, guitar, accordion, and voice. The sound and movement increase in intensity to mimic the movements of the afflicted.

The Rascazzo sisters love to dance the *pizzica*. "It's easy," they attest. One of their preferred venues is the annual feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June

Stile Mediterraneo Cooking and Wine School

Who says sense and sensuality can't share the dining table?

Certainly not Marika nor Cinzia Rascazzo, proprietors of the *Stile Mediterraneo* Cooking and Wine School. This dynamic pair is out to enlighten the world — one student at a time — to the empowering message that eating in the healthful Mediterranean manner is a feast for all the senses.

Marika and Cinzia personally select all the ingredients (organic whenever possible) to ensure the highest quality. Some produce even comes from the Rascazzo family's property. The terroir of Puglia is present in each bite — in the extra-virgin olive oil,

wild chicory, durum wheat bread crumbs, hand-made mozzarella, or native wine grapes such as *Negroamaro* and *Sussumaniello*.

For the foundation of each lesson, Marika, a practicing cardiologist, explains the health benefits of each ingredient and preparation method. She and Cinzia believe that this differentiates their school from others that merely teach students how to recreate recipes by rote.

The lesson plans change according to the season and what ingredients

are the best choices on class day. In addition, holiday and feast day specialties are incorporated. "At

Christmas, we teach Almond Cake. It's an ancient recipe created by my *nonna*'s mother. Our *nonna* would make it at Christmas time. It's packed with almonds which are full of vitamin E," Cinzia says.

"Whenever we make this cake, Marika and I remember the Christmas aroma of cinnamon and clove. Our *nonna* is so proud that we are teaching her mother's cake to our guests."



All classes are participatory, taught in English, and limited to six students. The typical cooking program runs for six days and includes three cooking classes (with students eating what they have prepared) and visits to local wineries, markets, and olive oil producers. Because each program is customized, the six-day cooking itinerary may range in cost from 740 to 1,245€.

**Stile Mediterraneo
Cooking and Wine School**
Via Diaz, 84
Squinzano (Lecce)
(39) 3484 514324
www.stilemediterraneo.it

Unlike her neighbors, Puglia

eat just to feed themselves.
people together. Food is a social thing.

29 in the town of *Galatina*. Celebrations actually start with a procession on June 28 and the event includes fireworks and concerts.

In times past, *tarantate* (people who survived the tarantula's venom) would come to Galatina from all over the Salento to celebrate their recovery. "There is no specific address or contact number. If you're in Puglia on June 29, you just come to Galatina," Cinzia advises.

Sea Faring

The Fish Market in Gallipoli. Marika shops at the morning fish market in Gallipoli's old city where she knows the glistening seafood is just a few hours out of the sea. Anchovies and sardines (bursting with omega-3 fatty acids), sea bass, sea urchin and all sorts of shellfish — like the local *fasolari* and *piedi di capra* — abound. Marika marinates the fresh anchovies in wine vinegar, extra-virgin olive oil, and a bit of parsley. Both she and Cinzia are crazy about fresh sea urchins savored as *antipasto* or cooked with *linguine*.

Marika Barozzo



Red Prawns Baked in Sea Salt Crust. If you visit the Fish Market and don't have access to a kitchen, you'll quickly become frustrated. Head to the nearby *Trattoria La Puritate* for a meal of Mediterranean prawns baked in a salt crust. The simple preparation keeps the prawns incredibly moist and tasty. Cinzia also approves of the wine list.

Double Identity

In the charming whitewashed town of

Cisternino, named one of "the most beautiful villages in Italy" by ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities), is "a traditional trattoria where people can go and eat very good meat." *Macelleria Demola* and *Arrosteria del Vicoletto* is a butcher shop with an attached rustic dining room that serves locally-produced meats grilled or roasted over a wood fire. Clients may choose the cutlet they want at the meat counter and it will be cooked for them in the *arrosteria*. Cinzia and Marika recommend sampling the *Bombetta*, a typical meat dish of town. The *Bombette* are grilled thin pork or veal cutlet bundles that are stuffed with pecorino cheese and fresh herbs, and coated in breadcrumbs. Cinzia jokes that Pugliese cooks love to put breadcrumbs on almost everything.

A Pair of Pastries

Il Rustico is a savory pastry of *pasta sfoglia* (puff pastry) crust enclosing tomato sauce, mozzarella, and bechamel seasoned with pepper and nutmeg. "This is something you can only find in *Lecce*. It is very cool to have it sitting outside at any caffè with friends as an *aperitivo* before lunch," Cinzia says. One likely spot is the stylish *Caffè Alvino* — in the *Sant'Oronzo* square although it will be very good at any coffee bar in Lecce.

Il Pasticciotto, a *pasta frolla* (sweet pastry) tart filled with lemon cream, is the preferred breakfast in Lecce. However, the best *pasticciotto* is baked in the historic *Pasticceria Ascalone*, in Galatina, between Gallipoli and Lecce. Cinzia

tells the story that when she was younger and lived in *Milano*, she would visit *Ascalone* and ask to purchase a tray of *pasticciotti* to take back north with her. The baker refused to sell them to her because he insisted that the pastries must be enjoyed warm or not at all.

Bi-Coastal

Porto Selvaggio Parco Naturale

Regionale is a habitat for animal, bird and plant life located north of Gallipoli on the Ionian Sea, close to the striking town of *Nardò*. Miles of stunning coast are studded with towers



Infano, Gaciano, flidra.com

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DREAM OF ITALY®

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's landscape is virtually flat.

Luxury Hotels

Casa Howard Florence

Via della Scala, 18

(39) 06 924555

www.casahoward.com

Rates: A double room costs from 160 to 190€ per night and specialty-themed rooms, such as the fireplace, terrace or oriental rooms, cost from 160 to 250€. Breakfast is not included.

This 12-room hotel, sister to the *Casa Howard Rome*, always gets a lot of press because of its décor — rather dramatic and just a little bit quirky. Vivid colors and decorator fabrics cover antique and custom-designed pieces, creating a pleasing effect in the high-ceilinged rooms of this *palazzo*. It's located almost next door to the fragrant *Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella* (which is where the amenities in the bathroom come from). Both are located on the noisy *Via della Scala*.

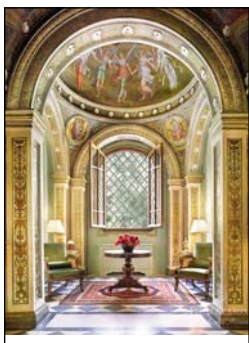
Four Seasons Hotel Florence

Borgo Pinti, 99

(39) 055 26261

www.fourseasons.com/florence

Rates: The standard rate for a superior room is 295€ per night, but there are six other package options that include meal(s) and/or tours from 350 to 495€ per night. Includes coffee and tea service every morning from 5 to 8 a.m.



The second Four Seasons in Italy opened here in

the spring of 2008 and occupies two very special buildings, the 15th-century *Palazzo Gheradesca* and the 16th-century convent next door, set in a lush, 11-acre botanical garden, the *Giardino della Gheradesca*.

One of the most breathtaking hidden treasures in the city, it features rare species, including a giant evergreen sequoia and a century-old thuja tree, also known as the “tree of life.” The hotel has been sumptuously restored — 500-year-old frescoes, carvings, bas-reliefs and architectural details — have been returned to their original glistening state.



The 117 bedrooms and suites are luxuriously appointed, including lotions and potions by the Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella and the Coty Perfume Prize-winner *Lorenzo Villoresi*. All the Four Seasons trademarks are in place — beautiful extra-large bathrooms; knowledgeable, friendly service; a chic spa; a terrific-looking bar and restaurant and something found only in a few places in Florence — quiet, quiet, quiet.

Moderately Priced Hotels

Hotel Hermitage

Vicolo Marzio, 1

(39) 055 287216

www.hermitagehotel.com

Rates: Rooms range from 120 to 245€ per night and include breakfast.

This was the first place I stayed in Florence when I was a student and when I returned to work in fashion. I loved it because it was owned by two nice old ladies, was just steps away from the *Ponte Vecchio*, and had the best roof garden in Florence, where continental breakfast was served under the verdant *pergola* and the railings were hung with coral-geranium-filled window boxes. It has a view of the



Duomo and the *Palazzo Vecchio* from one side and the Arno River and the *Vasari Corridoio* from the other.

Though the hotel has new owners and updated interiors, those things have not changed. The staff is lovely, and every time I visit to say hello, it still feels a little like home.

J&J Hotel

Via di Mezzo, 20

(39) 055 263121

www.jandjhotel.com

Rates: Depending on the season, rooms and suites range from 115 to 330€ per night, including breakfast.

If you want to stay somewhere that is just off the beaten path and yet close to everything, the J&J fits the bill. It's situated on a quiet street in a Florentine neighborhood near the delicious *Cibreo* group of restaurants.

It was transformed from a 16th-century convent into a 20-room hotel decorated with period Italian antiques and comfortable furniture crisply covered in pretty fabrics. Settle in the courtyard, a great place to relax and have tea or a drink, and you will feel that you are really living in the past.



Residenza Santo Spirito

Piazza Santo Spirito, 9

(39) 055 2658376

www.residenzasantospirito.com

Rates: Depending on the season, a double room ranges from 90 to 130€ per night, including breakfast, a three-bed room ranges from 145 to 170€ and a room with four beds costs 180 to 220€ nightly.

This is the perfect place for anyone who loves the *Oltranto* and *Piazza Santo Spirito*, as it sits just at the corner. It has

Six new jogging paths op

treasures in the city, it features rare species, including century-old thuja tree, also known as the “tree of life.”

just three rooms, but they are grand — big and beautifully restored, with antiques and original floors and ceilings. The bathrooms are spacious and modern.

It is owned by *Ferdinando* and *Laura Budini Gattai*, who will be enlarging it shortly by renovating the top floor. The *loggia* at the top offers a wonderful view of the city and the very lively piazza below.

Hotels in the Hills

Villa Poggio San Felice

Via San Matteo, 24

Arcetri

(39) 055 220016

www.villapoggiosanfelice.com

Rates: All rooms at this hotel are 200€ per night, with the exception of “The Grandparents’ Room,” which is 250€ per night. Breakfast and shuttle service included.

This gracious two-story Tuscan villa is in the tiny town of *Arcetri*, just above Florence.

It was inherited by the owner *Livia Puccinelli* from her



great-grandfather, Gerardo Kraft, who once owned the Grand and Excelsior hotels in town.

The cool, simple-but-charming interiors include five bedrooms — most with balconies — lovely flower-filled gardens and a small swimming pool. You can walk into Arcetri to see Galileo’s house and have lunch at *Omero*.

The last lines in the hotel’s brochure are the clincher: “Free accommodation

to children under the age of three. So as to make you feel at home, we also speak English and French. Small and well-behaved dogs are welcome.”

Villa San Michele

Via Doccia, 4

Fiesole

(39) 055 5678200

www.villasanmichele.orient-express.com

Rates: During the high season, a double room ranges from 550 to 1,070€ per night, with breakfast.

I’ve been in love with this romantic hotel for a very long time, ever since we had a memorable lunch on the loggia one spring afternoon when we were just married. It is nestled in the hills of *Fiesole*, just 15 minutes from Florence.



The magic starts as you approach, up a narrow, winding road. The fragrance of lemon trees and flowers comes to meet you as you enter the hotel, a 15th-century Franciscan monastery, whose façade is said to have been designed by *Michelangelo*.

Stroll through the ancient cloister and restaurant to the terraced garden with beige umbrellas, comfortable chaise lounges, roses, wisteria and fragrant herbs. The pool is at the top, above two rows of junior suites, which are roomy and comfortable and have terraces overlooking the spectacular panorama of Florence.

The bathrooms and dressing rooms are large and beautifully appointed with *Bulgari* and *Penhaligon* amenities tucked into baskets filled with fluffy

towels. The staff couldn’t be nicer. Do try to stay here, but if you can’t put lunch, dinner or a drink on the loggia on your to-do list.

Apartments and House Rentals

St. James Guest House

Via Bernardo Ruccellai, 9

(39) 055 294417

www.stjames.it

St. James, the Episcopal church in Florence, was founded by J.P. Morgan and has some wonderful programs for visitors, including a library and terrific thrift shop. They also have a guest house with a spacious three-bedroom, three-bath apartment overlooking the church garden. Minimum booking is one week.

Windows on Italy

Via dei Serragli, 6r

(39) 055 268510

www.windowsonitaly.com

This company has a vast selection of interesting apartments. We prefer the



ones on the Oltranto and, in fact, rented one for a month when we were working on *Dreaming of Tuscany*. It was a nice change from staying in a hotel.

— **Barbara Milo Ohrbach**

The author of 22 bestsellers, Barbara Ohrbach’s latest book, *Dreaming of Florence*, (from which this article is adapted) has just been released. Upon the publication of her book, *Dreaming of Tuscany*, she shared her insider Tuscany secrets with *Dream of Italy* (see the February 2007 issue).

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ened in Florence this fall.

Celebrating the Feast of

On December 24, *la vigilia di Natale*, Giuseppe Scarlata's family will sit down to a feast dominated by seafood. In their *Trapani* home on Sicily's west coast, they typically start with an array of antipasti, among them marinated octopus and squid salad, smoked swordfish and thin slices of cured tuna called *bresola di tonno*. And, as Giuseppe points out, that's just the beginning.



could be eaten and *magro* or "lean" days when only fish was permitted. December 24 was a fast day, broken only in the final hours of waiting for the birth of the Christ child by a multi-course seafood feast.

Just as the particular dishes can vary from one region or family to another, so can the number. The idea of serving seven fish dishes or varieties of seafood is often linked to the number of sacraments or the days God required to create the

world. But the numbers three (Trinity), twelve (apostles) and thirteen (apostles plus Christ) are considered equally propitious. And the truth is that many Italian families don't bother to count—the important thing is gathering in the dead of winter for a celebratory feast.

The custom of an all-fish Christmas Eve dinner is particularly meaningful to the many Italian-Americans who emigrated from southern Italy. Growing up in New York in the '40s, my friend Kathy Manfredi Mackie remembers the sense of anticipation as her Sicilian-American mom and aunts worked for days on the preparations

"What you eat depends on the family," says Fiorangela Piccione, who lives in *Siracusa*. She often prepares a *fritto misto* of lightly battered and fried fish and vegetables such as artichokes, fennel and potatoes. Pasta might be dressed with a sauce of clams, cuttlefish with their ink, or mussels, while eel is simmered with tomatoes and capers. Also likely to be on the menu is a wonderful *baccalà* (dried cod) and potato stew (see recipe), which Fiora taught me to make when I was researching my book *Seafood alla Siciliana: Recipes and Stories from a Living Tradition* (Lake Isle Press).

In Katia Amore's part of Sicily, near *Modica*, everyone eats what's known as *pastizzu* or '*mpatata* in dialect—a pie with a fish and vegetable filling (shark and zucchini, for example) topped with a pastry or a bread-like crust. During the holidays, cooks often carry these concoctions to the house of a friend or relative for the Sicilian equivalent of a potluck.

These intimate family celebrations have their roots in a liturgical calendar that, from the 4th century on, distinguished between days when meat

Baccalà and Potato (con patate) Stew alla Siracusana

Makes 3 to 4 servings

Prep time is 20 minutes (plus 36-hour soaking time for the baccalà), cook time is 25 minutes.

When I asked Fiorangela Piccione why this dish is named after her hometown, Siracusa, I expected to hear a tale harking back to the Greeks. "Because my grandmother made it this way," she replied.



Tina Rupp

Ingredients:

- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3/4 cup thinly sliced celery
- Hot red pepper flakes
- 2 large potatoes, peeled, halved, and sliced into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 pound baccalà (salt cod), soaked for at least 36 hours
- 4 fresh plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped, or canned tomatoes, chopped
- 1 to 2 teaspoons salt-preserved capers, soaked in water for a few minutes and drained (optional)
- 8 to 10 black or green olives, pitted or unpitted
- Leaves from several flat-leaf parsley sprigs, chopped

Directions:

1. In a large deep skillet, combine the onion and olive oil. Cook over medium heat until the onion is tender but not browned. Stir in the celery and add a sprinkle of red pepper flakes. Cook, stirring, for a minute or two.
2. Add the potatoes, then add water to the halfway point (about 1/2 cup). Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the potatoes are barely tender, about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, cut the cod into large chunks. Add it to the saucepan along with the tomatoes, capers, and olives. Cook with the cover ajar until the cod is heated through, about 10 minutes.
3. Taste the sauce and add more pepper flakes if needed. Add the parsley. Serve the stew in shallow soup bowls.

Sicily's roughly triangular shape

Seven Fishes, Sicilian Style

and her Calabrian dad shopped for fish on Arthur Avenue or Sullivan Street.

The meal kicked off with a roasted red pepper and anchovy *antipasto* and, on another platter, *caponata* circled like a wreath around a savory heap of canned tuna. *Scungilli* (large marine snails) were in the picture, as were angel hair pasta with shellfish, squid or tiny shrimp. The main course might be, lobsters, prawns or baccalà. "We ate late and, just before we started, someone blew out the candles on the tree," remembers Kathy.

Her family still holds to the Feast of Seven Fishes tradition, but when her large four-generation family gathers

around the table these days, the meal is simpler. The main course is *cioppino*, a spicy soup Kathy and her daughters Shevaun and Kelly make with seven kinds of fish, shellfish, and crustaceans.

Even in Sicily, fish sometimes mingles with meat on Christmas Eve and, in central or northern Italy, may be absent altogether. Sara Matthews-Grieco, who rents country apartments in *Valdarno* (www.poggiolotuscany.com), e-mailed me to say: "The Feast of Seven Fishes is more or less respected in Tuscany, but for New Year's Eve, which is considered a *vigilia*—waiting for the New

Year—it's then that you have an endless series of fish dishes. You have to stay up eating until midnight so that you can have *spumante* and *panettone* and, above all, grapes (symbolically money) as the New Year comes in."

If there's a conclusion to draw here, it's the freedom to take what you please from the patchwork of Italian traditions to create your

own fish-centric holiday celebrations. Usually I serve one or two fish dishes on Christmas Eve, but this year I'm going for the full seven, all from the pages of *Seafood alla Siciliana*. No need to finalize the menu quite yet, but I know octopus simmered in *Nero d'Avola* wine (see recipe) will be on it, along with pistachio-crusted shrimp, linguine with a garlicky clam sauce, seared tuna with sweet-sour onions, and a stunning salad of shredded baccalà with blood oranges and pomegranate seeds.

And for New Year's Eve? Just one great dish, most likely the luxurious lobster soup with broken fettuccine I learned to make from Palermo chef *Patrizia di Benedetto*. I'll also make sure to welcome 2010, in true Tuscan style, by laying in a supply of *Prosecco*, panettone and grapes.

—Toni Lydecker

Toni Lydecker sampled at least 70 kinds of seafood while working on Seafood alla Siciliana and found all of it delicious except cuttlefish ink and lattume (tuna sperm sac). Her book takes readers on a Sicilian odyssey as she explores the island's fish markets, watches fishermen mend nets, and learns in the kitchens of home cooks and chefs. For more, visit www.tonilydecker.com



Octopus (Polipo) al Nero d'Avola

Makes 8 to 10 appetizer servings

Prep time is five minutes; cooks for about an hour.

Katia Amore, owner of a cooking school in Modica, gave me this family recipe. It calls for simmering the octopus first in water, and then a second time with nero d'Avola, Sicily's best-known red wine. The octopus turns gorgeously wine colored and delectable.

Ingredients:

1 medium octopus (about 3 pounds) or several smaller ones, cleaned

2 lemons

1 bottle nero d'Avola or another fruity red wine

Flat-leaf parsley leaves, whole or torn

Directions:

1. Place the octopus in a large saucepan with water to cover, plus a couple of inches. Halve one of the lemons and add it to the pot. Bring to a boil, adding more hot water as necessary to keep the octopus covered as it curls up.



Tina Rupp

2. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, until the octopus is fairly tender (15 to 40 minutes). Transfer it to another saucepan. Add the nero d'Avola and enough of the cooking water to barely cover. Bring to a boil; adjust the heat and simmer, uncovered, until the liquid is reduced by half, turning the octopus from time to time. Cool it in the liquid.

3. Cut the octopus tentacles and head into bite-size pieces. Arrange on a platter and sprinkle with parsley. Garnish with the other lemon, cut into wedges.

1 € = \$1.49 at press time

earned it the name *Trinacria*.

Sisters Share Their Private Puglia *continued from page 3*

built in the 16th century to defend against Turkish invaders and pirates. Hiking trails, bicycling, and diving are recreational options. The coast is rocky but dotted with some beaches for swimming. Because it is a natural reserve with no restaurants or coffee bars, Marika and Cinzia recommend packing a picnic lunch. (39-0833-838111; www.portoselvaggio.net)

Porto Badisco, amidst grottos, promontories, and coves, is the very small town with the bay of the same name located south of **Otranto** (the easternmost point in Italy) on the Adriatic Coast. The crystalline green water, cooling natural sea springs, and caves may be enjoyed from boats or by swimming and diving. Mediterranean plants such as myrtle, wild fennel, and oleander grow along the shore. Legend identifies this location as the spot where Aeneas landed on his journey from Troy to Rome. The *Grotta dei Cervi* (Deer Cave) contains remains of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras with ancient graffiti on the walls. (www.badisco.it)

Two Winter Fests

Il Presepe Vivente di Tricase (The Living Nativity of *Tricase*) This town, almost at the tip of the Italian heel, is often called "The Bethlehem of Italy." Supported entirely by volunteers from civic groups and schools, everyone from children to grown-ups (about 250 residents in total) dress in period costumes that transform the town into a Nativity pageant. The tradition was started in 1976 by resident Andrea Rizzo. This free event is usually scheduled for December 25, 26, 27 and January 1, 4 and 6. (www.presepeviventetricase.it)

Fòcara in Novoli, a small town near Lecce, honors the town's patron, *Sant'Antonio Abate*, on the eve of his feast day January 17. The origin of the fire ritual is said to date back at least 1,000 years and is credited to monks from the east who settled in *Novoli*. The fòcara is a bonfire constructed of olive branches and grape vines in *Piazza Tito Schipa*. Using a huge ladder to pile the branches on top, the fire builders make a "mountain" as high as a three-story house. Thousands of pilgrims walk from nearby towns to honor the Saint. In addition to the bonfire, there are masses, religious processions, food, wine, and musical events. (www.focara.it; www.comune.novoli.le.it)

A Couple of Spring/Summer Events

Cortili Aperti (Open Courtyards) in Lecce *centro storico* usually on the third Sunday in May. Many historical palaces open their main doors to visitors who can view the traditional courtyards and gardens. Because of the influence of the Spanish who ruled the area in the 1600s, all grand structures,



built from the honey-colored *pietra leccese*, have a courtyard. "Only local people know

about this," Cinzia says. "It is organized by the *Associazione Dimore Storiche Italiane* (www.adsi.it), but it is not mentioned on their Web site." (www.viaggiareinpuglia.it)

35° Festival Della Valle D'Itria is a renowned classical music and opera festival staged in various palaces and churches in the charming hill town of *Martina Franca*. The festival, which started in 1975, usually takes place from mid-July through the first week in August. Previous presentations have included *Concerto Sinfonico* of Haydn, Berlioz, and Ciaikovskij by the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia and the operas *King Lear* and *Orfeo ed Euridice*. (39-0804-805100; www.festivaldellavalleditria.it)

—Sharon Sanders

Writer and Certified Culinary Professional Sharon Sanders lived for several years in Firenze where she was married in the Basilica di Santa Croce. She contributes to Women's Health, Cooking Light and other national publications. She is the author of Cooking Up an Italian Life and inspires others to "feed their Inner Italian, body and soul" on her award-winning blog www.simpleitaly.com

Where to Stay and Eat

Patria Palace Hotel

Piazzetta Riccardi, 13
Lecce
(39) 0832 245111
www.patriapalacelecce.com
Rates range from 149€ to 209€ with breakfast, depending upon the season. Classically elegant five-star hotel in the heart of the old city. Some rooms have spectacular views of Santa Croce Church. The English-speaking staff is renowned for

their professionalism and hospitality. Offers a fitness center and parking garage.

La Puritate

Via Sant'Elia, 18
Gallipoli
(39) 0833 264205
Closed Wednesday

Macelleria Demola and Arrosteria del Vicoletto
Via Giulio II

Cisternino

(39) 0804 448063
The arrosteria is open only for dinner every evening in the summer; on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday evenings in winter.

Pasticceria Ascalone

Via Vittorio Emanuele, 17
Galatina
(39) 0836 566009
Closed Monday

Puglia produces around 80% of Europe's pasta.