

What a caper

The Aeolian Islands have much to offer in the way of beauty, but when it comes to flavour, the caper is king



WILD CAPERS ARE A GREAT REASON TO VISIT THIS PART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN; the volcanic soil and methods of

preservation on these small Sicilian isles results in uniquely outstanding capers. Not forgetting, that is, the cucunci, a close relative of the caper.

Reputed to kindle the appetite, lower blood pressure, mitigate toothache and lower cholesterol, capers are ubiquitous on the beautiful volcanic island of Salina. They turn up in antipasti, in salads, with pasta, meat, fish or as snacks and make a real spectacle in springtime—when the splendid but fragile caper blossom spills over the little terraced walls of Salina's hill-sides.

Wandering through the citrus groves and winding lanes of Salina, hand-written signs for Capperi e Cucunci invite further investigation. Following a Capers and Cucunci sign next to Bar Malvasia, in the village of Malfa, will lead curious travellers to the cantina of Signora Antonino, which is full of enticing



barrels and shelves straining under the weight of capers. Here, you can sample several sizes of capers and taste cucunci preserved in home-produced, golden malvasia wine vinegar. Discovering that capers are actually the flowers of the Caper bush, picked when they are still in bud, the intrepid foodie will find that a cucuncio looks like a small gherkin but is the fruit of the same plant. And that size does matter. Signora Antonino sells three sizes of capers: the smallest (and most expensive) are antipasto/aperitivo capers, the medium-sized are all-purpose, while the plump capers, the size of your little finger tip, are solely for cooking. All grown on the steeply terraced hill-sides around Pollara, above the cliff-backed, pebble cove where *Il Postino* was filmed.

Daniela Virgona's family, based in Malfa, have cultivated capers for 50 years. Daniela explains their popularity as a crop on Salina: "Cultivation isn't difficult because our climate is good for growing them, it's cool in the morning and warm during the day." Their roots also penetrate into narrow spaces, thriving in dry, rocky terrain, and volcanic soil. And the fact that they're suitable for being preserved, waiting for weeks in storehouses before transportation, has helped.

Although capers seem innocuous enough, safe in their jars on delicatessen shelves, the process of capturing them isn't easy. Caper plants are very thorny and cling to their steep, rocky hill-sides. The caper harvest starts in the spring, before the plants have flowered. Whole families are involved in the early hours of the day and collect capers from each plant every seven to ten days, since they tend to produce flower buds continuously. The presence of flamboyant white and pink flowers with violet stamen and a delicious smell is in fact a sign of cultural neglect.

The capers cultivated on Salina are of two distinct varieties—Nocella (rounded shape) and Spinosa (pyramid shape, not very widespread). They're preserved

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either with dry salt, in brine, wine vinegar or sott'olio (in olive oil). On the south-eastern tip of Salina at Lingua, there's a little salted lake, where the inhabitants once used to gather the salt needed to preserve capers and fish. Nowadays, it's a great spot to enjoy a refreshing granita at Alfredo's bar, while considering which caper dish to sample.

Daniela Virgona agrees with Signora Antonino that her capers are great with an aperitivo to tempt the taste buds, and recommends crostini with caper pesto, which she prepares for the annual caper festival in Pollara. She also agrees with the widely accepted Salina fact that capers can awaken other appetites.

Capers were used by the Romans for their aphrodisiac and medicinal qualities and a Venetian medical treatise writes that "Caper berries make coitus lively". Ancient Greeks used them as a beauty product and caper berries are used today in North Africa by Berber tribes, mixed with olive oil, milk and honey to make a beauty cream. In the Aeolian islands, it was common to use a mix of caper and walnut roots to fend off fever. The mixture was crushed in a mortar and laid, before sunrise, on the spleen by a bandage renewed daily for three weeks, until the fever disappeared.

For those whose spleen is fine, there's always caper gastronomy. Capers are one of the two main ingredients (along with aromatic wild herbs) in Aeolian cuisine, contributing to the robust tastes of dishes across the islands. Michele Caruso, Head Chef at his family's Hotel Signum in Malfa, loves using capers in his cooking,

Sample Capers

In the Aeolian islands (fly easyJet to Palermo, then hydrofoil from Milazzo): try Caper and Malvasia wine from Daniela Virgona at Malfa, Salina www.malvasiadellelipari.it. For typical Aeolian dishes with capers, head to the restaurant at Hotel Signum, Via Scalo, Malfa, Salina (www.hotelsignum.it).

Outside Sicily

Valvona and Crolla Ltd, in Edinburgh, sell capers in salt from Lipari in the Aeolian islands (www.valvonacrolla.com). Also, Gennaro Contaldo's restaurant, Passione, is at 10 Charlotte Street, London (www.passione.co.uk).



"Because they are local, genuine, special for our Aeolian kitchen and give the dishes a special flavour—a pleasure to eat." He uses them in 'Insalata di pane, capperi e cucunci', a salad of chopped capers and cucunci mixed with stale bread that's been slightly softened in warm water and tossed with olive oil, garlic, lemon juice, mint, basil and oregano. Or, as a simple but tasty sauce for spaghetti where capers join green and black olives, tomatoes, chilli, garlic, basil and oregano.



An important occasion for both Caruso and Virgona families, is the annual Sagra del Cappero di Pollara (Pollara Caper Festival), always held on the first weekend of June. Taking place in the square in front of the church of Saint Onofrio, it includes sports events, street games, folklore and musical shows. But the main performer is the caper that seems to stun visitors in the Virgona family salads and crostini, in Michelle's pasta dishes and in many other traditional dishes prepared by restaurants and local people. Gennaro Contaldo, the man who taught Jamie Oliver about Italian food, speaks passionately, not only about cooking with capers, but of the memories of his Southern Italian childhood that their flavour is evocative of.

"The sun plays a main part. When I was a little child we picked them wild in the spring, before the flowers were out. In the summer, the incredible flowers are like orchids and the bushes run down the hills."

But Gennaro warns the unsuspecting caper-forager not to eat them when fresh—they're bitter without salting. His mother used to put the capers he'd collected in salt for three hours. Gennaro recommends preserving capers in jars with one part vinegar to three parts water. Close the jar, place them in a pan of cold water, put on a stove and as soon as they're boiling, remove. The result is tasty capers in brine. According to Gennaro, there are endless ways to use caperberries, including adding to olives, anchovies, oregano and tomatoes. "Serve them with fish for a true flavour of the Mediterranean," he says.



