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Chef Elise Wiggins Hosts the Perfect Fall Dinner Party



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Gather Round

PANZANO CHEF
ELISE WIGGINS
PREPARES
AN AT-HOME
ITALIAN FEAST.

RECIPES BY ELISE WIGGINS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYCE BOYER



Clockwise from top left: crispy polenta, hot from the fryer; a culinary still life; tossing the flatbreads; a platter of mini piadinas awaits the guests.

Panzano chef Elise Wiggins is the consummate hostess, both at her restaurant and in her Stapleton home. Her flavors are big, bold, and straight from the hearth—all of which makes Wiggins' style of cooking ideal for entertaining. The following Italian feast for 10 to 12 diners was designed with sharing in mind—making it easy to duplicate. Buon appetito!

COCKTAILS

The Flippin' Nutty Italian

(Makes 1 cocktail)

- 1 ounce nocino* (see recipe)
- 1 ounce dark rum
- ½ ounce Bénédictine liqueur
- ¼ ounce simple syrup
- 1 ounce blood-orange juice (peel reserved for garnish)
- 1 whole egg

Pour all ingredients together in a shaker with ice. Shake vigorously and strain. Garnish with blood-orange peel.

Nocino (Walnut Liqueur)

This walnut liqueur—a staple in northern Italy—is made with green walnuts picked at the end of June or beginning of July. While the exact date is not important, it's best to use young nuts because as they mature, the outside sheath becomes bitter. *You can also purchase nocino at well-stocked liquor stores. (Makes 1 liter)

- 1 liter of 70–80 proof vodka (vodka works best because of the neutral flavor)
- 10 green walnuts (when out of season, use frozen nuts)
- 10 whole cloves
- 1 whole vanilla bean, split and scraped, pods reserved
- Zest of 1 orange
- 1 liter glass bottle, sterilized by boiling

With a cleaver, quarter the walnuts. Wear gloves and, once finished, wash working surface and gloves thoroughly. (Walnut juice stains, though it takes a few hours to turn from transparent to dark brown.) Place the chopped walnuts in the sterilized bottle together with the cloves. Add the vanilla seeds and pods. Fill with vodka, close the bottle, and place in a sunny location. Let age for 40 days, shaking every 2 to 3 days. Strain ingredients and rebottle the liquid.

Blushing Bella

(Makes 1 cocktail)

- ½ ounce rose liqueur* (see recipe below)
- 2 ounces vodka
- 1 ounce pomegranate liqueur
- 2–4 fresh rose petals

Combine first three ingredients in a shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a martini glass and garnish with petals.

*You can special-order rose liqueur from well-stocked liquor stores.

Rose Petal Liqueur

(Makes a half gallon)

- Approximately 36 red rose petals
- 1 cup superfine sugar
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds
- 4¼ cups vodka

Pluck the rose petals and remove the white tip that joins the calyx. Combine water and sugar in a saucepan, and warm for 5 minutes to make the syrup. Add rose petals and coriander seeds. Boil 5 more minutes, then remove pan from heat and cover until the mixture cools. Pour into a clean, airtight jar through a fine sieve. Add the vodka. Seal the jar and store it in a cool place for a month. (Refrigerated, the liqueur will keep indefinitely.)



ANTIPASTI

Flatbread Dough

Use this recipe for both the flatbread pizza and the piadinas. To do both, you'll have to make two batches of this recipe.

- 1 package active yeast
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 1¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
- ¾ cup warm water
- 1 teaspoon olive oil

In the bowl of a food processor, combine the yeast, sugar, flour, salt, and thyme. Pulse to combine. Add the water in a steady stream until the dough begins to form a ball. Turn it onto a board and knead with the heel of your hand until the dough is smooth and elastic.

Coat a large bowl with oil. Place dough in bowl and cover with a damp cloth. Put in a warm spot to rise until it doubles in size, about 1 hour.

When the dough has doubled, punch down, scrape it onto the counter, and knead it lightly into a smooth ball. Cut into 20 pieces and make 2-inch discs (for the Piadina recipe, page 89) or 10 pieces to make 11-inch discs (for the Flatbread with Culatello recipe, below).

Flatbread with Culatello, Grana Padano Cheese, Arugula, Extra-Virgin Olive Oil, and Balsamico di Modena

(Makes 10 flatbreads)

Cut flatbread dough into 10 pieces and, with a

rolling pin, roll each into a very flat 11-inch circle.

If using a pizza stone, place stone in the oven on the lowest rack (so it's closest to the heat source). Preheat the oven to 500°. When hot, lay a single disc on the hot surface. Allow to cook until you see bubbles on the surface, about 1 to 2 minutes. Turn and continue to cook 1 to 2 minutes more or until bread has puffed up.

If you don't have a pizza oven or stone, heat a large sauté pan on high heat. Do not add any oil or fat. Lay a single disc on the hot surface. Do not touch it until you see bubbles on the surface, about 1 to 2 minutes. Flip and continue to cook 1 to 2 minutes more or until bread has puffed up.

Flatbread Toppings

- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 pound culatello or Prosciutto di Parma, shaved very thinly
- 1 pound grana Padano cheese or Parmigiano-Reggiano, shaved very thinly
- 1 pound arugula or rocket
- ½ cup high-quality balsamic vinegar

Drizzle olive oil on the hot flatbread. Top with culatello, then grana Padano, then the arugula, more olive oil, and then a drizzle of balsamic. Cut each flatbread into 8 pieces. Enjoy immediately.

Mini Piadinas with Roasted Pork, Olives, Oil-Marinated Sun-Dried Tomatoes, Marjoram, and Whipped Ricotta

(Makes 20 mini piadinas)

Piadina is a peasant flatbread from Italy's Emilia-Romagna region.

Roasted Pork

- 4 cloves fresh garlic, finely chopped



Clockwise from top left: the Blushing Bella cocktail; bartender Jodi Dolph mixes it up; crispy pork belly with mostarda; a selection of paired wines.



Clockwise from top left: preparing the mostarda; guest Debbie Schaffer gets in on the action; fresh herbs; chef Wiggins shows off a flatbread cooked in her outdoor pizza oven.

- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh oregano, chopped
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon freshly cracked black pepper
- 3 pounds pork shoulder

Preheat oven to 325°. Combine ingredients and rub over the pork. Place pork in oven, cook uncovered for 1 hour, or until the meat reaches a temperature of 155° to 160°. Let the meat rest for at least 30 minutes before slicing to allow the juices to redistribute.

Piadinas

Heat a large sauté pan on high heat. Place a couple of the piadina discs directly on the pan without any oil or fat. Once the disc begins to form bubbles, flip and finish the other side. As soon as it puffs up, remove and top with a small amount of each of the ingredients below. Fold in half to make a sandwich.

- 3 pounds pork shoulder, thinly shaved (keep all the crusty bits)
- ½ cup pitted kalamata olives, sliced lengthwise into quarters
- ½ cup oil-marinated sun-dried tomatoes, julienned
- ¼ cup loosely packed marjoram, roughly chopped
- 1 cup ricotta, whipped in a food processor until super-smooth
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

Crostini di Fegatini di Pollo e Sapa

(Makes 24)

This classic preparation of chicken livers is

found all over Italy, but especially in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, and Umbria.

- 1 pound organic chicken livers
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large shallots, thinly sliced
- 1 large garlic clove, smashed
- 3 anchovy fillets (or 1 tablespoon anchovy paste)
- 1 tablespoon salt-packed capers, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- 4–6 fresh sage leaves
- 1 sprig fresh rosemary, leaves removed and minced (about 1½ teaspoons)
- 1 sprig fresh thyme, leaves removed (about 1 teaspoon)
- ¼ cup cognac
- ¾ cup chicken broth
- ⅛ teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- Crostini (for serving)
- Parsley, chopped (for garnish)
- Shallots, shaved (for garnish)
- Sapa (see recipe)

Trim any sinews from the livers and dry well with paper towels.

In a large skillet, melt the butter and olive oil over medium-high heat. Sauté the shallots, garlic, anchovy, capers, sage, rosemary, and thyme until shallots are lightly browned, about 6 minutes.

Season the chicken livers with salt and pepper and add to the pan. Cook over high heat until browned, then add cognac. Then add half of the broth and keep stirring with a wooden spoon, breaking up the livers as they start to cook through. When the broth is absorbed, add the second ⅓ cup of broth and repeat.

Remove from heat and transfer to a food processor. Process until smooth, then add lemon juice and additional salt and pepper as desired. Serve warm or at room temperature with grilled crostini. Garnish with parsley, shaved shallots, and sapa.

Sapa (Concentrated Grape Must)

Sapa is a fermented grape must used to finish many Italian dishes. It lends a tart grape flavor, and the acid helps balance out the fat in a dish. For this recipe, source the best grapes—traditionally Malbecs, but any high-quality grape will do—instead of table grapes. You can often purchase grapes from Whole Foods online.

- 5½ pounds perfectly ripe grapes (ideally still in the bunch)

Crush grapes with a spoon or in a mortar and pestle. Place the fruit and the juice in a bowl, cover, and set aside at room temperature to ferment for about 24 hours. Once fermented (look for tiny bubbles on the surface), press and filter the must through a fine muslin bag or cheesecloth into a pot. Set the must over medium heat and boil 2 to 3 hours, until it has reached the consistency of syrup. Cool and store in a sterile bottle. Sapa will keep for several months in the refrigerator.

Ciccioli Frolli with Mostarda (Crispy Pork Belly with Mostarda)

(Makes 24)

Ciccioli, which is made by compressing, drying, and aging fatty pork trimmings, is common in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region. In this preparation, the ciccioli will be similar to a dry, crunchy chip.

Ciccioli Frolli

- 3 pounds pork belly
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 sprigs fresh rosemary, picked but not chopped

Slice the pork belly in half down the middle so you have 2 thin sheets. Then slice those into 2-ounce square portion sizes. Toss belly pieces with salt and rosemary. Lay flat on a jelly roll pan. Place another jelly roll pan on top. Place some sort of heavy weight (bricks, canned food, large stones) on top of the tray. The idea is to press the pork down as much as possible. Refrigerate and allow to press for five days. Remove pork belly and slice pieces thinly (about an ⅛ inch thick). Place on a dry sheet tray with space between each piece.

Bake in a preheated 300° oven for 1 hour, or until skin is crispy. Remove and allow to cool to room temperature.

Mostarda di Bolognese

- 4 dried figs, cut into ½-inch cubes
- 1 slightly unripe pear, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
- ½ cup dried apricots, cut into ½-inch cubes
- ½ cup dried cherries
- ½ cup dried apples, cut into ¼-inch dice
- 1½ cups sugar

Crispy Polenta with Mortadella Mousse

(Makes 24)

Mortadella Mousse

- 1 pound mortadella di Bologna, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 tablespoons Parmigiano-Reggiano, grated
- ¾ cup fresh heavy cream for whipping

Grind the mortadella and the cheese in a mortar or blender until it is reduced to a creamy consistency. Whip heavy cream and gently fold into the mortadella mixture. Scoop into a pastry bag if you have one, or you can just spoon it on later. Store in the refrigerator while you make your crispy polenta cakes.

Crispy Polenta

- | | |
|---|--|
| 4 cups polenta, cooked | 1 cup all-purpose flour |
| 1 cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained and finely chopped | 4 eggs, cracked and gently whisked together with a tablespoon of water |
| ¼ cup fresh thyme, chopped | 4 cups panko bread crumbs |
| 1 cup Parmigiano-Reggiano, finely grated | 2 quarts vegetable oil |
| 2 tablespoons kosher salt | 1 ounce pistachios, chopped |
| 1 tablespoon freshly ground white pepper | Balsamic vinegar |

Fold into the hot cooked polenta the sun-dried tomatoes, thyme, Parmigiano-Reggiano, salt, and white pepper. Pour into a jelly roll pan. Set in the refrigerator and allow to chill approximately 1 hour. When completely cool, use a small cookie cutter about 1 inch in diameter and cut out small discs. Dredge discs in flour, then egg wash, then into the panko. Repeat until all discs are breaded. Heat oil to 350°. Drop in a couple of polenta discs at a time. Fry till golden brown. Remove. Set on a tray covered with paper towels.

Pipe a small amount of mousse onto each polenta disc. Garnish with chopped pistachios and a drizzle of balsamic vinegar.



1½ cups dry red wine
2 teaspoons mustard oil
¼ cup mustard seeds

Place figs, pear, apricots, cherries, and apples into a mixing bowl and stir to mix. In a saucepan, heat sugar and wine together until boiling. Remove from heat and stir in mustard oil and seeds. Pour over fruit and allow to steep for 24 hours. Jar and refrigerate. (Alternatively, you can also purchase mostarda online.)

Assembly

Place mostarda in a serving bowl and, on a platter beneath, arrange the crispy pork belly bites around it. Eat the belly plain or dip it into the mostarda.

Quaglia Arrosti Cicheti (Mini Quail Brochettes)

(Makes 24)

Semi-boneless quail means the entire body cavity is boneless, and only the leg and wing bones remain.

Quail

6 semi-boneless quail
2 tablespoons kosher salt
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped
24 pancetta slices, cut into 6-inch strips

Cut quail into quarters, then cut off wings and remove leg bones so each portion is boneless. Mix pieces of quail with salt, oil, and thyme. Form each piece into a bundle. Wrap with pancetta. Stick with a plain wooden toothpick.

Heat oven to 350°. Pan-sear quail first to crisp the pancetta, then place in the oven on a middle rack for 15 to 20 minutes, or until pancetta is fully crispy and quail is cooked.

Sweet-and-Sour Pine Nut Sauce

½ cup toasted pine nuts
¾ cup honey
¼ cup sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon tomato paste

Combine sauce ingredients together. Place a bowl of the sweet-and-sour sauce on a serving platter and surround with quail bites.

DESSERTS

Almond-Polenta Tart with Caramelized Pears and Cherries

(Makes 12 to 16 servings)

Almond-Polenta Tart

¾ cup (1½ sticks) unsalted butter
½ cup powdered sugar
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon salt
1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
½ cup polenta or finely ground cornmeal

Pampepato (Black Pepper–Chocolate Cake Bites)

Thanks to fruit, chocolate, nuts, and spices, this treat has nothing in common with traditional American fruitcake. For the best result, bake the Pampepato a week or more before serving. Recipe courtesy of *The Splendid Table: Recipes from Emilia-Romagna, the Heartland of Northern Italian Food*.

(Makes 2 cakes, serving 6 to 8 each)

Cake

1½ cups cake flour
1½ cups all-purpose unbleached flour (organic, stone-ground preferred)
¼ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
6 tablespoons candied citron, very fine dice
¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons candied orange rind, cut into very fine dice
2 small dried figs, finely minced
1¾ cups whole blanched almonds, toasted and coarsely chopped

1 cup plus 3 tablespoons water
1½ cups sugar
¼ cup ground sweet chocolate
1 cup cocoa (not Dutch process)
Generous ½ teaspoon ground cloves
Generous pinch freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Icing

8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, melted

Working ahead: Pampepato must be made at least 12 hours in advance. Ideally it should “ripen” for 3 to 4 days. Keep tightly wrapped at room temperature. It freezes very nicely (before cloaking in chocolate).

Making the cakes: Butter and flour a cookie sheet. Preheat the oven to 300°. In a large shallow bowl, thoroughly mix the flours, baking powder, baking soda, candied fruits, figs, and nuts. In a small saucepan set over medium heat, blend the water, sugar, ground chocolate, and cocoa to a cream-like consistency. Do not let it boil. Cool about 15 minutes and stir in the spices.

Make a well in the dry-ingredient mixture, filling it with the chocolate mixture. Stir with a wooden spoon to combine everything, taking care not to overmix. It will be a very sticky dough. Use a rubber spatula to make 2 round mounds of the dough on the cookie sheet, spacing them about 3 inches apart. Each should be no more than 6 to 7 inches in diameter. Smooth the mounds.

Baking, mellowing, and icing: Bake the cakes for 1 hour and 25 minutes, or until a tester inserted into the center of one comes out clean. Cool to room temperature on the sheet. Then wrap the cakes in plastic wrap and let them ripen at room temperature for 12 hours to 4 days.

Lay out a sheet of paper towels under a cake rack. Set the cakes upside down on a rack and spread an almost-transparent film of melted chocolate over the bottom of each. Once it has hardened, flip the cakes over and spread a slightly thicker film over the rest of the cakes. When the chocolate hardens, rewrap the cakes and store them at room temperature.

½ cup caramelized almonds, plus more for garnish (see recipe below)

Caramelized Almonds

½ cup sugar
4 tablespoons butter
1 cup almonds, blanched and slivered

Stir sugar, butter, and almonds constantly in heavy skillet until nuts are a light caramel color. Spread on greased cookie sheet to crisp and cool. When cool, break caramelized almonds (this will look like brickle) apart by placing in a plastic bag and rolling a rolling pin over it until you have crumbly chunks.

Caramelized Fruit

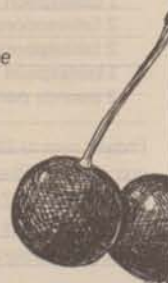
4 firm red pears
1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
½ cup sugar
1 cup fresh cherries
1½ cups crème fraîche or sour cream (for garnish)

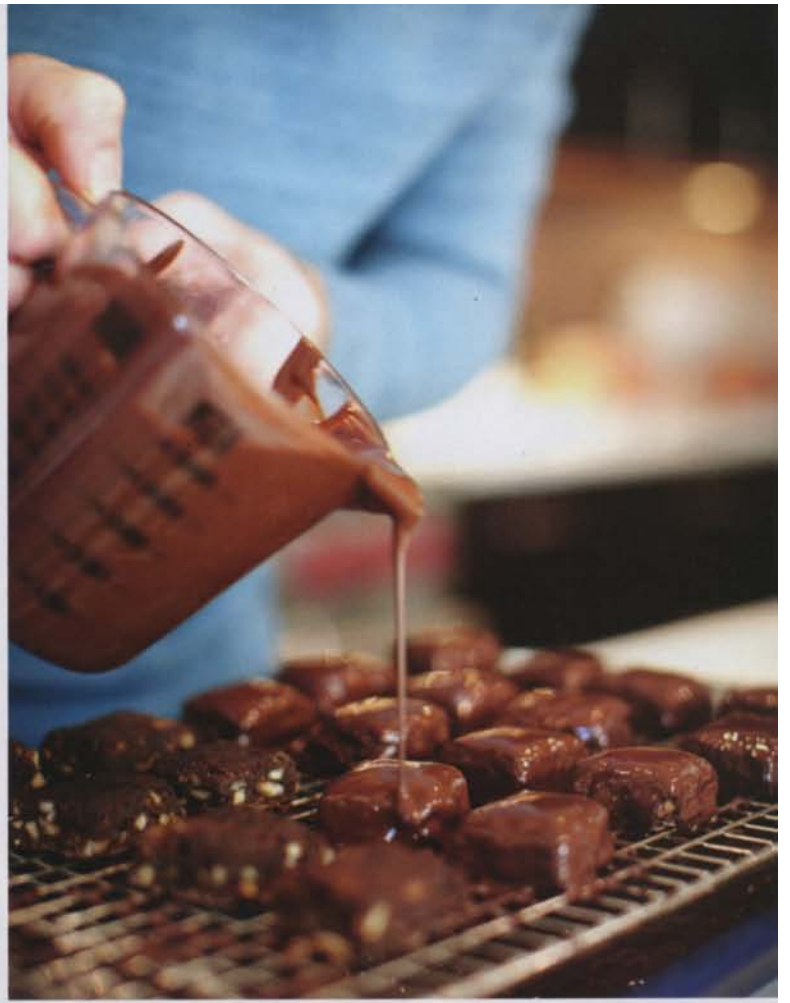
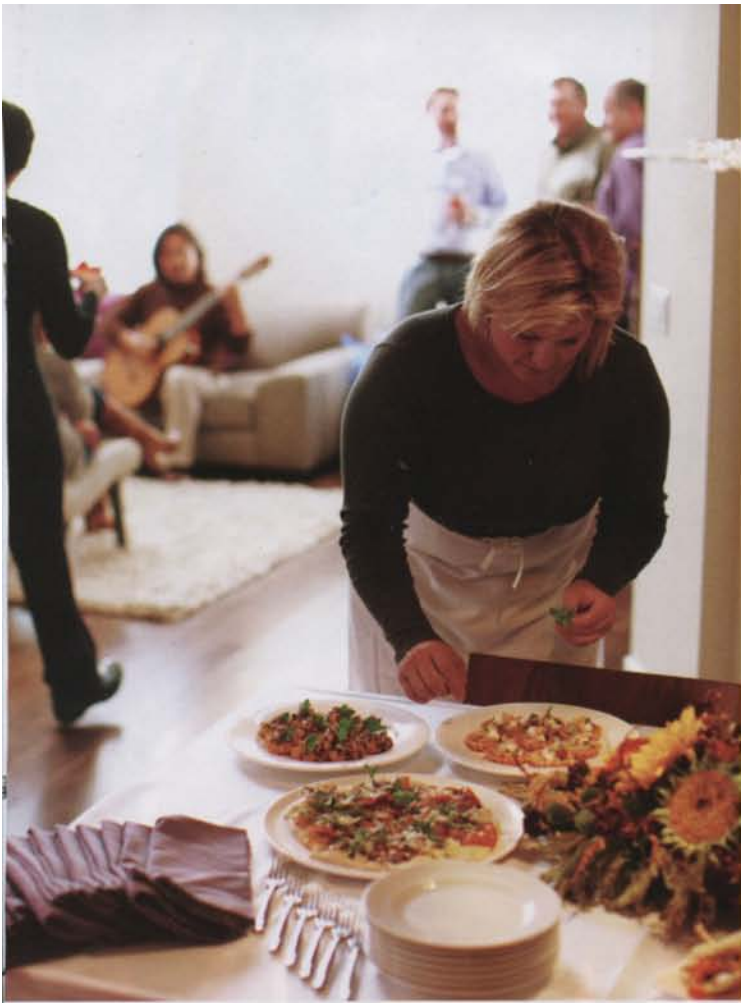
Preheat oven to 350°. Grease and flour an 11-inch tart pan with a removable bottom. Or you can use individual tartlet pans.

For Almond-Polenta Tart: Cream together butter, powdered sugar, vanilla, and salt with an electric mixer until light and fluffy. Add flour and polenta, and mix just until blended. Scrape dough into prepared pan. Use floured fingers to press dough evenly into pan. Sprinkle center with caramelized almonds, pressing almonds into dough. Bake 35 to 45 minutes, until golden brown. Let cool, and remove tart shell from pan.

For caramelized fruit: Peel pears, and cut each one into 12 wedges, discarding cores. Toss pears in lemon juice. Place sugar in a large skillet, and turn heat to high. Let sugar caramelize, supervising closely and swirling pan occasionally for even color. When the caramel is deep golden brown, add pears and cherries, and stir gently to coat. Cool slightly.

Cut tart into wedges and top each piece with caramelized fruit, a dollop of crème fraîche or sour cream, and a sprinkle of almonds. ▲▲





Clockwise from top left: chef Wiggins adds the finishing touch; the black pepper-chocolate cake bites get a little sweeter; guest Honor Wiggins; assembling the almond-polenta tartlets.