

OFF THE AMALFI COAST'S BEATEN TRACK

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

View of the town of Minori from the lemon path (Photo Lucy Gordan) and a commemoration plaque to the *formichelle* ("little ants") who carry the lemons at harvest time (photo Lucy Gordan). Bottom: a *formichella* (lemon carrier)



The small town of Minori on Italy's Amalfi Coast is located directly below Ravello, the more famous hill-top town beloved by composer Richard Wagner and many writers: André Gide, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence and Gore Vidal, to name just a few. It's also only a 10-minute, once-an-hour ferry ride to Amalfi with its magnificent medieval cathedral, Italy's most-sought-after wedding church with some 400 weddings a year in pre-COVID times.

Although less glamorous than its jet-set neighbors Ravello and Amalfi, throughout the year Minori offers several events and sights that *ITV* readers will appreciate. Since this "Of Books, Art, and People" will be published in the November/December issue, let's start with Christmas.

From the Immaculate Conception to Epiphany, several elaborate *presepi* (crèches) with their numerous terracotta figures, a Neapolitan and thus a local tradition, are displayed in the Churches of Santa Lucia and Santa Trofimenia, dedicated to Minori's patron saints, as well as in the church of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and in the central square *Largo Brandolini*.

However, Minori's most special crèche figures aren't made of terracotta, but rather of carved wooden cutouts painted with acrylics by 72-year-old native son Giacomo Palladino, who taught art and art history for some 30 years in Sondrio, in very northern Italy, before returning to Minori just over a decade ago. His crèche started as a didactic project for his students



and gradually increased in size over the years.

Now it's usually housed in the *Antica Scuderia*, a building which dates to 1700 and later was used by King Victor Emanuel III (1869-1947) as his stables when he visited Ravello.

First displayed in Minori in 2012, today Palladino's crèche depicts the scenes of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Nativity, the sleeping shepherd Benjamin's Dream, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight to Egypt. All its some 100 figures, between 50 and 180 cm in height, are copies of figures in paintings dating from the 1300s to the 1800s. Many are from works by Giotto, Botticelli, Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and the Venetian Renaissance painters. To name a few: his Madonna is by Correggio, his St. Joseph by Murillo, and the Adoration of the Magi by Gentile da Fabriano. Palladino also painted the backgrounds: landscapes of the Amalfi Coast with the sea, castles, and lemon groves. If you can't travel to Minori this Christmas, you can still enjoy Palladino's unique masterpiece virtually by clicking on *presepe dipinto di Giacomo Palladino-Pro Loco Minori* to watch videos on YouTube taken during several different years, so each is slightly different, because Palladino has either moved some of his figures or added new ones.

Truly unique, hopefully before too much longer this crèche can be visited year-round.

One Christmas is not enough for the Minoresi. During *Gustaminori*, a cultural and food festival held annually for the past



From the left: the facade of the Basilica of Santa Trofimenia in Minori. The tomb of the Saint inside (photo Lucy Gordan), and the Shrine to Santa Trofimenia on the Lemon Path (photo Lucy Gordan). Bottom, Michele Ruocco, founding father and promoter of “lemon paths” (photo Lucy Gordan)

25 years during the second half of August, on the 24th, 25th, and 26th, the Minoresi recelebrate Christmas; this year they invited me and seven other journalists.

On the 24th or “Panettone Night,” 34 chefs from Italy’s 20 regions, all members of the *Accademia del Lievito Madre* founded by Minori’s most famous citizen, pastry chef “Sal” De Riso, passed out free panettone samples to everyone on the *lungomare* or seafront. Groups of local *zampognari* (bagpipers) played Christmas tunes wandering from restaurant to restaurant, which all served typically Christmas dishes (actually all three nights): *fritto misto* of fried artichokes, broccoli, baccalà, anchovies, apples, and bananas; *l’insalata di rinforzo* (usually of cauliflower, black and green olives, anchovies, boiled potatoes, baby red peppers stuffed with tuna fish, pickles, cucumber, capers, and onions, but every family has its own recipe. It’s called *di rinforzo* or “strengthening” because everyday from Christmas Eve to New Year’s Day new ingredients are added to it); *spaghetti atterrati con noci ed alici* (with walnuts and anchovies, and *zeppole ‘e patate* (sugar-coated fried potato rings). I can recommend “Giardiniello,” “A’Ricette,” and “La Botte” for these Christmas dishes and other local specialties like homemade *fusilli* (curly short pasta) or *n’dunderi* (local gnocchi) with various shellfish sauces, eggplant *polpette*, and fish and lemon dishes too numerous to list.



Speaking of lemons, you cannot leave Minori without stopping at Sal De Riso’s bistro for “pizza Amalfi” (the topping: *provola*, *fior di latte*, prosciutto from Parma, ginger, and lemon slices) or *delizia al limone* (lemon cream on a slice of sponge cake encased in white chocolate with *limncello*). To learn more about Sal, flip to “Food For Thought” on the back page.

To return to Palladino, the crèche is not his only work of art in Minori. The other, in the courtyard of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, is a large (20 meters long and 1.3 meters tall) ceramic tile frieze depicting (in blue) episodes of the traditions of the hooded anonymous “beaters” dressed in long white robes. They are male penitents who for centuries have led the Holy Week processions through town while singing various chants (in 2010 declared “intangible cultural heritage”

by Italy’s Ministry of Culture) and flagellating themselves with rough rope cords. Although they no longer practice self-flagellation, the Confraternity’s *battenti* still lead Minori’s Easter Processions. The whole town participates particularly on Good Friday; visitors can as well. The rest of the year the *battenti* devote themselves to helping Minori’s less fortunate citizens.

On the walls of the Confraternity’s sacristy are 29 other unique works-of-art depicting religious subjects: the Last Supper, St. Trofimenia, and the Madonna, as well as views of Minori. At first sight they look like paintings; instead, they are embroideries made of colored cotton threads by native-son

World War II veteran Alfonso Florio. After returning home, he devoted himself to this art form. He’d learned it while a prisoner-of-war in India, to rehabilitate his hands that had been badly frostbitten while serving in the Russian Campaign (1941-43).

During any time of year, although best to avoid the hottest months for lack of much shade, you can admire Palladino’s and Florio’s scenery firsthand by walking along “The Lemon Path” between Minori and the neighboring town Maiori. This path was originally an ancient Roman road, which today counts c. 800 up-and-down steps if you complete its entire 7 km. route with several shrines to St. Trofimenia along the way.

Luckily for me, thanks to the founding father and promoter of “lemon paths,” Michele Ruocco, a retired banker turned agronomist and very active member of Pro Loco Minori, it has recently become possible to drive nearly halfway up to the hamlet of Torre near the lovely little church of *San Michele Archangelo*, which dates to 936 AD and was probably built on the site of a pagan temple.

Here Michele recounted to my colleagues and me a brief history of Amalfi’s spindle-shaped lemon. “It arrived in Amalfi, already an important port in ancient Roman times, from the Middle East,” he said.

“Initially small and practically inedible,” he continued, “over time it was crossed with local bitter oranges to provide sailors with vitamin C to avoid scurvy during their long sea

Of Books, Art and People

voyages. For several centuries, along with fish, the lemon was the local population's main sustenance."

During a stop at a local lemon grove, Michele explained: "Over the centuries this unproductive rural landscape was transformed into terraces often only accessible by steep staircases. The lemon trees' branches, when young, are carefully twisted around wooden trestles covered with black or green nets to protect them from the wind and hail. Everything is still done by hand. The harvest lasts from around February 1 to October 31, producing some 1,700,000 kilos a year along the Coast; most are sold in Italy. The other months are devoted to pruning, maintaining the trestles, and protecting the plants from frost. Our paths are too narrow and too steep for motorized transport, not to mention the stairs," Michele continued, "so until recently it was the women's job to carry down on their shoulders to the sea baskets, each loaded with some 50 kilos of lemons. They were nicknamed *formichelle* or 'little ants,' for that's what their processions looked like. Today men help too, as do mules."

Minori's story wouldn't be complete without a word about St. Trofimena. She was born in Patti, a town on the north coast of Sicily below Tyndaris (see my "Tyndaris: 'City of Mary,'" *ITV*, October 2013). When, in 304 A.D., at the age of 12 or 13, during the reign of Diocletian and Maximian, Trofimena expressed her wish to be baptized and embrace Christianity, her father, a pagan nobleman, who wanted her to marry a suitable pagan nobleman, murdered her. Legend recounts that some

300 years later on November 5, 640 A.D. an urn containing her body, inscribed with a description of the saint's life and death, floated up onto Minori's beach. Here a woman doing her laundry in the sea found it. The urn was very heavy, so two young heifers were brought to move it. Instead, the urn moved towards the heifers and pulled them (!). A church was built on the spot where they stopped and, though transformed through the ages, is still there.

However, because along the Amalfi Coast and its hinterlands she was the only saint with an actual relic, during the early 800s, bishops contested her urn and kidnapped it many times: it traveled to Benevento, to Amalfi, to Salerno, then back to Benevento, back to Amalfi, and finally back to Minori on July 13, 840, after which the townspeople successfully hid it for nearly 1,000 years, until, after four days of frantic digging, they found it again on November 27, 1793. Since then her final resting place is in an alabaster sarcophagus in the crypt of her namesake church, Baroque on the façade and Gothic in the interior.

Today Minori has three Santa Trofimena feast days: November 5, the anniversary of her murder and of the discovery of her urn on the beach; November 27, when her remains were discovered after 1,000 years, and July 13 to commemorate the date in 840 when her remains finally returned forever to Minori and the day she is said to have intervened miraculously by creating a terrible tempest which caused Arab pirates attacking Minori to shipwreck.○