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TASTY
PASTAS**

SECRETS OF
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MUSHROOM
MAGIC

THE VERY BEST TOMATO SAUCE

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LOVING LUCCA

By Susan Van Allen

There are so many things to love about Lucca. One is how easy it is to reach from Florence — just an hour and 15 minutes by train. Another is its most unique feature, sixteenth century walls that circle it. The top of these wide walls has been landscaped into a pretty park, perfect for blissful bike rides at the golden sunset hour.

Inside Lucca's walls is an easy going pedestrian-only historic center that enchants with pretty piazzas, Romanesque churches, cafes, and boutiques. Music adds to the magic. Opera composer Giacomo Puccini was born here, and to honor him there are concerts every night, with soloists performing arias from his greatest hits, including *La Bohème* and *Madam Butterfly*.

And, most deliciously, there's Cucina Lucchese. Many say Lucca's food is the best in Tuscany. Its origins go back to the town's prosperous medieval and Renaissance days, when Lucca was a center for silk trade and production. Lucchese dishes are rich with meats and spices, accented with superb olive oil from nearby groves. Among my favorite tastes here are buccellato—a bread flavored with currants and anise seed, and tordelli, an egg pasta that's stuffed with meats, thyme, and cheese, then topped with meat ragu.

For dessert there's a savory torta coi becchi—thick, buttery pastry crust filled with chard, pine nuts, and candied lemon peel. All blends well with the Colline Lucchesi DOC wines from the surrounding vineyards—

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characterized by deep, fruity flavors.

I was thrilled to be back recently, staying at the new 5-star Grand Universe Lucca, which opened in 2020. The hotel's interior is designed in sleek, contemporary style, and it's set in an ideal location overlooking the elegant Piazza del Giglio and Piazza Napoleone. Here I have modern comfort and at the same time am immersed in Lucca's history.

The Teatro Giglio I can see from my balcony was built in the seventeenth century and still honors Puccini with staging of his operas during Lucca's summer festival. The Piazza Napoleone harkens back to early nineteenth century days when Napoleon's sister Elisa was named "Princess of Lucca" and had it transformed, so it became a beautiful tree-lined open space, where city events and concerts are staged.

In the Grand Universe hotel's Legacy restaurant, centuries-old traditions are celebrated by Chef Alessandro Manfredini with a fresh style. He grew up in nearby Barga, a village in the province of Lucca that's been named one of the most beautiful in Italy. Though he's traveled and cooked all over the globe, Manfredini is now happy to be back home, cooking dishes he's loved since childhood. His recipe will warm up a winter night wherever you are, with delicious comfort, Lucchese style. granduniverselucca.com.

Susan Van Allen is the author of four books about Italian travel, including *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*. She also designs and hosts Golden Weeks in Italy: For Women Only tours. See susanvanallen.com.



PASTA WITH BARGHIGIANA (MEAT AND MUSHROOM) SAUCE

- 2 ounces dried porcini mushrooms
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 medium yellow onion
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 peeled carrot
- ³/₄ pound ground beef
- ¹/₂ cup red wine
- 1 28-oz. can peeled, chopped tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
- Salt to taste
- ¹/₂ cup grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese
- 1 pound fusilli or rigatoni

Soak the mushrooms in 1 cup of warm water for about 20 minutes until they soften. Keep ¹/₄ cup of the soaking water and drain the mushrooms through a sieve, squeezing out the water, then mince them and set aside.

Mince the onion, celery, and carrot.

Set a large skillet over medium heat, and warm the olive oil in it, then add the minced onions, stir and cook for a few minutes, then stir in the celery and carrots. When the vegetables begin to soften, add the mushrooms, stirring together for a few minutes. Then add the ground beef, cooking until the meat is just browned. Add the wine and increase the heat until the wine bubbles away.

Stir in the reserved mushroom soaking liquid and the tomatoes, then the sage, rosemary, and salt to taste. Simmer, stirring occasionally for about 30 minutes, until the sauce thickens.

To cook the pasta, bring a large pot of salted water to a full boil. Cook the pasta to al dente, according to the directions on the package. Drain the pasta and mix in with the sauce in the skillet. Serve immediately with Parmigiano Reggiano cheese sprinkled on top.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.