

Capers from Pantelleria are considered to be among the best in the world

Notes from Rome INSPIRED BY PANTELLERIA

The distinctive capers of Pantelleria provide the basis for plenty of delicious dishes, says **Elizabeth Minchilli**

Even though I live in Rome, a lot of what I cook is inspired by my travels. Not only do I learn about different traditions and cooking methods while on the road, I inevitably bring back ingredients to try.

I've been lucky enough to go on quite a few of these learning trips with Oldways. They are a Boston based non-profit company that organises symposiums in the Mediterranean for journalists, chefs, nutritionists, scientists and vendors to learn about traditional ways of growing, preparing and eating meals. While each trip is different, certain elements repeat themselves. Things like olive oil, for instance, are pretty much a given. And even if each trip itself is full of a widely varied list of local things to eat and drink, there is usually one item that keeps getting repeated at each meal on each trip.

My recent Oldways trip to Pantelleria, an island off the south coast of Sicily, was no different. It was pretty much capers all the time. I think that I can honestly say that I ate the caper-based dishes *insalata pantescia*, *caponata* and *ciaki ciuka* at least twice a day, every day, for the entire trip.

Insalata pantescia is more or less a slightly different version of a Greek salad. Basically

take out the feta and add potatoes. *Pantesca caponata* is different from regular *caponata* because it is eaten warm. Also, it's topped by almonds, which makes all the difference.

And, of course, the main seasoning in both these dishes is – since we are in Pantelleria – capers. *Ciaki ciuka* is the oddly named dish that is pretty much the Pantescan version of *ratatouille*, and was one of the few dishes that didn't employ capers.

Did you know that capers from Pantelleria are the only capers in Italy to have an IGP, which protects their geographical origin? While capers have always been grown in Pantelleria, the 80s were the real boom years. But when cheaper imports from Africa began to flood the market, local farmers ripped out their caper fields and began planting grapes instead. Flash forward to today, when the quality of the capers from Pantelleria have been widely recognised and farmers have begun planting them again.

While the capers from Pantelleria are considered to be among the best in the world, don't be discouraged if you can't find them. But do make the effort to seek out capers preserved in salt, rather than brine. They have a much truer taste, and work fantastically well in the following recipes.