

11. TUSCANY

SEASONAL SIMPLICITY

By Sara Hauman & Jordan Mackay

Rome, Venice, and Naples are all iconic Italian cities whose individual fame overshadows their respective regions. Tuscany, however, is the rare Italian region whose “brand” is even stronger than that of its most famous city, Florence. Tuscany’s current cultural dominance stems from many things — tourism, pop culture (e.g., Diane Lane’s time out under the Tuscan sun), wine (Chianti being Italy’s most recognizable wine), and its apparently infinite number of stately villas, so fervently rented by older, bougie adults (the rarity of finding a villa in Tuscany during the summer was memorialized during a Seinfeld episode in 1995).

However, none of these qualities are particularly new. Tuscany has been big for ages, going back to its namesake, the Etruscans (900-100 B.C.E.), and the famously rich and Machiavellian family Medici. The Diane Lane of its day was Botticelli’s Venus, painted by a Tuscan and still screening daily at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the town that was ground zero for a little era called the Renaissance. And, if you’ve never been, Tuscan light is a thing. Something about the heavenly luminosity of its skies and its expansive vistas make every landscape look like the backdrop of the Mona Lisa.

In this epic context, the downright plainness of Tuscan cuisine feels like an anomaly. After all, this is one of Italy’s biggest and most dominant regions. It has a vast and underrated coastline, towering and craggy mountains, and golden fields bursting with fertility. It boasts renowned tourist towns like Siena, Lucca, Pisa, and, the aforementioned, Florence with all its lavish art galleries and architecture. And Tuscany is imbued with Italy’s most internationally celebrated and expensive wines — featuring Chianti Classico, Brunello di Montalcino, and the famous Super Tuscans — you’d think an equally decadent cuisine would follow suit. But no. It’s as if all these high-brow artists and Renaissance thinkers were too busy painting and inventing to worry about food.

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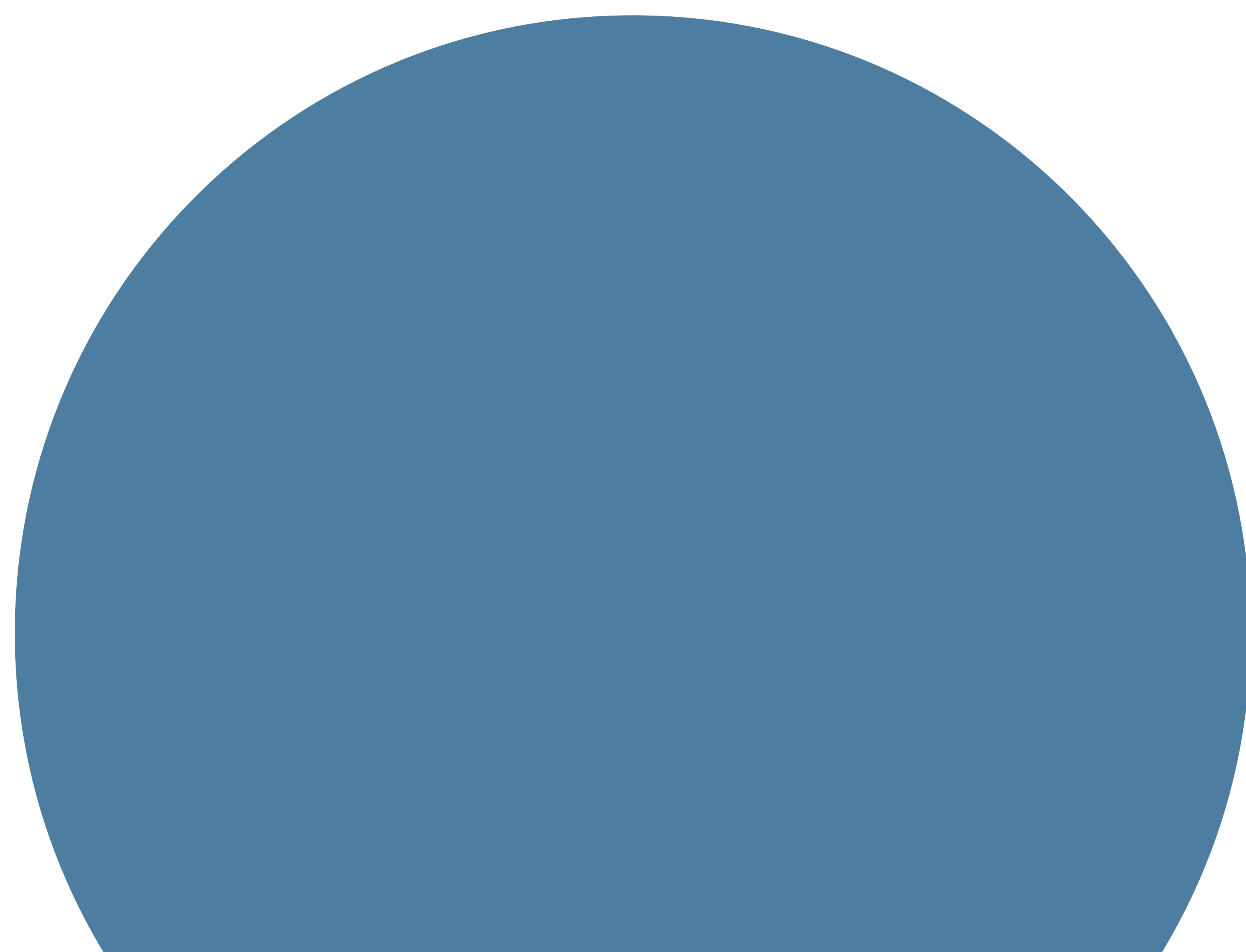
That said, you will eat well in Tuscany. It is, after all, a part of Italy. But despite its wealth in vistas, sunlight, art, and tourists, the Tuscan cuisine claims its roots in *la cucina povere* (the cuisine of necessity), which means its most fashionable ingredients are earthy and unglamorous. For instance, Florence's most famous food is a tripe sandwich. The most ubiquitous pasta is *pici*, a rustic, misshapen version of spaghetti, with a ragu (Tuscans call it *sugo*) of *cinghiale*, wild boar, that local farmers consider more a pest than a delicacy. Don't expect to be blown away by your first bite of Tuscan bread — it contains no salt. The olive oil you dip the bread in will be delicious, but your hand will look for the nearest saltshaker. Tuscany's most high-brow culinary claim to fame is a brutishly simple, massive hunk of grilled steak, the *bistecca alla Fiorentina*. Tuscans generally pair simple, seasonal food with complex, age-worthy red wines.

Tuscany's most famous soup is the hearty and humble *ribollita*, which is a sacred item on this menu, after a delicious *crostini* of chicken liver mousse. If you grow tomatoes, summer is when you start looking for things to do with them, and the cool tomato-and-bread salad called *panzanella* is a great application and easy to make. It can be a light summery main or a great side dish to a protein like the main course of this menu, *cacciucco* (ka-CHYOO-ko). The beaches of Tuscany's coastline are more popular with Italians than international tourists (who tend to flock to the vineyard-covered hills), but its waters provide a great bounty of seafood, which makes this light, easy dish delicious and quick.

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Finally, the nutty, crunchy Tuscan biscotti known as cantuccini will be improved if served alongside (or dipped into) a glass of the honeyed Tuscan sweet wine called vin santo. Regarding wine, as noted above, Tuscany is most famous for its red wines, which you can drink with the fish stew, but given the summery warmth and magical sunsets of Tuscany, it's a good idea to have some cold whites on hand. A celebrated white wine is made in the region; it is produced from the Vernaccia grape in the vicinity of the town of San Gimignano. But any brisk, medium-bodied white will do, whether from Italy or a crisp Californian homage like Massican.

Pour yourself a glass and then enjoy this meal in the spirit of a true Tuscan by taking a deep breath of summer air, admiring the beautiful light, and dining al fresco.



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ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

Chef Sara Hauman's career is sprinkled with culinary accolades: Eater Young Gun, Zagat 30 under 30, and Bravo Top Chef contestant. Having cooked in kitchens from Spain's famed Asador Etxebarri to San Francisco's Octavia, she now resides in Portland, OR.

Jordan Mackay is a James Beard award-winning writer covering wine, spirits, and food. He has written for the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and Food & Wine magazine. Jordan has penned countless books including Secrets of the Sommeliers, The Atlas of Taste, Franklin Barbecue, Franklin Steak, and the recently released Maison Premiere Almanac.



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OUR TUSCAN DINNER PARTY MENU

Serves 6-8

1. Appetizer: CROSTINI NERI (CHICKEN LIVER SPREAD)
2. Starter: RIBOLLITA (BEAN SOUP)
3. Salad: SPRINGTIME PANZANELLA (BREAD SALAD)
4. Main Course: CACCIUCCO (SEAFOOD STEW)
5. Dessert: CANTUCCINI (BISCOTTI)



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CROSTINI NERI (CHICKEN LIVER SPREAD)

Makes about 1 ½ cups of liver spread, enough for 6-8 crostini

Ingredients:

- 1 lb. chicken livers
- 4 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 large shallot, minced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Salt
- 2 sage leaves, chopped
- 1 Tbsp capers, chopped
- 3 oil-packed anchovy filets, chopped
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- ¼ cup chicken stock

For serving:

- 6-8 slices rustic style bread, toasted
 - Balsamic vinegar
 - Freshly cracked pepper
 - Finely chopped parsley
 - Coarse sea salt
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CROSTINI NERI (CHICKEN LIVER SPREAD)

Serves 6-8

Preparation:

1. Rinse the livers in cold water and pat dry.
2. Remove any discolored portions of the livers and the connective strings with a small, sharp knife, while keeping the livers as whole as possible.
3. In a medium sauté pan, heat 2 Tbsp olive oil. Add the livers and cook on medium-high heat until golden brown, about 3-4 minutes, then flip the livers over and cook the other side until browned. Remove the livers and reserve.
4. Return the sauté pan to the stove.
5. Add the remaining olive oil, shallots, garlic, and a pinch of salt.
6. Cook this mixture over low heat until the aromatics are softened and the shallots are translucent, about 5 minutes, stirring frequently.
7. Add in the chopped sage, capers, and anchovies and cook for another minute or so until the mixture becomes very fragrant.
8. Add the white wine and chicken stock to the pan and let the mixture come to a boil, while simultaneously scraping the bottom of the pan with a heat-proof spatula or wooden spoon to remove any caramelized bits.
9. Transfer this mixture and the cooked livers to a blender. Blend the liver mixture well until smooth and homogenous.
10. Transfer mixture to a bowl and chill for at least an hour in the refrigerator.

To serve:

- Slather the toasted bread with the chicken liver spread and then finish with a drizzle of balsamic vinegar, freshly cracked pepper, parsley, and a sprinkle of flaky sea salt.
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RIBOLLITA (BEAN SOUP)

Serves 6-8

Ingredients:

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ lb. pancetta or bacon, diced
- 1 large yellow onion, diced small
- 1 carrot, diced small
- 1 stalk celery, diced small
- 1 fennel bulb, diced small
- 6-8 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ tsp. red chili flakes
- ¼ cup tomato paste
- 28 oz. can whole plum tomatoes, crushed with your hand
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 2 bunches lacinato kale, washed and cut into ½" pieces
- 1 lb. cannellini beans, cooked, and drained
- ½ cup fresh basil leaves, coarse chopped
- 6-8 ¼" slices of day-old bread, toasted with lots of olive oil
- ½ cup parmesan grated
- 1 4 oz. ball of burrata cheese
- Good olive oil
- Freshly cracked pepper
- Salt

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RIBOLLITA (BEAN SOUP)

Serves 6-8

To prepare the beans:

1. If using dry beans, soak them overnight and then simmer on the stove with a couple cloves of crushed garlic and a spring of thyme or rosemary. If you are cooking all day, don't hesitate to leave the beans on the stovetop's lowest setting and cook them all day, barely at a simmer.
2. Alternatively, you can use canned cannellini beans: strain them from the can, rinse them, and then pop them in your soup.

Preparation:

1. Heat the oil in a large pot over medium heat.
2. Add the diced pancetta or bacon and render the fat on medium heat, stirring frequently until the chunks of pork are nicely browned.
3. Add in the diced onion, carrots, celery, fennel, and garlic. Season with a couple good pinches of salt.
4. Cook the vegetables for 6-8 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Add another generous pinch of salt, the chili flakes, and tomato paste and continue to cook a few more minutes, letting the tomato paste caramelize on the bottom of the pot.
6. Add the crushed tomato, bay leaf, white wine, and chicken stock.
7. Bring the mixture to a boil, then lower to a simmer and add the kale.
8. Let the ribollita simmer for 25-30 minutes, taste, and adjust the seasoning.
9. Remove the stew from the heat and add the cannellini beans.
10. Allow the soup to rest for about 20 minutes on the counter.
11. Ladle portions of soup into oven-proof serving bowls.
12. Place toasted bread on the soup and then grate parmesan on the bread.
13. Tear pieces of the burrata cheese from the ball and scatter on the top of each piece of toast and then place each bowl under the broiler until the cheese bubbles, melts, and turns golden brown.
14. Serve the soup immediately with a good drizzle of olive oil and freshly cracked pepper.


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SPRINGTIME PANZANELLA (BREAD SALAD)

Serves 6-8

You can use any of your favorite spring vegetables for this salad. Peas, fava beans, roasted carrots, and even beets would make great additions or substitutions for any of the vegetables listed below.

Ingredients:

- 1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
 - 1 garlic clove, minced
 - 1 tsp. salt
 - 3 Tbsp red wine vinegar
 - ½ cup good olive oil
 - 1 bunch asparagus, roasted and cut into 1" pieces
 - 1 small head cauliflower, cut into florets and roasted
 - 1 small bulb fennel, shaved thinly
 - 1 bunch radishes, halved
 - 1-2 shallots, shaved thinly lengthwise
 - 1/3 cup olive oil
 - 5-6 cups rustic bread, torn into large bite-sized pieces
 - 15-20 basil leaves
 - Freshly cracked pepper
 - Salt
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SPRINGTIME PANZANELLA (BREAD SALAD)

Serves 6-8

Prepare the vinaigrette:

1. Whisk together the mustard, garlic, salt, and vinegar.
2. Slowly whisk in the olive oil. Set aside.

Prepare the vegetables:

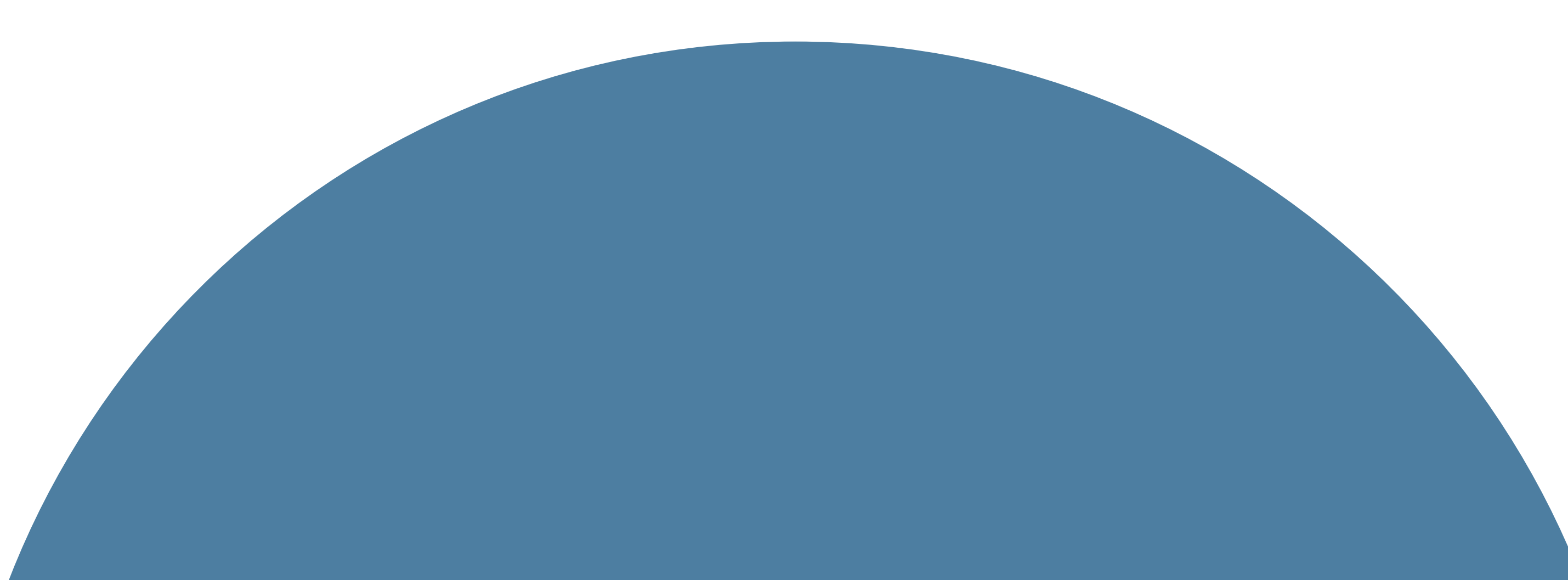
1. Preheat your oven to broil (500-550F).
2. On a sheet pan or in an oven dish, toss the asparagus and cauliflower with olive oil and a healthy pinch of salt. Place in the oven on the middle rack.
3. Toss the veggies every few minutes until golden brown. Approximately 10 minutes total.

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SPRINGTIME PANZANELLA (BREAD SALAD)

Serves 6-8

Preparation:

1. In a bowl, mix the torn bread, olive oil, and a large pinch of salt.
 2. Toss the bread making sure to evenly coat it.
 3. In your preheated oven, place the bread onto a baking sheet and cook for 12-14 minutes, making sure to rotate and stir the bread every few minutes. You are looking for a crunchy, golden-brown exterior and a chewy interior.
 4. Remove the baking sheet from the oven and let cool for about 15 minutes.
 5. Alternatively, you can heat the olive oil in a large sauté pan. Add the bread and a good pinch of salt. Fry the bread in the oil, stirring frequently until browned on the exterior. Remove the bread from the pan and transfer to a bowl to let cool for 15 minutes.
 6. Place your roasted and raw vegetables in a large bowl, and pour the vinaigrette over the top.
 7. Add the toasted bread and basil leaves.
 8. Toss the panzanella together gently, seasoning with more salt and cracked black pepper as desired.
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CACCIUCCO (SEAFOOD STEW)

Serves 6-8

Ingredients :

- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp. red chili flakes
- 1 tsp. fennel seed, toasted and crushed
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 stalk celery, diced small
- 4 sage leaves, chopped
- 2 Tbsp parsley, chopped
- 1 Tbsp tomato paste
- 1 cup tomato pulp*, about 4-5 Roma tomatoes
- 1 cup white wine
- 3 cups fish stock
- Salt
- 1 lb. shrimp, cleaned and deveined
- 1 lb. clams or mussels, rinsed
- 1 lb. white fish, e.g., sole, bass, or snapper, cut into 6-8 equal portions

*Use fresh tomatoes and grate them on the largest hole of a box grater. Discard the skin and reserve the pulp.

Ingredients for serving:

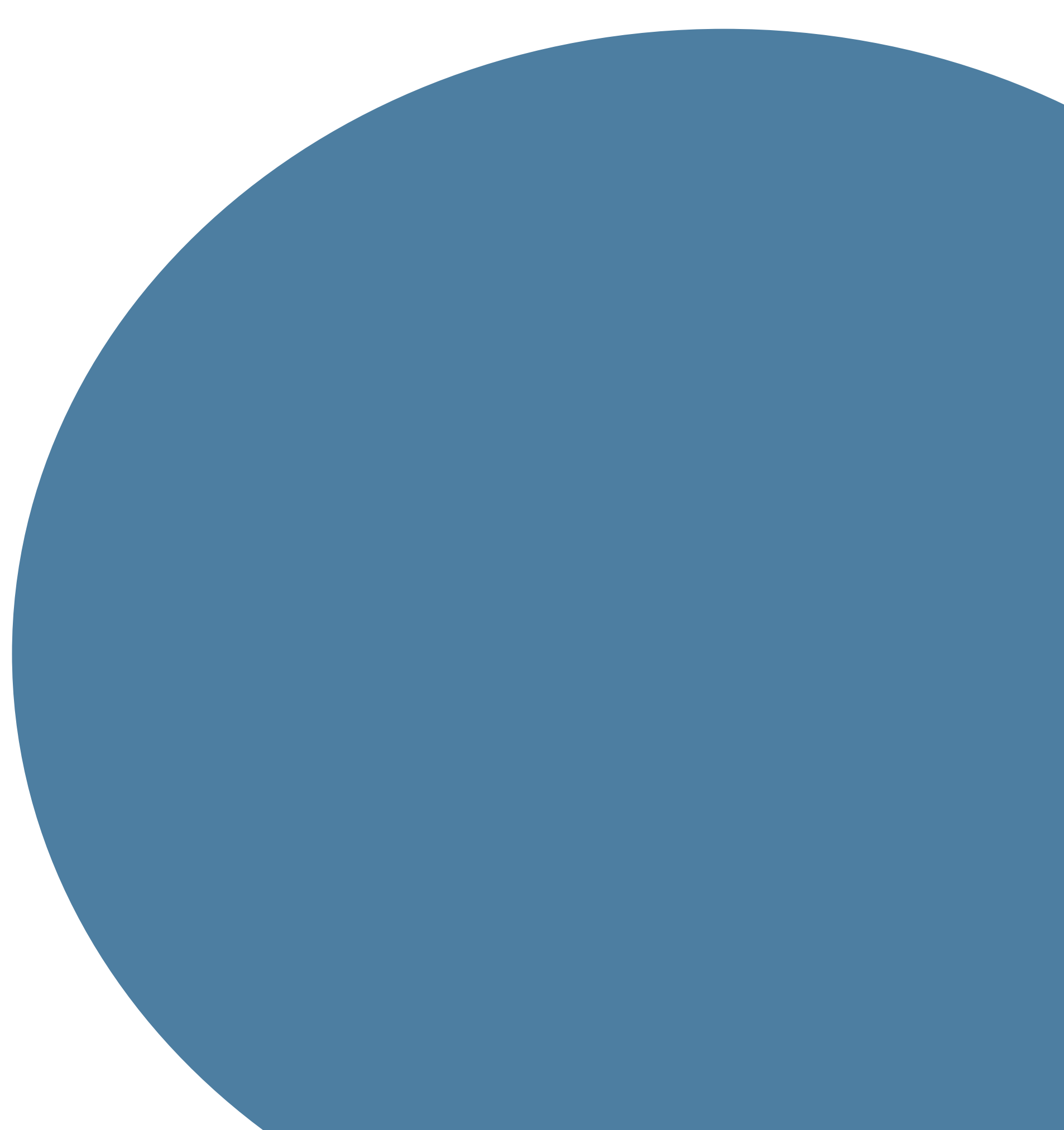
- Chopped parsley
- Good olive oil
- Rustic, crusty bread

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CACCIUCCO (SEAFOOD STEW)

Serves 6-8

Preparation:

1. Heat the olive oil in a large pot.
 2. Add the chili flakes, fennel seed, garlic, celery, sage, and parsley and fry in the oil until aromatic, about one minute.
 3. Add in the tomato paste, lower the heat and continue to cook the mixture, stirring frequently for another minute or so.
 4. Add the tomato pulp to the mixture and cook for a few minutes, while stirring continuously.
 5. Add the white wine, fish stock, and a generous pinch of salt.
 6. Let the stew come to a boil and then lower to a simmer, allowing the broth to cook for about 10 minutes.
 7. Add the shrimp, mussels, and white fish evenly in the pot, cover and let cook for another 10-15 minutes or until the mussels have opened.
 8. Serve the cacciucco with freshly chopped parsley, a good drizzle of olive oil, and fresh bread to soak up all the delicious juices.
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CANTUCCINI (BISCOTTI)

Makes about 20 cookies

Ingredients:

- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. salt
- Zest of 1 orange
- 1 cup whole toasted almonds, chopped
- 1 cup dried cherries, chopped
- 1 cup pine nuts, toasted and chopped
- 1 egg white
- ¼ cup demerara sugar



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CANTUCCINI (BISCOTTI)

Makes about 20 cookies

Preparation:

1. Preheat your oven to 350F.
2. In a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat together whole eggs and sugar until thick and pale in color, about 5-6 minutes.
3. In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, and salt.
4. Add the flour mixture to the sugar and eggs little by little until fully incorporated, making sure not to overmix the batter.
5. Stir in the orange zest, nuts, and dried cherries.
6. Divide the dough evenly on a large baking tray lined with greased parchment paper.
7. Form the dough into rectangles approximately 9" in length and 3" in width.
8. Beat the egg white lightly with a fork until foamy, then brush the cantuccini dough liberally.
9. Sprinkle the demerara sugar on top of each rectangle, then bake for 25-30 minutes.
10. Remove the cantuccini from the oven and place the baking sheets on a wire rack to cool for about 30 minutes.
11. Lower the oven temperature to 300F.
12. Transfer the cantuccini to a cutting board then use a serrated knife to slice the rectangles into ½" pieces.
13. Place the cantuccini cut side up on a fresh baking tray.
14. Bake the cantuccini once more.
15. After 20 minutes of baking, flip the cantuccini over and rotate the baking tray and bake for another 20-25 minutes.
16. Remove the cantuccini from the oven after they have become lightly browned. Place the cookies onto a wire rack and let cool completely.
17. Cantuccini can be made two weeks ahead of time and stored in an airtight container.