



cultivating capers

ENJOY THE WORLD'S MOST EDIBLE FLOWER
BUD ON ITALY'S PANTELLERIA ISLAND.

BY PAULA DE LA CRUZ | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROMAS FOORD



AS A GARDEN DESIGNER, I MAKE MY LIVING getting plants to bloom. But I was fascinated by one flower that's best plucked while it's still a bud. This plant is the *Capparis spinosa*, commonly known as the caper, and to see it in all its glory I traveled in July to Pantelleria, Italy's southernmost island, about 60 miles southwest of mainland Sicily.

Pantelleria is a volcanic island with far more farmers than fishermen. In A.D. 835, nearby Arabs brought the sophisticated methods of cultivation and gardening to the island that they'd already established in Spain and southern Italy, and introduced zibibo grapes to the island's hillside terraces. Amid the grapes, which the Arabs kept close to the ground to protect them from the wind, grew capers, native creeping shrubs—with buds that taste piquant and earthy—that even today sprout spontaneously across the island. The ancient terrace walls still edge some of the island's most bountiful caper farms, like that of Pietro Bonomo on the hillside of Montagna Grande.

I met Pietro and his family in their caper fields just as the sun was rising. Pietro started picking capers at the age of 7 and passed the tradition on to his children, as well as to his grandchildren, who

now also help. When I saw the cultivated capers for the first time, they reminded me of octopuses, sitting at the edges of the terraces with their long tentacle-like branches extended across the ground and cascading down stone walls.

Pietro showed me how to pick them quickly, pulling the branches taut with one hand while harvesting the buds with the other. His hands are burly but dexterous, like those of someone who's spent a lifetime unbuttoning long silk dresses. We tiptoed between plants, working for a few minutes on one and then switching to the next before returning to the first. Watching where you step is crucial to avoid squishing the younger buds on the tips of the branches.

As the sun changed to lighter shades of orange and the morning grew warmer, the unpicked blooms opened. The meaty white petals revealed iridescent lilac stamens that filled the air with a musk-rose scent. Pietro explained that when the plants are cultivated *a secco*—with little water—the buds have a stronger flavor and the flowers have a more powerful scent.

Once we'd picked enough capers to fill our buckets, we poured them into a large sack, which we kept in the shade so the buds wouldn't open. A

Opposite: the flower and buds of *Capparis spinosa*. This page clockwise from top left: capers bathed in salt; Pietro Bonomo with the morning's harvest; picking caper buds on Montagna Grande.

RESOURCES

The best route to Pantelleria is through Rome. The International Wine Academy of Roma (www.wineacademyroma.com) is particularly adept at matching caper dishes with wine. The pinot grigio Piatti Ruttars nicely complements the maccheroni with lobster ragout and capers (but note that the menu changes with the seasons). The academy also owns

the only public terrace overlooking the renowned Spanish Steps. The finest *dammuso*-style lodging on the island is the Pantelleria Dream Hotel (39-0533-37-93-07; www.pantelleriadream.com), which also offers cooking classes. To buy capers, go straight to the source: Cooperativa Agricola Produttori Capperi (39-0923-91-60-79).

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Opposite: A Pantelleria domed-roof *dammuso* overlooking the Mediterranean. This page: sitting down to *tumma* cheese, almonds and olives, figs, and a caper salad (above); a plate of *insalata Pantescas*, or Pantellerian salad (right).



Pantelleria caper plant produces about a quarter pound of capers every eight to 12 days. Some members of Pietro's family can pick more than 50 pounds in just a few hours, but my yield was closer to a one-digit measure.

Around 10 a.m., the whole family prepared to go home to sort the capers by size: small, which are considered the best and most flavorful, and therefore the most expensive; medium; and large. The freshly picked capers are then placed in sea salt. The salt extracts water and certain enzymes, forming a brine that helps mature the buds' flavor. Pietro works in small batches, changing the salt every week for a month. Then, like all farmers on the island, he takes the capers to the local cooperative, where the aging process continues until the bitter buds have transformed into tiny savory capsules.

My friend Teresa, who'd invited me to her summer house on the island, lamented while preparing lunch that once she'd been able to buy even smaller capers. Her house was a typical *dammuso*—an Arab-style stone construction with a domed roof for collecting water—perched above fig and acacia trees, vineyards, and tomato fields. Beyond the farms, I could see black cliffs outlining the sea. Teresa's terrace was ideal for inhaling the herb-scented breeze and, most important, lunch. Most meals at her house consisted of appetizing salads, accompanied

by a local white cheese called *tumma*, dressed with olive oil and basil leaves.

Deciding that a Mediterranean morning's work deserved a dip in the sea, I walked from Teresa's house to the reef below. Without abandoning my brown canvas hat, I glided into the water and swam across the bay, where I encountered a Pantellerian family opening sea urchins atop a rock, then spooning the coral red roe into a jar. Their teenage son opened one urchin and offered it to me. It was hard to stay afloat, eat the roe, and not to pierce my fingers all at once. "Use your thumb as a spoon. The eggs are an aphrodisiac," he said, smiling. That's also what people say about capers, and they're much easier to eat.

When I returned from the sea, I put a handful of capers in fresh water to soak for a few hours to wash away the salt. Teresa and I were expecting guests for dinner—close friends of hers from northern Italy—and we'd planned an all-Pantellerian menu to welcome them. While the capers bathed, I did the same in the nearby thermal springs. I covered myself in the sulfurous mud on the shore and circled the water until I felt like a clay pot. Then I rinsed and emerged looking like a Botticelli Venus. Well, almost.

Back at home, Teresa was already working on the salads. She recommended we drive up Montagna Grande to an old friend's winery to pick up bottles of *passito*, the sweet local wine

A CAPER RECIPE

The complete Pantelleria experience includes trying at least one of the island's delicious salads. Here is my favorite.

INSALATA PANTESCA:

- 4 medium white potatoes
- 1 medium spring onion
- 8 ripe tomatoes
- 12 black olives
- 7 tablespoons of capers in salt
- Basil
- Olive oil, pepper and salt to taste

Soak capers in tepid water to drain the salt, changing the water a few times for about one hour. Peel and dice the potatoes, then boil and let cool. Dice the tomatoes and slice the onion thinly. Combine the potatoes, tomatoes, and onion in a large mixing bowl. Drain the capers and add to the salad. Add shredded basil leaves, olive oil, pepper and salt. Toss and let sit at room temperature for two hours before serving.

made from zibibbo grapes. The Valenza estate is housed in an old monastery and produces capers along with wine. I saw an older man with his 8-year-old grandson picking capers, and I asked if I could join them. We harvested placidly. Tall grasses swaying in the breeze on nearby abandoned fields provided the only sounds. It was late afternoon when we returned home.

At the terrace's table, I prepared the first course, *insalata Pantescas*—Pantellerian salad—made with potatoes, onions, small ripe tomatoes, olives, basil, and, of course, capers. I chopped the veggies, distracted by the copper sun submerging into the sea. In the kitchen, Teresa finished a *caponata*, an eggplant and tomato-sauce dish, just in time to welcome our guests.

We set the table while sipping wine and trading island gossip. Before sitting down, I strolled to the garden to cut some basil leaves; Teresa had taught me not to rinse the leaves to avoid washing away the essential oils. By now it was dark, and the candles on the table lit a feast of salads and stews, figs from the garden, green almonds, olives, candied fruit, and cheese. I put a tiny caper in my mouth, tasting the sea salt first. I bit the crunchy petals through to the pistils, releasing a sweet rosy scent and a hint of pine nuts and truffles. The caper tasted of sea and land all at once, even as its aroma filled the air. □