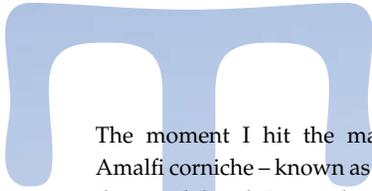


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coast with the most

He's known as Jamie Oliver's mentor, but what's the source of UK-based chef Gennaro Contaldo's own inspiration? Here he takes us on a tour of Italy's stunning Amalfi Coast, where both Gennaro and his passion for food were born.

WORDS GENNARO CONTALDO PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW MONTGOMERY



The moment I hit the madly winding Amalfi corniche – known as “the road of a thousand bends” – and catch my first glimpse of its plunging cliffs and glittering sea, I always feel the same crazy thrill of excitement, like a small boy.

I’m biased, I know, but the Amalfi region in Southern Italy has to be the most ravishingly beautiful coastline in the world, and I can’t help but feel proprietorial about it. After all, I was born here, in a tiny cliffside house in the village of Minori. This was my playground, the sea my swimming pool and the mountains my back garden.

The Amalfi Coast has a reputation as a haunt of the rich and famous, yet it’s the simple pleasures – incomparably fresh food and the small paradises of tranquility and beauty – that make it really special. Here, I find myself eating more slowly, savouring local flavours: the vivid taste of a San Marzano tomato or the enormous, intensely aromatic Sfusato di Amalfi lemons.

The Amalfi Coast describes a stretch of coastline south of Naples, including the towns of Amalfi, Positano and Ravello. The best time to visit is in spring and early summer, or in autumn – high summer is always very hot and crowded. I, of course, would advise staying in Minori; it’s nearly 40 years since I left for the UK, but it still feels like home. My 97-year-old father and my sisters still live here, and it takes me an hour to walk down the main street because I bump into so many old friends.

That’s not the only reason I’d recommend Minori as a base for your Amalfi adventure. What makes the place special is that it encapsulates the region at its unpretentious best. Though it isn’t as well known as Positano, Minori is one of the most ancient inhabited places in the region. Roman noblemen used to live here, as you can see from the village’s incredibly well-preserved villa, complete with marvellous frescoes.

Minori has its own food festival, Gusta Minori (Tastes of Minori), held each year in early September. Gusta Minori is the only festival of its kind in Italy, and it takes place in the piazza under the approving shadow of the Basilica of Santa Trofimena – I felt immensely proud when I was honoured with an award at the festival last year.

morning in minori

Each year, before the festival begins, everyone gathers for breakfast outside **Pasticceria de Riso** (Piazza Cantilena, Minori, +39 089 853 618, deriso.it), a veritable institution in Minori. Its tables spill out across the piazza with views across the *passaggiata* (promenade). It’s the place to mark every important happening and perfect for coffee at any time of day.

This place is full of happy memories for me. As a child, I used to spend hours helping the owner, Salvatore, make his



Seafood pasta at the Hotel Villa Maria, Ravello. Left: the view from Minori over the Gulf of Salerno. Above: Gennaro enjoying a seafood lunch in Maiori.





Strolling through the old town of Ravello. Clockwise from above right: old-fashioned transport in Ravello; fresh seafood in Maiori; Torre Normanna, Maiori; homegrown salad at Agriturismo Villa Maria in Minori.



lunch in minori

Giardinello (Corso V. Emmanuele 17, Minori, +39 089 877 050) opened when I was eight years old. My family had a grocery shop next door, so I practically grew up there. I still think their pizzas – made with ultra-fresh *fior di latte* (cow's milk mozzarella), baby tomatoes and basil – are some of the best in the world, especially when eaten on the terrace under a canopy of lemon trees.

Giardinello may look unassuming, but it is far more than just a pizzeria. Their phenomenal cellar is stocked with the best local wines, as well as some serious vintage bottles, and each dish is made from scratch every day. I've always been fascinated by *ricci*, a traditional handmade pasta that's rolled using the spoke of an umbrella. It's most delicious with a sauce of chilli, tomato and rocket. Another lovely dish is one with bitter radicchio leaves and the local pink *parapandalo* prawns. As a boy, I loved helping fishermen gather shoals of prawns at the entrance to caves, using basket traps handmade from myrtle and rush.

For staggering panoramic views over Minori, lunch under a pergola of grape vines at the **Agriturismo Villa Maria** (Via Annunziata, Minori, +39 089 877 197, agriturismovillamaria.it) is a must. Owned by my friend Vincenzo Manzo Sfusato and his wife Maria, the villa sits high above the town in the heart of the lemon groves.

I like to hike up there to work up an appetite, as lunch is always a veritable feast. Besides homemade charcuterie, there are invariably anchovies caught on



legendary lemon granita. With my friend, his son Antonio, I'd grate the zest and squeeze the juice of hundreds of lemons before we were allowed to go off to play. Antonio is now a famous *pasticciere* in his own right, making cakes for everyone from the Pope to Jamie Oliver.

These days, when I visit Minori I start the morning at Pasticceria de Riso by treating myself to *sfogliatelle*, a shell-shaped pastry oozing with lemon custard, and a strong Neapolitan coffee. I like to quote the famous French statesman and gourmet, Talleyrand, who said that coffee should be "hot as hell, black as the devil, pure as an angel and sweet as love."

the rocks below Minori and marinated in *peperoncini* (chilli) and basil. These are followed by *scialatielli* (a pasta similar to spaghetti) with prawns and home-grown zucchini, then sensational *secondi* of gargantuan steaks cooked over aromatic herbs. A chilled glass of homemade limoncello is always an essential digestif.

Villa Maria is also a wonderful place to stay. The property is almost totally self-sufficient, as the Sfuscatos make phenomenal charcuterie including a kind of *culatello* (cured pork), wild fennel salami and sausages, as well as fantastic cheese and olive oil, preserved vegetables, jams and an extraordinary range of liqueurs including mandarin, myrtle and wild strawberry – all of which you can buy to take home. And if you want to learn more about authentic local dishes, Maria will run cookery courses on request.

dining out

I always like to spend at least one night in Minori or its neighbour, Maiori, perhaps dining at the stunning **Torre Normanna** (Via Diego Tajani 4, Maiori, +39 089 877 100, torrenormanna.net), which sits on its own craggy promontory. It's one of my favourite romantic spots, with a secluded bar that has sun lounges to relax on after a swim off the rocks.

The circular restaurant has uninterrupted views of the bay, and serves local specialities with great style. There are the marinated anchovies with *peperoncini*, and *ndunderi* – a lighter version of gnocchi made with ricotta and flour rather than potato – served with a tomato and basil sauce. Also on the menu is *paccheri* (tubular pasta) with seafood, sea bass with lemon, and wild strawberries with fresh ricotta to finish. Despite the spectacular setting of Torre Normanna, there's nothing too fancy. Why overdress ingredients that taste fantastic practically naked? It's *la bella cucina* at its most desirable.

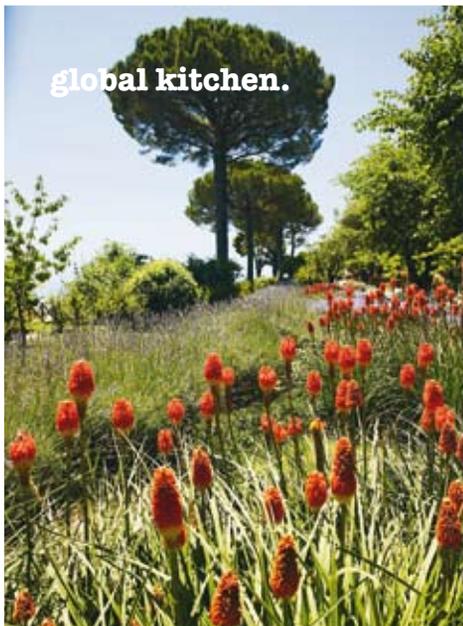
where to shop

In Minori, almost everyone grows and cooks everything from scratch, which explains why shopping for foodie gifts is limited. But I do like to visit **Il Pastaio**

(Via Largo Solaio dei Pastai, Minori, +39 089 853 706) to see them freshly make the pasta. Most of the shops in Minori have been there since my childhood, but a relatively new addition is **Enoteca Sirah**, (Piazzetta di Santa Trofimenia, Minori, +39 089 853 895), a good spot for buying wine and cheese or enjoying a glass and tasting plate on the spot. It also sells some interesting specialities such as *colatura di alici*, a powerful anchovy condiment that is rather like an Amalfi equivalent of fish sauce.



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road to ravello

Nowhere is very far away on the Amalfi Coast, and the towns of Ravello, Positano, Amalfi and Montepertuso are all within an hour's drive. Ravello, Minori's neighbour, is a gem. It has the most amazing light, and I never tire of the drive there. I call it a "Mamma mia!" road, with each cliff-hugging hairpin bend offering a view more eye-poppingly amazing than the last.

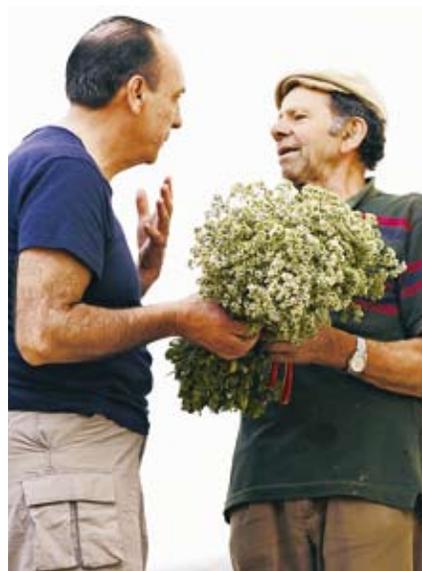
Even when Ravello's main square, the Piazza Duomo, is full of tourists, it's easy to lose the crowds by wandering along the spiral maze of alleys within the inner walls

Ravello street scene.
Below: Gennaro with a man
he met picking wild herbs in
Ravello. Above: the gardens
at Villa Cimbrone, Ravello.

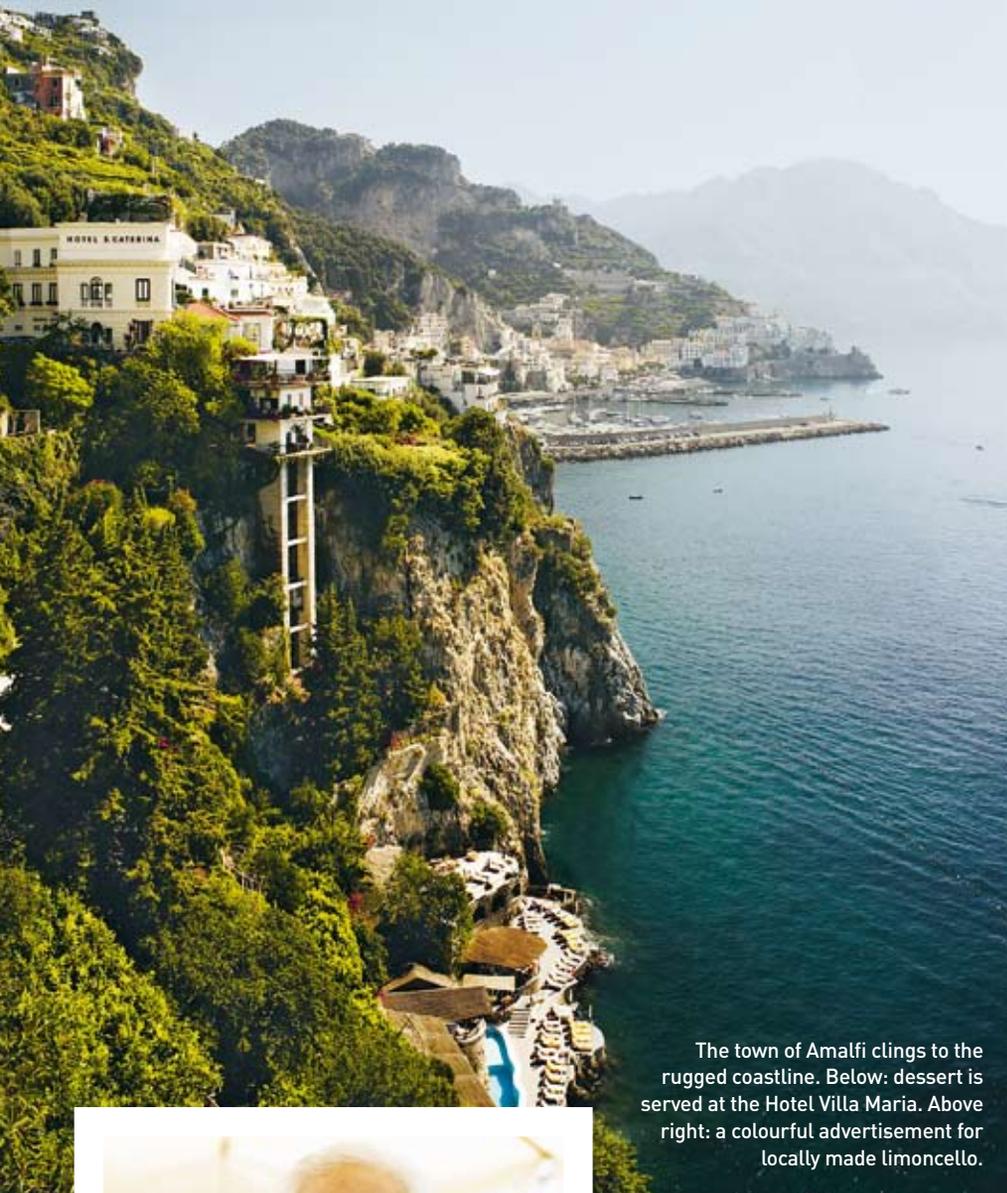


of the town. I like to gather ingredients for a wild lunch – tiny peppery shoots of rocket, oregano, and caper berries that grow from cracks in the walls – as I head for **Villa Cimbrone** (Via Santa Chiara 26, Ravello, +39 089 857 459, villacimbrone.com). There's a great, rather expensive, restaurant, which takes care over the freshness and quality of their ingredients – many of which come from their organic vegetable gardens. But it's the formal gardens, said to have been planned by the celebrated English gardener Vita Sackville-West, that I really love. The American writer Gore Vidal, who lived nearby, said the view from the Villa's Terrazza dell'Infinito, a statue-lined terrace overlooking the Gulf of Salerno, was the most beautiful in the world. I'm inclined to agree – it's an incredibly romantic spot.

Once you've soaked up the vista, visit my favourite place to eat in Ravello – the *ristorante* in the elegant loggia of **Hotel Villa Maria** (Via Santa Chiara 2, + 39 089 857255, villamaria.it), which offers more sensational views of tiny boats on a shimmering sea. The terraced gardens are full of vegetables, fruit and herbs, all of which are used in the kitchen. I like their *sciatatielli ai frutti di mare* (pasta with seafood), and their speciality – fish baked on lemon leaves with a crust of breadcrumbs, garlic and lemon zest, and a side order of endive with capers, raisins and the hotel's own olives. The *ricotta* and pear cake is another one not to be missed.



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The town of Amalfi clings to the rugged coastline. Below: dessert is served at the Hotel Villa Maria. Above right: a colourful advertisement for locally made limoncello.



The sunsets in Amalfi town are simply magnificent, so I like to choose my spot for aperitifs carefully. The terrace of the **Hotel Palazzo Sasso** (Via San Giovanni del Toro 28, Amalfi + 39 089 818181, palazzosasso.com) is an ultra-smart place for an evening cocktail, and they make a fantastic Bellini – peach nectar with prosecco. I also love to visit some of the bars on the beachfront at nearby Positano – **La Cambusa** (Piazza A. Vespucci 24, +39 089 875 432) and **La Zagara** (Via dei Mulini 8, +39 089 875 964) are both terrific options – before tackling the steep ascent to the tiny, near-vertical hilltop village known as Montepertuso. The drive up there makes you feel like you are travelling through holes in the mountains.

montepertuso

The goal is dinner at **Donna Rosa** (Via Montepertuso 77, Montepertuso + 39 089 875 453), run by the phenomenal Erika Villani and her mother Raffaella. It's a lovely place with whitewashed walls, plenty of paintings, staggering views and a wonderful open kitchen with bare beams and gleaming copper pans – so it's both homey and elegant. Jamie Oliver loved it here when I brought him. Among my favourites are zucchini flowers stuffed with mozzarella, baked scallops, and fish cooked in *acqua pazza* ('crazy water' scented with tomato, garlic and herbs). Their desserts are memorable, too, especially a deconstructed cannoli with ricotta, fresh almonds and orange rind, and a chocolate and almond torta. **d.**

amalfi & positano

I prefer to visit the town of Amalfi itself in the early evening, when it's calm and less crowded with tourists. After admiring the Cathedral, I like to sit at **Pasticceria Pansa** (Piazza Duomo 40, Amalfi, + 39 089 871 065), an old-fashioned place with chandeliers, mahogany fittings and candied lemons on cut-glass dishes in the window. The piazza tables are laid with embroidered linen, and they serve excellent light, spongy *babà limone*. I always think of an old saying that Neapolitan men use when sweet-talking girls, "*sei dolce come un babà*," meaning "you're as sweet as a babà".

