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# the italian

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## TOTALLY TUSCAN

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**Lemon Life**  
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Amalfi lemon lore



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one of the tastiest ways to take in a healthy dose is with a shot of *limoncello*, the traditional sweet lemon liqueur



cheese in one meal – bah! I was *abuffato*, stuffed! My stomach felt like a stone. The only thing that fixed it was *canarino*.”

As a cure-all and basis for Amalfi cuisine, the lemon should be treated with gentleness and respect, I soon learned. The women who picked them at the turn of the century, lugging huge baskets of *sfusato* on their shoulders up and down the precipitous steps between the terraces, had to clip their nails and wear cotton gloves to avoid damaging the precious merchandise.

“You should squeeze it like you are squeezing a nice girl,” I was quickly instructed by Mamma Agata during a lemon cookery class in her kitchen at Ravello, when I ham-fistedly clutched half a *limone* and tried to squish the beejayzus out of it.

The embodiment of a twinkly-eyed, ample Italian mamma, Signora Agata is something of a culinary legend on the Amalfi coast, having cooked for celebrity visitors like Humphrey Bogart (a “sweet, quiet person” who liked fried anchovies – and lots of whisky), Jackie Kennedy (very elegant, liked mozzarella and tomato salad) and Fred Astaire.

As she rattled through recipe after recipe, chopping, stirring and whisking, she explained that lemon juice should nearly always be added at the last minute. Too much cooking and it becomes bitter. But when fresh, the Amalfi lemon is one of the sweetest, tastiest lemons in the world, due to the mineral rich volcanic soil it grows in, courtesy of nearby Vesuvius. And it’s not just fondly biased locals who believe it. Studies at the Universities of Salerno and Reggio Calabria has shown that it contains twice the amount of flavour-giving oxygenated compounds than other lemons. The researchers

concluded that, “it is possible to affirm that the extract from Amalfi Coast lemons has a remarkably superior flavouring power.”

### Slimming solution

Its other supposed prowess, this time as a slimming aid, was demonstrated the next day, when pencil-slim chef Tanina Vanacore took charge in the pretty kitchen at Villa Giovannina, as part of my ‘Cooking-Vacations’ experience in Positano.

“You’re never 51!” we all gasped, when Tanina revealed her age. “I have drunk lemon juice every day of my life,” she said, tying a lemon-embazoned apron around her hand-span waist. “It’s the power of the lemon.”

Though it could also be something to do with the fact that her preferred style of ‘new Campania’ cuisine is lighter, less oily and more reliant than fresh flavour on the *oleoso*, fatty tendencies of traditional cooking.

As part of her training, the vivacious Tanina, a chef at the legendary Palazzo Murat hotel in Positano, which once belonged to Napoleon’s brother-in-law, wrote a thesis on lemons. She discovered that there were 47 different types in the world. But of course, as a good Positano girl, she tells me the Amalfi Coast lemon is the finest.

“Because the flavour and acidity is so good, so balanced, it is excellent to marinate fish, like this *insalata de sepia*...” she said, slicing tiny local squid, called *sepia*. Sprinkled with a mix of lemon juice and salt, it had been cooked for 30 minutes, and the result was unrecognisable from the rubber-band chewiness of so much Mediterranean calamari.

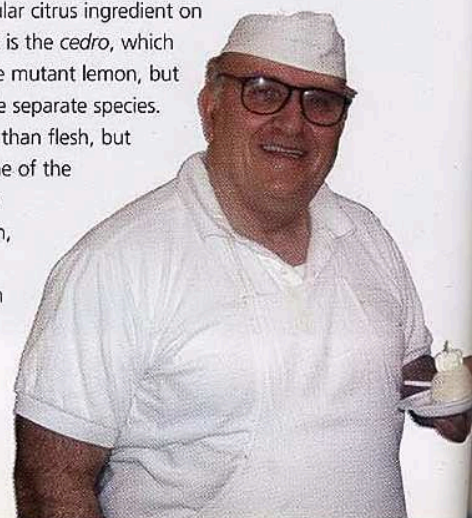
The same bath of lemon juice and salt transformed some super-fresh prawns into gently lemony, melting mouthfuls, which were perfectly balanced by a creamy yet tangy rice and rocket salad, one of Tanina’s own inventions.

Another popular citrus ingredient on the Amalfi coast is the *cedro*, which looks like a huge mutant lemon, but is in fact a whole separate species. It has more pith than flesh, but the pith has none of the bitterness of the traditional lemon, as my class discovered when

Above: Vincenzo a 64-year-old veteran of lemon cultivation. Right: Confectioner Fiorentino Giuseppe with one of his creations. Below: Jars of lemons on sale in Positano. Far right: Lemon confectionery in Sorrento



Lauren Birmingham







we were offered some to nibble, and gingerly stuck our teeth in. Mixed with fennel, orange and a tangy lemon dressing, slices of *cedro* add to a refreshing, palate-cleansing salad, which locals eat in place of a sorbet between courses.

### A walk in the sun


To work off those courses, and endeavour to gain a figure like Tanina's while doing some spectacular sightseeing, you could always visit one of the area's 1,556 *limoneti*, or lemon groves, and trudge the steps linking the vertiginous terraces.

One of the prettiest *limoneti* has to be the one owned by the Landi family on the Canna Verde hillside at Maiori. Grandfather Bonaventura Landi, who we found sitting in the sunshine by his chickens, still manages some of the 380 steps linking the 13 terraces, despite approaching his 93rd birthday. He's a living example of the health-giving benefits of regular lemon consumption.

One of the tastiest ways to take in a healthy dose is with a shot of *limoncello*, the traditional sweet lemon liqueur made from infusing lemon rind in alcohol before sweetening with a sugar syrup. Look for an opaque colour, at least 32% alcohol and a thin layer of oil on top, when buying a bottle. But making your own is easy, and more satisfying.

"The Amalfi lemon is the true lemon to use because the skin is pure with no chemicals, and the rind has lots of oil and flavour," explained Bonaventura's son, Gino, as he checked some of his 1000 lemon trees, protected by from sea spray and winter chills by a canopy of black netting.

Each tree produces around 300-600 lemons, or 50 kilos a year, over three harvests, adding to the 16,000 tons of lemons produced annually on the official Amalfi lemon coast, a sea-hugging ribbon of some of the most scenic tourist villages in Italy – Atrani, Amalfi, Cetara, Conca, Dei Marini, Furore, Maiori, Minori, Positano, Praiano, Ravello, Scala, Tramonti and Vietre Sul Mare. The Limone Costa d'Amalfi even now has its own official cheer-group, the CO.VA.L, to promote it.

Unofficial fans, like Praiano *limoncello* maker Rosa Esposito, whose family has been working with lemons for generations, sum it up like this: "*Il limone succa della vita*" – lemons are the juice of life. And awfully good in a gin and tonic. 

## Visit the Amalfi Coast

For further information on a Cooking-Vacations holiday at Marco Predieri's Villa Giovannina in Positano, visit [www.cooking-vacations.com](http://www.cooking-vacations.com); e-mail [cookingvacations@aol.com](mailto:cookingvacations@aol.com); tel: 001 617 247 4112

BMI flies daily from London Heathrow to Naples, prices from £63 incl. tax ([www.flybmi.com](http://www.flybmi.com)). Reservations 0870 6070 555

## Lemon Lifestyle

Lemons are not just for the kitchen. Here is a look at just a few of their other uses around the house

**Concentration** – A Japanese study found that by diffusing the aroma of lemons through an air-conditioning system in a crowded office building, typing mistakes were decreased by 54%. The result was attributed to the positive influence of lemon aroma on concentration

**Halitosis** – Pour a cup of boiling water over a tablespoon of chopped parsley. After ten minutes, filter it and cool. Add a cup of lemon juice and use as a mouth wash.

**Hiccups** – Suck a lemon slice. It's fast and extremely effective!

**Blackheads** – They will disappear if you rub them with lemon juice before going to bed.

**Cabbage smells** – Avoid these in your kitchen by adding half a lemon to the water used to boil it. The aroma will not be as strong, and the taste of the cabbage will be improved.

**Eggs** – To prevent the shells of eggs cracking during boiling, rub them with half a lemon before cooking.

**Ink stains** – Mix two tablespoons of milk with two tablespoons of lemon juice and pour onto the stain. Let it act for half an hour before washing

**Shoes** – To have shiny shoes, brush them and rub them with half a lemon before applying the final polish

**Smoke** – To get rid of the smell of smoke from a room, try burning some lemon peel in a metal bowl.

To keep lemons fresh, put them in a bowl and cover them with water and change daily. In Morocco, they claim this not only keeps them fresh, but makes them juicier.

With special thanks to Guendalina Giuliano, author of *Il Limone e la Costa d'Amalfi*. For further information on Amalfi lemons visit [www.limonecostadamalfi.com](http://www.limonecostadamalfi.com)





From left: Mamma Agata passes on her lemon expertise; Tanina in the kitchen at Villa Giovannina; Limoncello for sale in Positano



When fresh, the Amalfi lemon is one of the sweetest, tastiest lemons in the world, due to the mineral rich volcanic soil it grows in

scenery of the 'The Divine Coast', recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997. Yet before 17th-century farmers hacked out the hillside *piazzata*, or lemon terraces, which cling like verdant steps along the once harsh, impenetrable strip of cliffs from Sorrento to Salerno, there was nothing but the crash of waves on rocky scrub.

### Yellow fever

By the end of the 1800s this stretch of sea-facing land south of Naples had definitively become the world-renowned coast of lemons, and almost by accident, a photographer's dream and fashionable tourist magnet, attracting visitors and residents as diverse as Greta Garbo, John Steinbeck, Gore Vidal, Bob Geldof, Sophia Loren and Sting, it also saw the birth of luxury hotels like the sumptuous Le Sirenuse at Positano, where Danny de Vito, the Rolling Stones, U2 and Ingrid Bergman have lain their heads.

However, the Amalfi lemon is not just a fruit of fond nostalgic memory. It's still at the heart of everything Amalfian, from

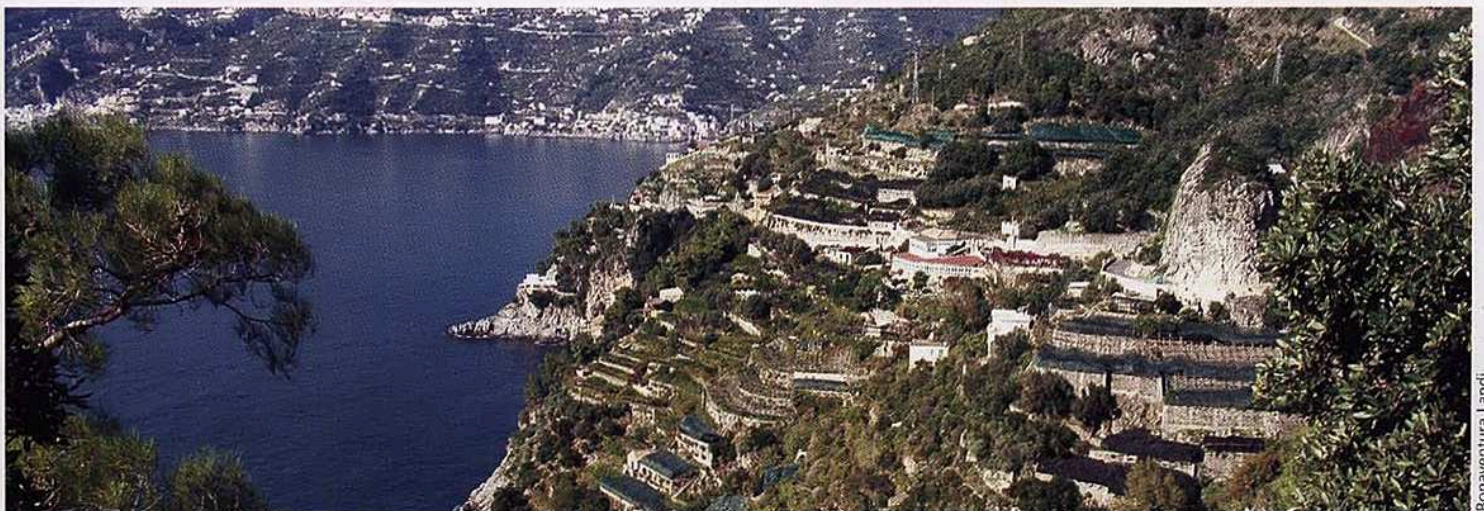
decorating the cheerful marker signs along cliff-clinging State Road 163, to influencing cookery and inspiring the ceramics industry of picturesque Vietri sul Mare.

I was only ten minutes out of Naples airport, heading to Positano for a few days of lemon cookery lessons and exploration at Villa Giovannina, the beautiful 17th-century home of former orthopaedic research scientist and *Paris Match* photographer Marco Predieri, when I got my first lemon lesson.

Mario, my driver, explained that whenever he was "ndurzato", "Like my stomach is stuffed like a ship that can take no more cargo", the best way to quickly cure his *malada pancea*, or tummy ache, was to boil three to four pieces of lemon rind until the water goes yellow, then add sugar and drink as hot as he could bear it.

"We call it *canarino*. Like the yellow bird. Three minutes and your *indigestione* will be gone," he assured me. "I once ate three types of

Opposite page:  
Lemon groves of  
the Amalfi Coast;  
Below: the terraces  
of the Amalfi  
Coast, shaped by  
lemon cultivation



Bonaventura Landi





Bonaventura Landi

# Living with Lemons

So much more than just a garnish for your evening tipple, the lemon is hugely popular across Italy with cooks and consumers alike. **Rebecca Gooch** visits the citrocentric Amalfi Coast to learn more about this distinctive yellow fruit

To think, I used to assume that lemons were just the colourful half of the 'ice 'n' slice' that made for a perfect gin and tonic. Don't let the citriculturalists on the Amalfi coast know this, or they'd throw their hands in the air at the hopelessness of such *una scema*. But for years I've been casually tossing the odd canary yellow waxy specimen, imported from who-knows-where, into my supermarket trolley, then letting it sit forlorn and forgotten in the fridge, wizening and wrinkling as it waited to be summoned into service with the Gordon's and Schweppes.

But after a week perched above Positano in the bosom of Campania lemon country, this ignorant *scema* is now *una saccente*, a smart-ass worthy of the famous black leather *Mastermind* chair, with the *Limone di Costa d'Amalfi* as my specialist subject. And the Amalfi lemon, or *Sfusato Amalfitano* (officially recognised as unique by the PGI, or Protected Geographic Indication, in 2001) is, indeed, special.

Identified by its more prominent 'nipple' end, paler yellow colour, impressively high number of oil glands, virtual lack of seeds and weighing at least 100grams, it is the first choice for an authentic *limoncello* (lemon liqueur). It also cures hiccups, gout, dandruff and halitosis. It gets rid of cabbage smells in the kitchen, and makes your shoes shiny if you wipe it over before the polish. It is a symbol of fidelity in love. It stops the shells from cracking when you're boiling eggs.

Then there's the landscape, that came about partly partly because of the lemon's scurvy-beating Vitamin C content. When the Royal Navy made lemon juice consumption mandatory for its sailors in 1795, Amalfi lemon cultivation hit the big time. As a result, we have the exquisite, dramatic

