

# Romancing the Stove

*Winter weather calls for comfort food, and few cuisines are better suited to soothe than Italian. So take a tour of Italy, Berkshires-style, and indulge in simple, satisfying Mediterranean flavors.*

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**A**t this time of year, as ice and snow grip the Berkshires and frigid winds whip through the hills, even the most winter-loving among us can be seduced by visions of milder climates. And few seductions could be more sweeping and romantic than the lure of a trip to Italy, starting with its sun-soaked coastlines and sapphire seas.

Such is the setting of Campania, considered the gateway to southern Italy. Loosely speaking, the region represents the front ankle of the Italian boot. Campania encompasses the island of Capri, the Gulf of Naples, and the Amalfi coast. One of the region's most prominent features is Mount Vesuvius, the volcano that covered Pompeii and surrounding cities in lava and ash in 79 A.D. In a way, the eruption laid the foundation for Neapolitan cuisine, since the volcanic soil rendered Campania's countryside highly fertile. The region today yields some of Italy's finest produce.

Davide Manzo, chef-owner of Trattoria Rustica, on McKay Street in Pittsfield,



Massachusetts, grew up in Pompeii, where his playground lay at the foot of Vesuvius. Manzo opened Trattoria Rustica just over three years ago after a thick layer of economic ash had already settled over Pittsfield. "I feel I'm a pioneer here," Manzo says in his thick accent. "And I believe in the revitalization of the city."

Manzo also believes strongly in the authenticity of his Campania cuisine. "The authenticity is why I've survived here," he says. "Everybody wants to do this fusion stuff. I'm sticking with the ancient flavors."

Manzo's menu offers cuisine representative of Pompeii in particular and Neapolitan cuisine in general. Inside Trattoria Rustica, Manzo's wood-fired brick oven serves as his own personal Vesuvius. Made from Argilla bricks that hail from Campania, the oven is the centerpiece of his open kitchen, and the defining characteristic of this remarkable restaurant. "The ancient flavors come through in that oven," Manzo says.

Manzo cooks most of his entrees in the brick oven, which generates infernal temperatures that sear and lightly char meats and fish, leaving them crispy outside, tender and juicy within. Brick-oven specialties include a roasted rack of lamb touched with mint, parsley, and lemon; a veal loin chop rubbed with red wine vinegar, oregano, and garlic; and salmone al forno, an organic, farm-raised salmon roasted with white wine and finished with aged balsamic vinegar.

Entrees are plated with minimal fuss. An accompanying vegetable side, perhaps broccoli rabe with garlic, a wedge of polenta, and a slice of lemon—if applicable—fill out the plate. "They say you eat with your eyes," Manzo says. "But I don't believe that. You eat with your sense of smell and your palate."

This is not to say Manzo has no concern for visual aesthetics. With brick and stucco walls, stone-tiled floors, and candlelight, Manzo has created an intimate, romantic atmosphere in Rustico's half-basement interior. Tasteful art prints line the walls, while hanging pots and dried peppers delineate the kitchen area.

Black-clad waitstaff pepper their tableside banter with heartfelt "pregos" and "ciaso," lending to the authenticity on which Manzo prides himself. Dinner begins with crusty bread Manzo bakes each morning, accompanied by olive oil with chopped basil.

Appetizers include air-cured beef bresaola with arugula, lemon, extra virgin olive oil, and parmigiano reggiano, and antipasto verdure, an assortment of marinated vegetables and olives. The coastal Campania region is famed for its seafood dishes, which Manzo offers in the form of grilled calamari *ai ferri* and *am pepepata e cozze*, mussels steamed in white wine with garlic, grape tomatoes, and parsley.

Rustica's menu features a number of pasta dishes, such as linguini alla puttanesca, with a sauce of olives, capers, garlic, anchovies, and tomatoes, and linguini *alla scoglio*, with mussels, clams, and shrimp in a tomato-basil sauce with white wine.

Manzo works Limoncello, a Campanian lemon liqueur, onto his



**Master of the Fire:** Davide Manzo (left) seasons ingredients for his brick oven specialties at Trattoria Rustica in Pittsfield, Mass.; one of the restaurant's delectable desserts (above).



**Mama Mia!** [top, l-r] Anna Arace, owner of Trattoria Il Vesuvio in Lenox, Mass., with her mother, Liberata Manzo, and her sister, Maria Manzo.

menu with some of the desserts, including tartufo limoncello, a lemon sorbet served in a hollowed-out lemon skin.

The Berkshires are fortunate to have a restaurant offering such regionally authentic, delectable cuisine. But to have two restaurants celebrating the food of Campania located within ten minutes of each other, the Berkshires are blessed.

Manzo's sister, Anna Arace, makes this possible with her restaurant, Trattoria Il Vesuvio, located on Routes 7 & 20 in Lenox, Massachusetts. The lofty, barn-like structure, which formerly housed an art studio, was