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SAVEUR

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NEW YEAR'S EVE *in* FLORENCE

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NUMBER

6



P. 70

S A V E U R

MY NEW YEAR'S

In this ancient Tuscan city, the lovably quirky trattoria

From left to right, Trattoria Garga; New Year's Eve 2001 in full swing at Garga; co-owner Sharon Oddson's chocolate tart.



P. 74

IN FLORENCE

called Garga celebrates with an endless party

BY SARAH LYDON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN SCHREIBER



RECIPE

Gamberoni con Salsa Vigliacca

(Shrimp with Spicy Garlic and Tomato Sauce)

SERVES 6

VIGLIACCA can mean scoundrel, explains Sharon Oddson, which in the case of a sauce means that it's spiced with chile peppers. She and Garga began serving this concoction when they opened their trattoria, in 1979; they still like it atop everything from pasta to meat loaf.

- 8 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
- 3 ripe medium tomatoes, cored and quartered
- 3-4 Italian whole dried red chiles (see page 94), crushed, or ¼-½ tsp. dried red pepper flakes
- Salt
- 30 large fresh or thawed frozen heads-on shrimp (about 1 ½ lbs.), peeled, head and tail shells intact
- 2 tbsp. cognac
- Leaves from 2 sprigs parsley, chopped

1. Heat 4 tbsp. of the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring with a wooden spoon, until golden, about 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and chiles, season to taste with salt, and cook, crushing pieces of tomato with the back of the spoon and stirring occasionally, until sauce thickens, 8-10 minutes. Set sauce aside.

2. Heat 2 tbsp. of the oil in another large skillet over high heat. Add half the shrimp in a single layer and cook, turning once, until cooked halfway through, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer shrimp to a plate and set aside. Repeat process with the remaining 2 tbsp. oil and shrimp.

3. Return same skillet to medium-high heat. Carefully add cognac to skillet and cook, gently shaking skillet over heat, until alcohol evaporates, about 30 seconds. Add reserved tomato sauce and shrimp and cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp are completely cooked through, 3-4 minutes.

4. Divide shrimp and sauce between 6 medium plates, spooning sauce over and around shrimp, then garnish each plate with parsley.

G A R G A

IN TUSCANY, on the last night of the year, there is no Dick Clark. No fake silver ball falls from the sky, and no one sings "Auld Lang Syne". But oh, there's a party—Italians call the night San Silvestro in honor of Saint Sylvester, an early pope (280-335), whose feast day is December 31—and tonight I am here, in my favorite city, Florence, at my favorite restaurant, Trattoria Garga, as that party winds up.

Garga is no ordinary trattoria. It is a crowded, three-room mini circus whose walls are covered with colorful murals painted by local artists and positioned in such a way that from behind every table and every leafy potted palm peer images of dark-eyed women, horses, children, mysterious landscapes. And instead of classic Tuscan fare, Garga offers a curious amalgam of Italian and Continental flavors, put together by a wildly charismatic Florentine artist named Giuliano Gargani (and known as Garga) and his equally charming Canadian wife, Sharon Oddson.

By 10 P.M. this evening, the place was packed—not just with natives, who flocked to Garga even when I first came to know it, in the late 1980s, but also with Americans, Germans, Japanese. Dishes began flying

out of the kitchen, with Garga himself loudly calling waiters to fetch them. There were platters of veal with tender young artichokes; spicy shrimp served "scoundrel style" with garlicky tomato sauce; al dente tagliarini in a sauce of cream spiked with the zest of lemons and oranges plus parmigiano and fresh mint. Also seemingly flying about were countless bottles of wine—Santa Cristina and chianti classico; lush tignanello; slender bottles of pale, fizzy moscato. From the kitchen came a clamorous clanging of pans and the strains of Garga—sweating extravagantly in his open-necked shirt, a bandanna tied around

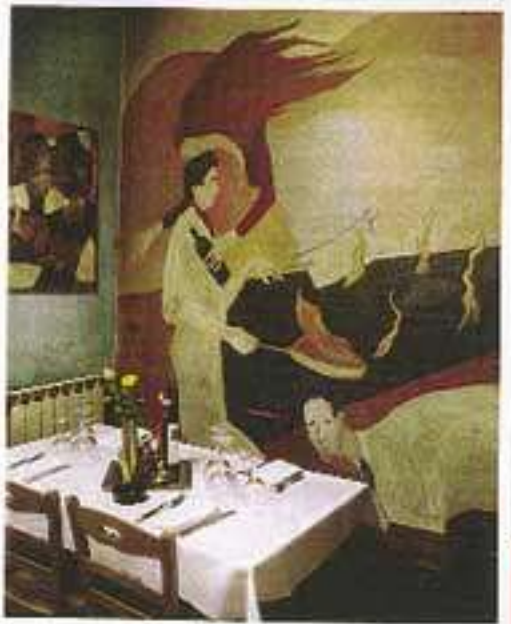
SARAH LYDON is a Boston-based writer currently developing a children's book about cooking.



BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SHARON AND GIULIANO GARGANI; THE PIAZZA DELLA SIGNORIA; SHRIMP WITH SPICY GARLIC AND TOMATO SAUCE; GARGA'S SALAD STATION; A STREET NEAR GARGA; A MURAL BY FLORENCE-BASED ARTIST JANET LANSILL.



THE PLACE IS
A CROSS
BETWEEN A
JEWEL
BOX AND A
CIRCUS



G A R G A

CELEBRATORY
JUICE
 AT GARGA
FLOWS
 UNTIL THE
SUNRISE

BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: LITTLE TOASTS WITH SMOKED MOZZARELLA AND ANCHOVIES; GARGA (LEFT) IN HIS KITCHEN; NEW YEAR'S EVE AT THE TRATTORIA; SOUS-CHEF ELIO COTZA; ALESSANDRO GARGANI'S GIRLFRIEND, ELIZABETH D'ALESSANDRO.



up, made toasts, and buzzed with anticipatory energy...and then the clock struck 12! Glasses clinked, couples kissed, music was turned up, and Alessandro, the Garganis' 24-year-old younger son, who was working in the kitchen, ran out into the alley outside the restaurant to explode Roman candles, which cracked and boomed and shook the windows and glass doors of the place. Now it is about an hour into 2002, and the party has not lost an ounce of its celebratory juice. I know that no one

will leave rill suncise. I've done this before.

his head—and his sous-chef, Elio, singing along to their cassettes of Puccini, Dean Martin, James Brown. Sharon, an earthy redhead, who used to have hair so long and wild that she resembled a Scottish warrior queen but who now looks very much the sleek, proud trattoria proprietor, has been presiding over the front of the house, where every table has been full. Again and again she has turned away people who appear hopefully at the door, yearning toward this glowing Aladdin's cave.

A few minutes before midnight, convivial table-hopping began. Sharon sprang around the restaurant, chatting amiably with her guests. Andrea, her elder son, who works in the front of the house, began passing out sparklers to the diners, who gradually stood

MY FIRST New Year's Eve at Garga was in 1992, and under very different circumstances. That night I was behind the scenes, standing at a cool marble counter in front of the kitchen, slicing ripe avocados into a glass salad bowl. Though this city prides itself on simple, almost spartan cuisine, the *insalata del Garga*, a house specialty, is spectacularly un-Florentine: it begins with torn arugula; then come a tomato chopped into rough chunks, a handful of sliced hearts of palm, and half an avocado, sliced. This is tossed with a splash of lemon juice and a stream of green *Laudemio* olive oil, then topped with a shower of coarse *parmigiano* shavings and a hand-

G A R G A

R E C I P E

Tagliarini del Magnifico

(Tagliarini with Citrus Zest)

SERVES 4

GARGA named this dish for Lorenzo "Il Magnifico" de' Medici (1449-1492) and says it was inspired by yeast cakes with lemon and orange zest eaten locally during Carnevale, preceding Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

- 1 large lemon
- 1 orange
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 cup half-and-half
- 2 tbsp. cognac
- Leaves from 4 sprigs mint
- Salt
- 10 oz. fresh tagliarini or linguine
- 1 cup freshly grated parmigiano-reggiano

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Meanwhile, gently scrub lemon and orange under warm running water to remove any waxy residue; then pat dry with paper towels. Finely grate zest from lemon and orange and set aside.

2. Put cream, half-and-half, and lemon and orange zests into a large skillet and boil over medium heat, stirring often with a wooden spoon, until reduced by one-quarter, about 10 minutes. Add cognac and mint and cook until alcohol evaporates, about 2 minutes. Season sauce to taste with salt.

3. Add 2 generous pinches salt to boiling water, then add pasta and cook, stirring often, until just tender, 1½-2 minutes. Using a pair of kitchen tongs, transfer pasta to skillet with sauce. Add parmigiano-reggiano to skillet and cook over medium heat, stirring pasta constantly, until sauce thickens, about 1 minute more.

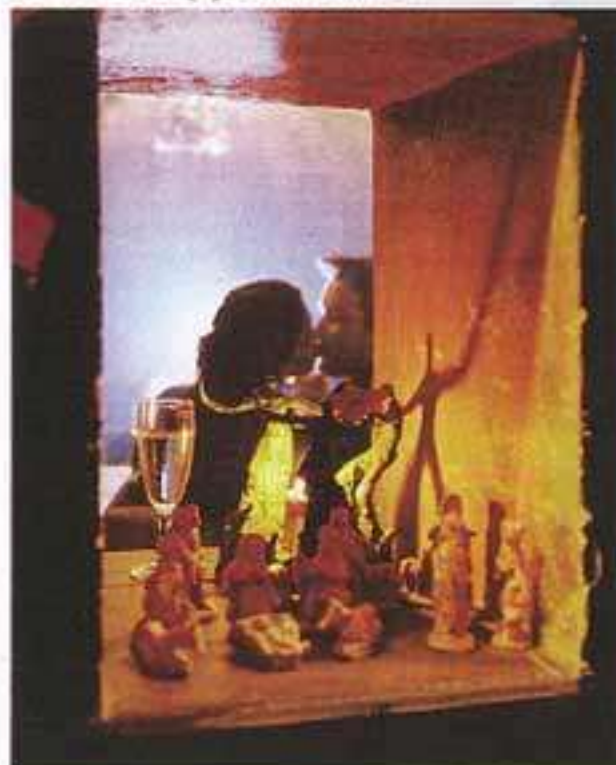
ful of sweet pine nuts. It is rough and rich and baroque, and no one can resist it.

I was there strictly as an understudy: one of the regular waiters had broken his leg, and on an evening like New Year's Eve even an untrained American is useful. I had no culinary background, but this is not a formal ristorante, and I had eaten here so many times that I already knew the routine. I knotted a white tablecloth as a crisp apron over my worn Levi's and then carried plates, cleared dishes, and cut slice after slice of torti al cioccolato and Sharon's cheesecake—irreverently un-Tuscan and made smooth with Philadelphia cream cheese and mascarpone.

I had lucked into becoming a regular at Garga. In 1987, I went to Florence on a loosely planned lark between high school and college to study art history. It felt at the time like a proper, romantic thing to do. I rented a somber little room in the home of an elegant widow on a stony, narrow old street where Galileo once lived and where Dostoyevsky wrote *The Idiot*. I met other students, mostly English, Australian, and German. We visited the Uffizi and the Accademia and went to churches to look at frescoes by Giotto and Masaccio; at night we ate in cheap pizzerias and

disco-danced. We fended off young Italian men who were as ubiquitous, indiscriminate, and persistent as mosquitoes. I read Cellini and Vasari. But I was still a tourist, a *straniera*, and I dreaded the moment every day when the stores shut for lunch, the metal grates rattling down with a terrible finality. The pizza and gelato I usually ate while leaning against a wall were losing their fun, as was the drudgery of slapdash student living.

Then, late one morning in early spring, I was in an antiques store buying a pair of round-rimmed tortoiseshell sunglasses and chatting with the owners. Some friends of theirs knocked on the window and poked their heads through the door. "We're going to lunch now," one asked. Then, looking at



BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: TAGLIARINI WITH CITRUS ZEST; A COUPLE SHARE A NEW YEAR'S EYE KISS AT THE TRATTORIA; SHOPPERS ON FLORENCE'S FAMED PONTE VECCHIO; SHARON ODDSON GREETING AND MINGLING WITH GUESTS.

IT TOOK A
LEAP OF
FAITH FOR ME
TO EAT
WITH THE
LOCALS





me, he asked, "Would you like to come with us?"—and in a moment of startling boldness, I said yes. We went to Garga.

IN THOSE DAYS, Garga was a smaller place on the dusty, sunny little via del Moro. (Now it is situated down the road, in the front of what was once a bishop's palace.) Even then, though, Garga and Sharon were sketching expansion plans on napkins. It was impossible not to hit it off with them, even for a shy stranger. Sharon became my generous translator and guide, Garga the mischievous cook offering marvelously scented dishes for me to try. He put a plate of tender spaghetti with a creamy pale sauce in front of me. It was delicious, I said—but what was it? "Lamb's brains," he said triumphantly, as my new friends dissolved in laughter. (What could I do but laugh as well?) It tasted wonderful, and so did pasta with lamb's intestines, and the ancient Florentine specialty made with roasted cucumbers. One afternoon, I tasted my first fresh shaved truffles, atop pasta with butter; the aromatic steam curling up from the plate gave me a shudder of pleasure and also some fear—this was something that one might never get enough of.

It was shocking and infectious, because my soul was not primed. I grew up in a household of cooks and gardeners but spent my childhood and teens adamantly resisting good food. I was known for my hatred of tomatoes. I didn't like salad. I liked white bread. I so loathed my mother's homemade marinara sauce with onion and garlic that when I tasted Ragù at a friend's house it came as a surprise and a relief—uniform, smooth, sweet. I had never eaten an olive, a mushroom, a bite of eggplant. And now here I was, happily devouring an appetizer of smoky scamorza cheese with anchovies. I had made a strange leap of faith, one that I can only put down to the intoxicating chance these restaurant owners gave me to take a seat at the table with their extended, food-obsessed family.

I went home in June that year, just as the tiny wild strawberries were coming into season. I had moved out of the signora's flat by then and into a raffish, sun-filled apartment in a quarter notorious for its population of exquisitely beautiful transvestites. Because of Garga, I returned knowing far more about things like arugula, silky green olive oil, and milky mounds of fresh mozzarella—

RECIPE

**Scaloppine di Vitello
all'Avocado***(Veal Cutlets with Avocado and Truffle Cream)*

SERVES 4

"IN 1979," Shuroi says, "my husband discovered avocados." First she put them in the house salad; then he created this veal dish.

- 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 tbsp. butter
- 4 4½-oz. piccolos boneless veal loin,
pounded to ¼" thickness
- Salt
- 2 tbsp. cognac
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tsp. white truffle oil
- 1 ripe hass avocado, halved lengthwise,
pitted, peeled, and sliced
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Heat olive oil and 1 tbsp. of the butter together in a large skillet over high heat. Season veal with salt to taste, add to skillet, and sear until well browned on each side and just cooked through, 30–60 seconds per side. Transfer to a plate and set aside.

2. Carefully add cognac to same skillet, ignite with a kitchen match, and cook until flames subside, about 30 seconds. Add cream, truffle oil, and the remaining 3 tbsp. butter and cook, stirring and scraping browned bits stuck to bottom of skillet with a wooden spoon, until sauce has reduced by one-quarter, 2–3 minutes. Return veal and any accumulated juices to skillet and cook, spooning sauce over meat, until veal is just heated through, about 30 seconds. Adjust seasoning.

3. Divide veal between 4 plates, spoon sauce over meat, and arrange avocado slices on top. Season to taste with pepper at the table.



G A R G A

LATE INTO THE
NIGHT
 WE DRINK
CHIANTI
 AND EAT CRUSTY
BREAD

BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: VEAL CUTLETS WITH AVOCADO AND TRUFFLE CREAM; CELEBRANTS AT THE MOMENT THE CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT; REMNANTS OF FESTIVITIES LINE A TABLE; GARGA REVELERS WITH THEIR DRINKS AND SPARKLERS.



ians and artists who had eaten lazy lunches there had dispersed, but I made a new friend, Amanda, a lithe blond writer from California, whose Italian boyfriend, Lorenzo, was a waiter at Garga, so there was no question of where we'd spend our time.

Once again I talked late into the night with Sharon and Garga, drinking chianti and eating crusty bread slathered with creamy stacchino cheese and sprinkled with salt and pepper. People smoked and played cards. Garga made ex-

all still novelties in America in those days before Tuscany had become a brand name—than I did about art history.

FIVE YEARS LATER, just out of college, I was toiling as a glorified secretary in London, counting the weeks until my work permit expired, when a friend planned. She was going to Florence for an art course—why didn't I come? She would paint; I could write. Three weeks later, I was back at Garga.

In the time that had passed, Giuliano and Sharon's paper dreams had blossomed on the via del Moro. The dusty gold façade of the place looked the same to me, but the pair had actually moved five meters down the road and now had three dining rooms. The antiques-

travagant sketches on a cloth napkin and sometimes pulled out his paintbrushes and started a canvas. I sat in on staff meals to eat things like tender poppadelle with a woodsy brown rabbit sauce. I listened to arguments about city politics and how polluted the Arno was. (Garga is an ardent advocate for the river, planting thousands of flowers on its banks and islands; he is even attached to its muskrats and once held a funeral for one he called Maurizio.) Taxes and strikes were a frequent topic amid occasional shouting over a dish that was not carried to a table on time.

Since my first trip to Florence, I'd lost some of the quixotic notions I'd once had about Italy, but I was still struck by the pure pleasure so frequently displayed in connection with



METHOD

Crostini di Scamorza e Acciughe

(Little Toasts with Smoked Mozzarella and Anchovies)

GARGA USES salt-packed anchovies for this dish; oil-packed ones may be substituted. Preheat oven to 350°. Rinse 4 anchovy filets (if using salted ones) and pat dry. Warm anchovies and ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil together in a small skillet over medium heat. Slice four 1" thick pieces from a long loaf of crusty Italian bread and arrange on a baking sheet. Put one ½" thick slice scamorza (smoked mozzarella) on each piece of bread, top each with an anchovy, and spoon some of the oil over anchovies and cheese. Bake until cheese is just melted, about 10 minutes. Serves 2-4.



RECIPE

Biscotti di Prato*(Prato-Style Cookies)*

MAKES ABOUT 4 DOZEN

ONE OF the few utterly traditional Italian specialties at Garga is these Tuscan cookies.

3 1/2 cups flour	1/2 tsp. salt
2 1/2 cups sugar	2 pinches saffron threads
3 whole eggs	1 egg yolk
1 cup shelled almonds, toasted	1 tsp. baking powder

1. Preheat oven to 325°. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper and set aside.

2. Put flour on a clean surface, shape into a mound with your hands, then make a well in the center. Add sugar, 2 of the whole eggs, egg yolk, baking powder, salt, saffron, and 3 tbsp. water to well and beat together with your fingers or a fork. Continue beating, gradually incorporating flour from inside edge of well, until dough comes together (dough will be stiff). Add almonds and knead with both hands until dough is smooth, 1–2 minutes. Quarter dough, roll into 1 1/2" x 10" logs, and arrange on prepared baking sheet 2" apart.

3. Beat the remaining whole egg in a small bowl, then brush dough logs with some of it. Transfer dough logs to oven and bake until golden brown on top, about 45 minutes. Remove baking sheet from oven and use a long metal spatula to transfer dough logs to a cutting board. Carefully cut logs crosswise with a serrated knife (logs will be a bit fragile) into 1/2"-thick cookies. Return cookies to baking sheet and arrange, cut side up, in a single layer. Bake cookies until pale brown, 20–25 minutes. Set cookies aside to cool completely before serving. Cookies will keep for up to 1 month in an airtight container.

G A R G A

THE GUIDE

FLORENCE

Country code: 39

City code: 055

Exchange rate: 1 euro = \$1

Dinner with drink, tax, and tip:

MODERATE—€25–€50

There are no nonstop flights from the United States to Florence, but Alitalia flies to the city from Rome and Milan and Air France serves Florence via Paris. It is also a very enjoyable train ride from both Rome (about one and half hours) and Milan (about two and a half hours) to Florence. Call Cit Tours for information on rail tickets: (800)CIT-RAIL.

Where to Stay

HOTEL SAVOY *piazza della Repubblica 7 (27 351; fax 27 35 888; www.hotelsovy.it). Rates: \$330–\$462 double. Situated on a square ringed with cafés just steps away from the famous Duomo (and also only a short walk from Trattoria Garga), this gorgeous hotel has 107 rooms housed in a building*

dating back to 1896. An extensive renovation was completed in 2000 to create the high-style hotel. Many of the rooms have views of either the piazza or the Duomo. The L'Incontro restaurant (*moderate*) and bar spill out onto the square in warm months, and a special dinner is offered on New Year's Eve.

HOTEL RIVER *Lungarno della Zocca Vecchia 18 (734 3530; fax 234 3531). Rates: \$130–\$190 double, breakfast included. Comfortable and charming but not lavishly furnished, this 38-room hotel sits right on the banks of the Arno. A helpful staff and services you usually find only in luxury hotels make this spot a great value. Be sure to ask for one of the few rooms that have a river view.*

Where to Eat and What to Do

TRATTORIA GARGA *via del Moro 48 (217 396). Moderate. Closed Mondays. For New Year's Eve, Garga hosts a special four-course dinner for about \$100 per person featuring many of the house specialties, such as insalata del garga, tagliarini del magnifico, and cheesecake della Sharon (see recipe, page 90).*

LA CUCINA DEL GARGA, across the street from the trattoria, offers one-day cooking classes (about \$155) from Monday through Saturday. Recently it has begun to add weeklong courses in southern Tuscany. For schedules and prices, call the trattoria or e-mail Sharon Oddson at garga@fo.it.



RECIPE

Torta al Cioccolato*(Chocolate Tart)*

MAKES ONE 10" TART

SHARON says she makes this tart as an alternative to the panna cotta (cooked cream) served in most local trattorias. Digestives are English sweet wheat crackers taken with tea.

FOR THE CRUST:

2 ½ cups finely crushed digestives (English whole wheat biscuits)

1 tbsp. sugar

4 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

FOR THE FILLING:

16 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped

2 cups heavy cream

3 egg yolks

1. For the crust: Preheat oven to 350°. Mix crushed biscuits and sugar together in a medium bowl. Add butter and stir until well combined. Transfer crumb mixture to a 10" false-bottom tart pan. Using your hands, spread mixture out in an even layer, then use your fingertips to press crumb mixture into bottom and up side of pan to form an even crust. Transfer to a baking sheet and bake until crust is set and lightly golden in places, about 15 minutes. Set crust aside until completely cool.

2. For the filling: Melt chocolate in a medium heatproof bowl set over a medium pot of gently simmering water over medium-low heat, stirring constantly, about 5 minutes. Remove bowl from heat and set aside. Heat cream in a medium saucepan over medium heat until bubbles appear around inside edge of pan and cream is just about to boil, then remove pan from heat. Meanwhile, put egg yolks into a medium mixing bowl and whisk until smooth. Gradually whisk about ¼ cup of the hot cream into yolks, then stir egg-cream mixture back into pot of hot cream. Gradually add egg-cream mixture to bowl of melted chocolate, stirring until well combined and smooth.

3. Pour filling into prepared crust and set aside until cool, about 30 minutes, then refrigerate until chocolate is completely set, about 3 hours. Remove outer ring of tart pan. Serve with sliced strawberries, if you like.

Trattoria Garga. Those butterfly-bright walls, the Verdi bellowing from the kitchen...every night felt like New Year's Eve.

Now 2002 is another year I have ring in here. For a moment or two I think of my home in Boston; I miss my seven-year-old daughter. It is four o'clock in the morning, and the room is heavy with cigar smoke. Christmas lights still blink in the kitchen. Sharon, Garga, and I trade pictures. Garga takes out Magic Markers and draws me a picture on a white cloth napkin—a man in a rowboat on the Arno. He festoons it with dabs of the expensive scotch he is drinking until the colors bleed as on a tie-dye T-shirt; later, this damp memento will fill my entire suitcase with the scent of whisky, puzzling a customs officer.

In the end, we say good-bye not once but five or six times. I remember back ten years, at almost one o'clock in the morning on the first day of the New Year, champagne bottles empty. The border between server and diner, always thin at best here, had eroded completely. But one couple were still seated. Even by Florence's high standard they were both achingly good looking. He was sleek and Cary Grant-ish, and she was darkly

radiant and doe-eyed in a chic black suit with a white cloth gardenia pinned to one lapel. They seemed to have eyes for no one but each other and sat with their hands clasped atop the table during the dancing and kissing. As I cleared the last of the dessert plates from their table, the girl smiled up at me. "What a beautiful flower," I said, and, in what seemed like a single graceful movement, she stood, kissed me on both cheeks, unfastened the white gardenia from her own lapel, and pinned it to my own, pale blue shirt. ♡

IN THE SAVVUR KITCHEN, page 89: A recipe for Sharon's signature cheesecake dessert; THE PANTRY, page 94: A mail-order source for ordering Italian whole dried red chiles.



BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, AUTHOR LYDON WITH GARGA AT 4 A.M. ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, SHARON'S CHOCOLATE TART; PRATO-STYLE COOKIES AND VIN SANTO, THE FAMED TUSCAN DESSERT WINE, A VIEW OF FLORENCE AND THE ARNO RIVER.

THE BORDER
BETWEEN
SERVER AND
DINER
COMPLETELY
ERODES

KITCHEN

Smooth Operator

CANADIAN Sharon Oddson has always preferred the smoother, lighter American-style cream cheese cheesecake to its dense, crumbly Italian cousin, made with ricotta. When she opened Garga, the trattoria she co-owns in Florence (see page 70), then, she decided to buck Tuscan tradition and offer the dessert of her own dreams (below).



POUNDING IT OUT

In the SAVEUR kitchen, where the talk (usually) involves food, we're always trading recipes and techniques, some of which make it onto these pages—like this foolproof method for flattening out salmon slices for the carpaccio on page 84. One of our interns shared it with us, and it's a great trick, especially if, like most of us, you don't slice salmon like a pro. Arrange thin-sliced salmon on the plate, lay a sheet of plastic wrap directly on the fish, gently pound slices with the bottom of a flat measuring cup (above) or sturdy glass until paper thin and even, peel off the plastic—*et voilà!* —JULIA LEE

MAKING THE GRADE

Eating raw fish—at home as well as in restaurants—has become more widespread in the United States in the past decade or so, and you don't have to be an expert to know that only the very freshest fish, handled properly, should be consumed this way. But how can we tell which fish is just out of the water and which has been lying around all week? Many fish sellers try to reassure their customers by marking their best cuts "sushi grade". We couldn't help wondering, though, what that term really means. Is it a reliable sign of quality or a mere marketing tool? The truth is, it



can be both. No governing board or agency determines what fish qualifies as sushi grade. Even though most fish are rated by those who catch them, based on time out of the water, marbling, and other factors, there's nothing to prevent someone from labeling a sub-par piece of fish as sushi grade. When shopping for tuna to make the hand rolls on page 59 or the salmon for the carpaccio on page 84, don't believe what you read. Instead, grade the fish yourself: look for firm, vibrant, uniformly colored flesh that smells sweet and briny. If the specimen seems at all fishy, cut bait. —WINNIE YANG

RECIPE

Sharon's Cheesecake

MAKES ONE 10" CAKE

SHARON ODDSON uses sweet wheat digestive biscuits in her cheesecake crust instead of the more common graham crackers.

FOR THE CRUST:

2 cups finely crushed digestives (English whole wheat biscuits)
1 tbsp. sugar
4 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

FOR THE FILLING:

1 1/2 cups cream cheese
1/2 cup plus 2 tbsp. mascarpone
1 cup sugar
3 eggs

FOR THE TOPPING:

1 cup plain yogurt
1 tbsp. sugar
1/4 tsp. vanilla extract

1. For the crust: Preheat oven to 325°. Mix crushed biscuits and sugar together in a medium bowl. Add butter and stir until well combined. Transfer crumb mixture to a 10" springform pan. Using your hands, spread mixture out in an even layer, then use your fingertips to press crumb mixture into bottom and up side of pan about 1 1/2" to form an even crust. Transfer to a baking sheet and bake until crust is set and golden in places, 15–20 minutes. Set crust aside until cool.

2. For the filling: Beat cream cheese and mascarpone together in a mixing bowl with an electric mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 1 minute. Reduce speed to medium-low and gradually add sugar, beating well, about 1 minute. Add eggs, one at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition. Pour filling into crust and bake until just set, 40–45 minutes. Remove cheesecake from oven and set aside to cool for 5 minutes.

3. For the topping: Combine yogurt, sugar, and vanilla in a medium bowl. Pour onto cheesecake, spreading it out to cover top of cheesecake completely. Set aside at room temperature at least 2 hours before serving.

4. Run a knife between crust and inside ring of pan and remove ring. Serve cheesecake with sliced strawberries, if you like.