

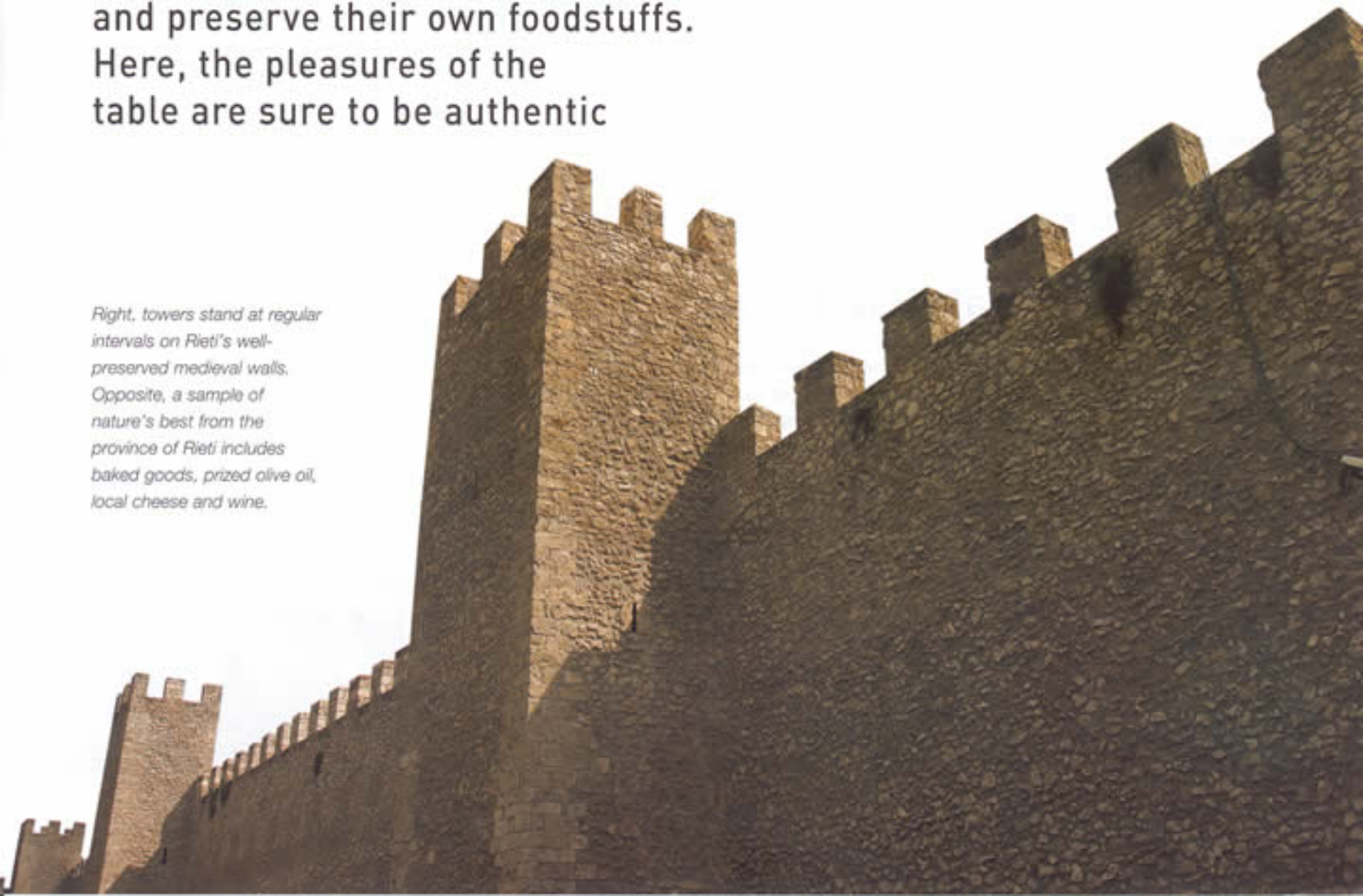
LAZIO: GASTRONOMY IN THE PROVINCE OF RIETI

Country

Flavors

In a zone rich in olive groves, lush fields and pastures, many people still cultivate and preserve their own foodstuffs. Here, the pleasures of the table are sure to be authentic

Right, towers stand at regular intervals on Rieti's well-preserved medieval walls. Opposite, a sample of nature's best from the province of Rieti includes baked goods, prized olive oil, local cheese and wine.



The foods and flavors of the province of Rieti have the genuine, simple and healthy qualities of country cooking. They are based on local ingredients and have much in common with the cooking of Rome, the capital of the Lazio region. Rieti's province, northeast of Rome, includes the Sabina district, a landscape of high, rolling hills blanketed mainly with olive trees. Down through the centuries and from ancient times, the gastronomy of Rome has drawn ingredients and inspiration from the neighboring province. The prime condiment in these parts is the brilliant green and wonderfully flavorful olive oil of the Sabina district. After winning top honors in international competitions, it is now known throughout the world.

Pasta here includes some unusual types that are not generally found in standard menus: *pizzicotti*, little snippets of fresh pasta; *fregnacce*, lozenge-shaped strips of fresh pasta; *stracci di Antrudoco*, thin, meat-filled crepes; and *maccheroni a fezze*, thick spaghetti-shaped strings of freshly made egg pasta. Two local specialties have also become staples on Roman menus. The classic *spaghetti all'amatriciana* is named for the town of Amatrice, in the mountains near Rieti. The name of *spaghetti alla carbonara* has origins of a different kind. Both are believed to derive from traditional cooking in these parts.

When the shepherds of Amatrice led their flocks on long migrations to fresh pastures, they would fill their knapsacks with dried pasta, *guanciale* (cured pig's cheek) and hard, sharp pecorino cheese. These are the basic components of the original *pasta alla gricia* that was the forerunner of *pasta all'amatriciana*. Only when tomatoes were introduced into Europe toward the end of the 16th century did they become part of the recipe for *amatriciana* sauce. This sauce has become a classic in the restaurants and trattorias of Rome, but those in the know say that you can find the best *pasta all'amatriciana* only in and around Rieti.

Spaghetti alla carbonara, it is said, goes back to the coal dealers from Umbria who sold fuel in Rieti, first in the Leonessa area, then throughout the entire zone. The traditional *carbonara* here is made with eggs, *guanciale* and *pancetta* (or bacon) grated pecorino cheese, olive oil, a little white wine, a clove of garlic, salt, and plenty of freshly ground black pepper.

The large flocks of sheep that graze in the valleys and on mountain slopes provide an abundant supply of lamb that is roasted, grilled or cooked in sauce. *Abbacchio* (baby lamb) *brodetto* is a favorite, and its origins can be traced back to the canons of traditional Jewish cuisine. Pieces of lamb are sautéed with onion and bits of prosciutto, then wine is added and when the meat is done, it is removed from the heat and a mixture of beaten eggs, lemon juice, marjoram and parsley is added. The finished dish is an intriguing blend of flavors. Chicken, turkey and rabbit can be cooked the same way.



Another local specialty is chicken *alla Sabina*, which is sautéed in olive oil and garlic, doused with white wine and cooked in a piquant sauce made of chili pepper, capers, anchovies and chopped black olives. Other meat courses favored locally include boar in sweet-and-sour sauce, various types of roasted meat, mutton chops and hare.

There are several small and pretty lakes around Rieti, formed by icy, swift-flowing streams from the mountains. They yield trout, pike and tench. A range of cheeses, salamis and sausages are made in the district. This area is also famous for *porchetta*, which is roast suckling pig flavored with garlic, rosemary, fennel and other herbs and cooked whole in a wood-burning oven. No festival or holiday in town or country here would be complete without a stall selling thick slices of porchetta



Left, medieval cellars in the foundations of Old Rieti are typical of the underground vaults that were used to store foodstuffs and keep wine at an ideal temperature. Above, wine ready for tasting in a Rieti winebar, and local types of pasta. Opposite, the landscape around Rieti, seen from the Renaissance loggia of Palazzo della Prefettura.



between slabs of good country bread. In Amatrice a cooperative produces full-flavored pecorino cheese made of sheep's milk, in addition to delicate ricotta and the typical local *provatura*, a mild, semi-hard cheese.

Cakes and cookies are often linked to seasonal holidays. *Terzetti* are sweets made at Christmas time; they are a mixture of walnuts, honey, sugar, eggs and flour. *Copeta* is a soft sweet paste sandwiched between two bay leaves. People in Rieti eat cookies called *antoniani* that get their name from a saint and a local custom connected with his feast day. On the day of the traditional procession marking the offering of candles in honor of Saint Anthony of Padua, the faithful meet in the sacristy of the church of San Francesco to munch the *antoniani* especially prepared for the occasion.

The wines of Sabina have been mentioned with varying expressions of enthusiasm by the ancient Roman authors, including Martial and Horace. They are not widely known outside the region, but they include some worthy wines, especially those from Rocasinibalda and the Magliano Sabina zone, including white and red Colli Sabini.

The pride of Sabina is undoubtedly the award-winning, flavorful olive oil that originates in hills covered with rows upon rows of olive trees. The older trees have strong, gnarled trunks that betray their impressive age. But there

are many younger, smaller trees, planted in ranks that seem to stretch in endless lines over the hills. Like pom-poms, their thick, silvery-green foliage dots the landscape. Clearly, they thrive in this soil and climate; the plants are strong, their foliage is dense, their yield is abundant. The type of olive tree found most frequently in Sabina is known as the Carboncella. The oil of Sabina is a perfect balance between the lighter, more delicate oil of northern Italy and that headier, richer oil which is produced in the south. It is yellow-green in color with golden overtones, and it has a distinct, fresh aroma. Low in acidity, it has a pleasantly fruity taste.

The ancient Romans used the oil of Sabina in their lanterns, in medicines for humans and animals, in cosmetics, perfumes and soaps. Galenus, the Greek physician who practiced at the court of Marcus Aurelius, judged it the best oil in the then-known world, and he prescribed it for many ills. At Fara in Sabina, a town near Rieti, stands the granddaddy of all olive trees; the olive tree of Canneto is known to be 1,500 years old.

As in so many of the province's food specialties, simplicity is the key to full flavor, and the best way to taste the olive oil of Sabina is in the quintessentially simple but delicious *bruschetta*: a thick slice of country bread, toasted, rubbed gently with garlic, sprinkled with salt and doused with the good olive oil of Sabina. □