

The inspiration magazine for chefs  
March 2022 | Issue 07



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## SHAPE

Shape your dishes,  
your restaurant  
and your future.



# ***Kissed by the sea*** and culinary traditions

**Rocco de Santis**  
Executive Chef at Santa Elisabetta\*\*





**Rocco de Santis** is Executive Chef at Santa Elisabetta, a starred restaurant in the Byzantine Pagliazza Tower, inside the Brunelleschi Hotel in Florence. He earned this restaurant two Michelin stars, but has had to miss his beloved native region in the south of Italy for it. His journey has shaped him into the chef he is today.

Rocco de Santis was born in Salerno, Italy in 1979. He grew up in Campania, a region in southern Italy that is still close to his heart and that he likes to mention in every interview. "The love of food, which has been passed down in my family from generation to generation, is based on culinary traditions and is certainly the foundation of my current work. I vividly remember seeing my mother working with fresh pasta and desserts in the kitchen when I was a little boy. I couldn't wait to help her! The products from the region where I grew up and the overwhelming nature there continue to inspire me – no matter where I am working. I will always love the mountains, the rocks and the sea around Campania."



### ***Kissed by the sea***

The sea plays an important role in Rocco's menu. "When you are born in a region kissed by the sea and have that ocean view on your mind for the rest of your life, the sea inevitably inspires your work. My dishes evoke memories of a maritime culture, the culture of my youth. For example, I like to serve a soup of gambero rosso, panzanella, caviar and olives, a starter of pasta with smoked Provolone and squid or red mullet in a bread crust with saffron. The latter is perhaps my favourite dish: a kind of snack that you can even eat with your hands."

Memories of his childhood and of his family follow in rapid succession in Rocco's stories. As a true Italian, he is committed to the traditions he grew up with and, like his Italian colleagues, he strives for 'culinary patriotism': the love of his origins is proudly conveyed through his dishes. Yet his work as a chef eventually drove him away from his beloved native region. "My origin doesn't feel like a cage. I prefer to see it as a starting point for the journey I am on to become a better and better chef."



Santa Elisabetta\*\*  
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***“I see my journey as a chef as a work in progress. I seize every opportunity along the way.”***



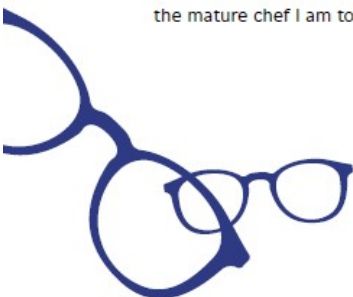
### ***Shaped into a mature chef***

Rocco met chef Gennaro Esposito in the Torre del Saraceno restaurant in Vico Equense, a suburb of Naples, in 1999. “He was a great connoisseur of Campania cuisine. I learned the technique, the accuracy and the love of our profession from him. And also that I should look beyond Campania, because comparison with other cultures is crucial to our work. I wanted to learn about different preparations and methods and to immerse myself in other culinary traditions. So I moved to France, where I worked in the historic Georges Blanc restaurant, which has been awarded three Michelin stars. Later, I moved to Switzerland, where I cooked in a well-known restaurant with two Michelin stars. My travels have always been about food. Each destination started with a restaurant, an ingredient or a wine that I wanted to get to know. For me, it’s first and foremost about gaining knowledge about my work; pleasure always comes second. All those experiences shaped me into the mature chef I am today.”

### ***Florence***

Once back on Italian soil, Rocco initially returned to his native region. He worked on the Amalfi coast in Palazzo Sasso di Ravello under Pino Lavarra and made stops at the Hotel Romeo in Naples and the Hilton in Rome. He eventually ended up in Florence: a difficult region for chefs because the people there have been used to high-end gastronomy for centuries. However, Rocco’s Mediterranean cuisine, characterised by the contrasts between sour and sweet, cooked and raw, flavour and lightness, was quickly appreciated. He earned a first Michelin star for the restaurant in 2019; the second star was awarded a year later.

“Funnily enough, the corona lockdown had a positive effect on us,” says Rocco. “After that period, real gourmets came to eat at our restaurant, excellent customers who used to shun the tourist restaurants in the centre of Florence. As a result, we paid even more attention to our dishes. We concentrated entirely on the flavour and omitted superfluous ingredients. We focused all our attention on the restaurant. We no longer provided catering or took on other events.”





### ***Michelin stars***

Rocco's signature dish is his starter Raviolo Fondente with ricotta, lemon, broccoli, cockles and gambero rosso. "Tasting one bite of that stuffed pasta is like taking a bite out of the south," the chef muses wistfully. "I cook on the basis of tradition but also strive for innovation. In the kitchen, I constantly try to balance between these two values. My favourite hashtag on social media is #traditionmoderninnovation."

The Michelin stars put a certain pressure on the shoulders of the Italian chef; he cannot deny that. He knows the stories of colleagues who gave back their stars and then started a simple bistro. "A Michelin star, or two, definitely adds a certain responsibility. It requires dedication and lots of hard work. But I would honestly work just as hard in a bistro. The hours are the same and, as a chef, you want to give your utmost every night. I see my journey as a chef as a work in progress. I seize every opportunity along the way."

### ***Aloha***

Hard work, gaining scientific knowledge about the cooking process, exchanging ideas with colleagues, comparing dishes and ingredients: these are all factors that contribute to becoming a professional and distinctive chef as far as Rocco is concerned. "In this job, you are driven by passion. As a chef, I think it's especially important always to approach your work in an ethical and professional manner. You feed people; they have to be able to rely on you completely. I prefer to use my dishes to communicate my emotions and origins, sometimes through the simplest of things. Concretely, this means that you can come across ingredients from Campania. More abstractly, you can find my love for the sea and the mountains and my respect for my family and their culinary traditions in my dishes. All those things are in me – so they show up on my plates."

Where will he be in five years? "I've no idea. I am currently focusing on my work in Santa Elisabetta, but I am ambitious and dynamic. I will never turn down an opportunity to develop my career. But walking around in shorts in Hawaii doesn't sound too bad either."

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## Heading towards innovation *with Debie*

Because Rocco likes to cook in a traditional way, he also uses Debie's cream in that way. "I use the cream in all sorts of dishes, from sweet to savoury. The fact that Debie employs excellent culinary advisers challenges me to let go of the classic ways of preparing food. Their recipes and advice for using the cream in innovative and different ways inspire and trigger me."

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**! VARIABLE CONTENT !  
PACKSHOTS AND PRODUCTNAMES**

# *Red mullet* in a crust of saffron bread





**SERVES 4**

**Red mullet**

- 8 red mullets
- lemon to taste
- wild fennel to taste
- extra virgin olive oil to taste
- salt
- pepper

**Compote of red Tropea onions**

- 1 kg red onions
- 100 g sugar
- 100 g glucose
- 50 g Sherry vinegar

**Saffron bread**

- 600 g flour
- 250 g water
- 15 g saffron stamens
- 15 g brewer's yeast
- 10 g salt
- 10 g fine granulated sugar
- extra virgin olive oil

**Mint pesto**

- 200 g mint leaves
- 60 g extra virgin olive oil
- 40 g chopped almonds
- 40 g vegetable oil
- 20 g basil
- 1 clove of blanched garlic

**Sultana and pine nut pesto**

- 150 g sultanas
- 14 g extra virgin olive oil
- 50 g pine nuts
- 50 g grape vinegar
- 50 g stale bread
- 30 g small capers, desalted
- 1 anchovy, desalted
- mint

**Red garlic sauce from Nubia**

- 100 g garlic cloves, peeled and germ removed
- 50 ml Debic Cream 35%
- 50 ml milk

**Garnish**

- 4 sprigs of mint
- 4 garlic flowers
- 4 strands of chives

**METHOD**

**Compote of red Tropea onions**

Peel the onions, wash them and finely slice them using a mandoline.

Bring 20 millilitres of water and vinegar to a boil and blanch the onions in this for a few minutes. Pour the remaining ingredients into a bowl, add the sieved onions, cover with cling film and leave to infuse for 6 hours. After those 6 hours, pour the mixture into a saucepan and let it simmer until it has the typical consistency of a compote.

**Saffron bread**

Pour the flour into a mixing bowl, add the yeast that you dissolved in a small amount of warm water beforehand, followed by the sugar. Start kneading at medium speed and then add the saffron diluted in a spoonful of water along with the other ingredients. Continue kneading until you have a soft dough. Place the dough on a wooden surface that you have dusted with a little flour. Continue to knead by hand until the dough is perfectly smooth. Then place the dough in a bread tin greased with extra virgin olive oil. Leave it to rise for about 2 hours and then bake it in an oven pre-heated to 180°C for 45 minutes. After baking, remove the bread from the tin, allow it to cool and then cut it into slices no more than 3 millimetres thick using a bread slicer.

**Mint pesto**

Blanch the mint and basil leaves and then plunge them into ice water. Squeeze them well and add the remaining ingredients. Mix all the ingredients with an immersion blender, then put the mixture in the freezer for about 2 hours. Mix vigorously to break up the ice crystals until you get a creamy pesto sauce.

**Sultana and pine nut pesto**

Let the sultanas soak in lukewarm water for about 20 minutes and soak the stale bread in the vinegar. Meanwhile, toast the pine nuts in a non-stick frying pan. Squeeze the sultanas when they are nicely swollen and put them in the immersion blender cup together with the other ingredients. Mix for a few minutes until the mixture is soft and smooth.

**Red garlic sauce from Nubia**

Blanch the garlic three times, starting with cold water each time. Pour the cream and milk into a small saucepan, add the blanched garlic and leave to simmer on a gentle heat for about 20 minutes. Mix and set aside.

**Red mullets**

Fillet the red mullets by removing the bones; make sure that the two halves of the fish remain attached at the tail end. Season with salt, pepper, grated lemon zest and chopped wild fennel. Brush the skin with a dash of extra virgin olive oil. Then place one side of the fish on a slice of saffron bread and, with the tip of the knife, cut the bread lengthwise to the point where the tail is attached. Do the same on the other side. Put a dash of extra virgin olive oil in a frying pan, heat it and fry the mullet gently on both sides until the bread changes colour slightly, becomes crispy and adheres well to the skin of the fish.

**TO FINISH**

With a spatula, spread some mint pesto on each plate, cover with a spoonful of sultana and pine nut pesto and place the red mullet on top. Garnish with a few drops of garlic sauce, a little red onion compote, sprigs of mint, chives and garlic flowers.

