Food & Wine

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Celebrating Christmas in August in Minori, a Gem of a Town on the Amalfi Coast

With lively and authentic traditions, food that is to die for and an incomparable setting, the little town of Minori should be on the top of your travel list

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Minori. Photo: Wikipedia

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"I came for a unique Minori tradition: to celebrate Christmas in August ... On the 24th "Panettone Night," 34 chefs from Italy's 20 regions, all members of the Accademia del lievito madre founded by Minori's most famous citizen, pastry chef "Sal" De Riso, passed out free panettone samples to all on the lungomare...Another Gustaminori 2021 spectacle, Drama De Antiquis-Fantasite 5.0, a musical with some 30 actors, musicians, and ballerinas, was held in Minori's most important monument, an enormous (2,500 square meters) ancient Roman villa built in the first century A.D..."

Tucked away in the narrow inlet since ancient times, the small coastal town of Minori is

located directly below Ravello, the more famous hill-top town beloved by Wagner and many writers: Gide, E.M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence and Gore Vidal to name just a few. It's also only a ten-minute once-an-hour ferry ride to Amalfi with its magnificent medieval Cathedral, Italy's favorite wedding church. Although it's not as glamorous as these two jet set neighbors with their several luxurious hotels, ("Villa Cimbrone" and "Hotel Caruso" in Ravello and "Santa Caterina" and the newly-renovated "Grand Hotel Convento" in Amalfi) Minori is a pleasant destination not too "far from the madding crowd" with a nice sandy beach and a spacious *lungomare* for a leisurely romantic stroll at sunset.



Sal with the Christmas panettone. Photo: Courtesy of Sal De Riso.

One of the two best times to visit Minori is during Gustaminori, a cultural and oeno-gastronomical festival held annually for the past 25 years during the second half of August.

This year a lucky guest of the Gustaminori Corporation for three days, I came for a unique Minori tradition: to celebrate Christmas on August 24th, 25th and 26th. On the 24th "Panettone Night," 34 chefs from Italy's 20 regions, all members of the *Accademia del lievito madre* founded by Minori's most famous citizen, pastry chef "Sal" De Riso, passed out free panettone samples to all on the *lungomare.*



Bagpipers on arrival in Minori met by Sal De Riso and colleagues. Photo: Gustaminori Corporation.

Groups of local *zampognari* (bagpipers) played Christmas tunes wandering from restaurant to restaurant which all served typical Christmas dishes (actually all three nights): *fritto misto* of fried artichokes, broccoli, baccalà, anchovies, apples, and bananas; *l'insalata di rinforzo* (usually of cauliflower, black and green olives, anchovies, baby red peppers stuffed with tuna fish, pickles, cucumber, capers, and onions–but every family has its own recipe. It's called "*di rinforzo*" or "strengthening" because every day from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day new ingredients are added to it; *spaghetti atterrati con noci ed* alici (with walnuts and anchovies; and zeppole 'e patane (sugar-coated fried potato rings).

I can recommend "Giardiniello", "A'Ricette", and "La Botte", for these Christmas dishes and other local specialties like homemade *fusilli* (curly short pasta) or *n'dunderi* (local gnocchi) with various shellfish sauces, eggplant *polpette*, and fish and lemon dishes too numerous to list.



Pizza Amalfi. Photo: Lucy Gordan.

Speaking of lemons, you cannot leave Minori without stopping at Sal De Riso's bistro for "pizza Amalfi" (the topping: *provola*, *fior di latte*, prosciutto from Parma, ginger, and lemon slices) or "*delizia al limone*"(lemon cream on a slice of sponge cake encased in white chocolate). Several of Sal's pizzas are named for other towns on the Amalfi Coast and a few of his cakes for family members. The celebrations on "Christmas Eve" ended at midnight with a bang: a fifteen-minute magnificent display of fireworks on the beach.

Instead, another Gustaminori 2021 spectacle, *Drama De Antiquis-Fantasite 5.0*, a musical with some 30 actors, musicians, and ballerinas, was held in Minori's most important monument, an enormous (2,500 square meters) ancient Roman villa built in the first century A.D by a wealthy Roman as his summer seaside residence. For Minori–possibly founded by the Etruscans in the 7th century B.C. and thus probably the oldest settlement on the Amalfi Coast, was certainly already a vacation spot at the beginning of the Roman Empire. Written for the occasion and using video mapping to recreate the villa's rooms as they looked 2000

years ago, "Drama" is a love story–a mixture of fantasy and history–about the family living in the Villa on the day Mount Vesuvius erupted in November 79 A.D.



Drama De Antiquis. Photo: Gustaminori Corporation.

The villa, with what were once some very special mosaics and wall paintings, and its small but well-explained museum, is the second most visited archeological site in the province of Salerno after Paestum. The Ministry of Culture has allocated 5 million euros to restore it, but the funds are still tied up in bureaucratic red tape.

Another good period to visit is Advent, to admire Minori's elaborate *presepi* (crèches) with their numerous terracotta figures, a Neapolitan and thus a local, tradition.

They're only displayed during the Christmas Season in the Churches of Santa Lucia and Santa Trofimena, the latter dedicated to the Sicilian-born patron saint of Minori; in the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament and in the central square *Largo Brandolini.* However, Minori's most special crèche figures are not made of terracotta, but rather of carved wooden

cutouts painted with acrylics by 72-year-old native-son Giacomo Palladino, who taught art and art history for some 30 years in Sondrio in northern Italy before returning to Minori a little over a decade ago. His crèche started as a didactic project for his students and gradually, over the years, increased in size. Now it's usually housed in the *Antica Scuderia*, a building which dates to 1700 and later was used by King Victor Emanuel III (1869-1947) as his stables when he visited Ravello.



Flight into Egypt in Palladino's crèche. Photo: Pro Loco Minori.

First displayed in Minori in 2012, today Palladino's crèche depicts the scenes of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Nativity, the sleeping shepherd Benjamin's Dream, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight to Egypt. All its some 100 figures, between 50 and 180 cm. in height, are copies of figures in paintings dating from the 1300s to the 1800s. Many are from works by Giotto, Botticelli, Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and the Venetian Renaissance painters; to name a few, his Madonna by Correggio, his San Giuseppe by Murillo, and the Adoration of the Magi by Gentile da Fabriano.

Palladino also painted the backgrounds: landscapes of the Amalfi Coast with the sea, castles, and lemon groves. If you can't get to Minori this Christmas, you can still enjoy Palladino's unique masterpiece virtually by clicking on "presepe dipinto di Giacomo Palladino-Pro Loco

Minori" to watch videos taken over several different years, so each is slightly different because Palladino either moves some of his figures or adds new ones, on YouTube. It is truly unique, hopefully before too much longer the crèche will be visitable year-round.



Section of Confraternity Frieze. Photo: Pro Loco Minori.

The crèche is not Palladino's only work of art in Minori. The other, in the courtyard of the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, is a large (20 meters long and 1.3 meters tall) ceramic tile frieze depicting in blue episodes of the traditions of the hooded anonymous "beaters" dressed in long white robes. They are male penitents who for centuries have led the Holy Week's processions through town while singing various chants (in 2010 declared an "intangible cultural heritage" by Italy's Ministry of Culture) and flagellating themselves with rough rope cords. Although they no longer practice self-flagellation, the Confraternity's *battenti* still lead Minori's Easter Processions (perhaps a third reason to visit Minori) and the rest of the year devote themselves to helping Minori's less fortunate citizens.

On the walls of the Confraternity's sacristy are 29 other unique works of art depicting religious subjects: the Last Supper, St. Trofimena, and the Madonna, as well as views of Minori. At first sight they look like paintings; instead, they are embroideries made of colored cotton threads by a native-son World War Two veteran, Alfonso Florio. After returning home he devoted himself to this art form. He'd learned it while a prisoner-of-war in India to rehabilitate his hands that had been badly frostbitten while serving in the Russian Campaign (1941-43), where over 30,000 Italian soldiers died in battle and another 54,000 in captivity.



On the Lemon Path with my colleagues. Photo: Pro Loco Minori.

During any time of the year, although best to avoid the hottest months for lack of much shade, you can admire Palladino's and Florio's scenery firsthand by taking a walk on "The Lemon Path" between Minori and the neighboring town Maiori**,** another unforgettable experience. In his article **"Italy's Amalfi Coast in the Aftermath of Covid-19: Still Paradise, Waiting for You!"**, published in La Voce di New York on September 5, 2020, Wolfgang Achtner skillfully described in detail the history of lemon production.

His was a similar "Lemon Path" in Amalfi's "Valle dei Mulini" ("Valley of the Windmills"). Thus, it's sufficient to say here that the path between Minori and Maiori originally was an ancient Roman road, which today counts c. 800 up-and-down steps if you complete its entire 7 km. route. Luckily for me, it's recently become possible to drive nearly half way up to the hamlet of Torre near the lovely little church of San Michele Arcangelo, which dates to 936 AD and was probably built on the site of a pagan temple.



Amalfi lemons. Photo: Wolfgang Achtner.

From there, after a visit to a lemon grove and a tasting of lemon dishes and products, we walked down the 398 steps back to Minori, stopping halfway at the family-run agriturismo "*Cuonc Cuonc*" ("Slowly Slowly") for a snack of homemade goat and sheep cheeses accompanied by several jams and condiments, two salads of ingredients from their vegetable garden, and additional lemon dishes.

To end on an extremely positive note: about a month after our visit, Minori's super-energetic mayor, Andrea Reale, in his fourth and last term, sent me a press release. It reported that, according to the media monitoring company Extreme Web Live, Campania was Italy's most photographed region by tourists during July and August 2021: Naples in first place followed by Capri, with Minori as a close third. Reale is also the owner of the Hotel Villa Romana where I stayed. It has a spa, swimming pool, and the best breakfast in town. The *sfogiatelle* and mini tarts filled with pistachio cream are to die for.

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Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican; European... *[More]*

Column

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