

# the sweet side of Italy

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What pops into your head when someone mentions Italian desserts? Tiramisu? Cannolis? Gelato?

For Francine Segan, it's lemon-cornmeal cookies, yogurt semifreddo with radicchio marmalade and sweet ricotta crepes.

Though the combinations might sound unfamiliar and even a little strange, these treats are what Italians eat – and make – on a daily basis.

Segan, a food historian fluent in Italian, scoured the country to find authentic recipes for her latest cookbook, "Dolci: Italy's Sweets."

"We know their salamis and their pizzas and their pastas, but I felt like we really did not know the desserts," says Segan, a first-generation Italian-American who grew up in Williamsburg.

With the help of home cooks, top chefs and even well-known pastry manufacturers, she learned to whip up each and every dessert in the book.

"I had to see them make it," Segan says. "I told them, 'I have to work with you. I'm representing Italy and your food,

## Francine Segan scoured the country for authentic desserts

so I really have to watch and taste while I'm here.'"

She drove two hours across Sicily to find *'mpanatigghi* – a sweet meat turnover that's been around for centuries – and spent another day in the Basilicata region rolling out dough with Franca Artuso for the 72-year-old grandma's sweet chickpea ravioli.

"I had to stay there six hours until I made them perfectly," Segan laughs.

The upper East Sider discovered so many quirky sweets, she created an entire chapter called "Dolci Particolari: Weird

and Wonderful, Unique and Unusual Desserts."

And while she features several traditional holiday desserts, including a Pandoro Christmas tree cake, nothing starts a conversation quite like angel hair pasta pie.

"You toss raw pasta with cocoa powder and bake it into a pie crust. When it bakes, it absorbs a little of the cocoa powder and butter and it becomes softer, but still crunchy, so it has a nice bite."

And to Segan, the conversations matter as much as what's served. She still



Francine Segan

remembers the Sunday suppers that her grandmother hosted every week.

"There were 40 people every Sunday. When you first walked in, there'd be these finger things that the kids can grab. Then, we'd go play and there would come the sit-down time with the pasta course and the meat course and lots and lots of desserts," she says. "Italians have all sorts of sayings about time at the table, like 'At the table, you don't get any older.'"

These sayings are so important, Segan paired every recipe with one.

"I wanted to show a little bit of the culture. The Italians feel the more time you spend at the table, the closer the relationships, and we all loved it because the food was fun."



### Angel Hair Pasta Pie (Torta Ricciolina) Serves 8

**REGION:** Emilia-Romagna  
**1½ cups blanched whole almonds**  
**¾ cup sugar**  
**Grated zest of 1 lemon**  
**A small handful of finely chopped candied citron or candied orange peel**  
**1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa powder**  
**½ recipe Pie Crust Dough (see below)**  
**8 ounces thin fresh egg pasta, such as tagliatelline or angel hair, store-bought or homemade**  
**6 tablespoons butter, thinly sliced**  
**6 tablespoons rum**  
**Confectioners' sugar**

1. Grind the almonds and granulated sugar in a food processor until the mixture resembles coarse sand. Pulse in the lemon zest, candied citron and cocoa powder until well combined. Divide into 3 portions.
2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
3. Roll the pie crust dough out into a circle large enough to line a 9-to-10-inch pie pan and fit it into the pan. With a fork, pierce the bottom and sides of the crust.
4. Divide the pasta into 3 portions, with one portion slightly larger

than the other two.

5. Line the pie crust with the larger portion of pasta and sprinkle with one portion of the almond mixture.
6. Lift the pasta with the tip of a knife so it is loose and free-form. Do not press the pasta down.
7. Dot the pasta with one third of the butter.
8. Top with another layer of pasta sprinkled with a portion of the almond mixture and more butter.
9. Repeat to make a third layer.
10. Loosely cover with aluminum

foil, bake for 25 minutes, then remove the foil and continue baking uncovered for another 20 to 25 minutes, until the top is golden and the center set.

11. Remove from the oven and immediately sprinkle the top of the pie with the rum. It will hiss and absorb quickly, with most of the alcohol evaporating, leaving just a lovely aroma and flavor.

12. Cool to room temperature on a wire rack. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar and serve, or, preferably, let stand overnight or for 24 hours before serving.

### Pie Crust Dough (Pasta Frolla) Makes enough dough for 1 double-crust pie or 2 single-crust pies

**1⅞ cups all-purpose flour**  
**¾ cup sugar**  
**8 tablespoons butter, softened, cut into pieces**  
**2 large eggs**  
**2 large egg yolks**  
**Grated zest of 1 lemon**  
**¼ teaspoon salt**  
**2 tablespoons liqueur, such as Maraschino or Sassolino, optional**

1. In a large bowl or on a work surface, mix together the flour, sugar and butter pieces

with a wooden spoon until the mixture will resemble coarse sand.

2. Form a well in the center and add the eggs, egg yolks, lemon zest, salt and liqueur (if using).
3. Gradually stir in the flour mixture, until thoroughly combined.
4. Shape the dough into a ball, wrap in a sheet of plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, before rolling out.



PHOTOS BY ELLEN SILVERMAN

## Peaches (Pesche dolci) Makes about 40

**REGION:** Abruzzo and Molise

**FOR THE COOKIES:**

**4 cups, all-purpose flour**  
**1 cup sugar**  
**2 large eggs**  
**6 tablespoons butter**  
**½ cup milk**  
**2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract**  
**2 teaspoons baking powder**

**TO FILL AND ASSEMBLY:**

**¼ cup Alchermes (see below) or other clear sweet liqueur such as Kirsch tinted red with food coloring**

**Sugar**

**1½ cups pastry cream, lemon curd or vanilla pudding**  
**40 whole almonds**

**MAKE THE COOKIES:**

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

2. Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper.
3. Sift the flour and sugar together onto a work surface and make a well in the center.
4. Add the eggs, butter, milk, vanilla and baking powder to the well and slowly mix in the flour until a dough forms.
5. Knead until well combined.
6. Pinch off a small portion of the dough and roll it into a small ball, about 1 inch in diameter. Press the ball onto the prepared baking sheet so it is flattened to a half dome. Repeat with the remaining dough. Each ball will become half of the peach. Continue until all the dough is used up.
7. Bake for about 25 minutes, until light golden.
8. While still warm, scrape out a wide hollow in the flat side of each ball with an espresso spoon or tip of a knife.

**ASSEMBLE THE "PEACHES":**

1. Put the alchermes, diluted with ¼ cup water, into a small bowl. Put some sugar on a small plate.
2. Divide the hollowed-out cookies into pairs of roughly the same size.
3. Take a pair and fill the hollow side of each cookie with lots of pastry cream.
4. Put an almond into the center of one of the cookies and gently press them together. Some of the cream will ooze out. That's normal.
5. Slowly roll each "peach" in the liqueur, then in the sugar.
6. Put the "peaches" on a platter, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 12 hours, or up to 36, before serving. This is an important step, as they need time in the refrigerator to absorb the pastry cream and soften.

## Alchermes: Spicy Sweet Dessert Liqueur

Makes about 1½ quarts

**2½ cups pure grain alcohol or vodka**  
**1 2-inch cinnamon stick**  
**½ teaspoon ground coriander**  
**1 to 2 blades whole mace or ¼ teaspoon ground mace**  
**¼ teaspoon ground cardamom**  
**4 whole cloves**  
**3 tablespoons candied orange peel**  
**3 whole star anise**  
**½ vanilla bean, cut into small pieces**  
**2 ½ cups sugar**  
**2 cups warm water**  
**7 tablespoons rose water**  
**Red food coloring**

1. Combine the alcohol with 1¼ cups water in a sealable glass container such as a Mason jar. Add the cinnamon, coriander, mace,

cardamom, cloves, candied orange peel, star anise, vanilla and stir to combine.

2. Leave the container, sealed, at room temperature for 2 weeks, shaking the container daily to combine the ingredients.

3. Combine the sugar and warm water and stir until the sugar dissolves.

4. Add to the alcohol mixture and seal the container. Let it sit for another day or two, then taste, and add more sugar or water, if you like.

5. Strain the liqueur into a clean sealable glass container and stir in the rose water and enough red food coloring to get a bright red color.

## Pandoro Christmas Tree Cake Serves 10

**Region:** Veneto and popular throughout Italy

**¾ cup sugar**

**6 tablespoons liqueur, such as Cointreau, or rum**

**2 large egg yolks**

**14 ounces mascarpone cheese**

**1 cup heavy cream**

**1 Pandoro\* cake, about 1 pound**

**Candied cherries, fresh mint leaves, silver confetti and crushed candy canes for decoration**

**Confectioners' sugar**

1. In a small saucepan, combine ¼ cup water and ¼ cup of the granulated sugar and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and stir in 4 tablespoons of the liqueur. Set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, with an electric mixer, beat the egg yolks and the

remaining ½ cup granulated sugar for about 5 minutes, until light yellow and fluffy.

3. Beat in the remaining 2 tablespoons liqueur.

4. Fold in the mascarpone.

5. In a separate medium bowl, whip the cream until firm peaks form.

6. Fold the mascarpone mixture into the whipped cream.

7. Carefully, so as not to break the points, slice the pandoro horizontally into 6 slices. Brush the outsides of the slice (the browned parts) with the liqueur syrup.

8. Place the largest pandoro slice on a serving platter and spread with some of the mascarpone mixture. Cover with the

next largest slice, angling it so that the points of the star don't line up. Spread with some of the mascarpone mixture and repeat with the remaining layers, finishing with a dollop of mascarpone on top.

9. Decorate the points with candies or candied cherries and mint leaves.

10. Sprinkle the entire cake with confectioners' sugar and serve.

\* Pandoro is available in many supermarkets beginning in the late fall. Thanks to the natural yeast used in making Pandoro, and despite containing no artificial preservatives, it lasts more than six months without refrigeration.

Recipes excerpted from "Dolci: Italy's Sweets" by Francine Segan (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$35).

