

Let's take a trip through Italy and enjoy the different types of cooking you will find from province to province. The reason I chose Italian cooking is first, I am Italian, and second, Italian cooking can be very healthy, easy to prepare, and very imaginative. You will find that mealtime will become a treasured part of your life, like it is treated in Italy.

Most of my recipes will serve four to six people. If you have small children, let them help you. They will love to be part of the meal preparation, especially if you make it sound like a game. Let's make believe we are in the outskirts of Rome and stop at a local "trattoria." Cover the table with a red and white tablecloth, set a little bowl of fresh parsley in the middle of the table. While the children set the table, you will be busy cooking the dinner.

Start with this recipe:

Meal One: Spaghetti ali "Amatriciana"

1-1/2 lbs. spaghetti (there are many good brands of Italian imports)

2-1/2 teas. olive oil

1 onion, diced small

6 slices (thick) pancetta diced (you can use bacon)

1/2 cup dry white wine

1 lb. ripe tomatoes (or canned)

salt & pepper to taste

Grated Romano and Parmigiano cheese

Heat the oil and sauté the onion till soft. Add the pancetta and fry slowly, moisten with wine, and cook till it begins to evaporate. Add tomatoes, peeled and chopped, salt and pepper to taste. Cook briskly for about 15 minutes.

Bring a large pot of water to boil, add spaghetti, and cook as directed on the box. Do not overcook.

Toss with sauce and cheese. Be sure to have extra cheese for the table, Italian bread and a green salad with virgin olive oil and vinegar dressing. End the meal with seasonal fruit and cheese.

Meal Two: “Pollo alla Diavola” (Chicken Devil Style)

I always use free-range chicken. Split chicken and open like a book, wash it, and dry it well. Then put it on top of a large breadboard or any hard surface and crush flat with a mallet or rolling pin. Rub it all over (rather lavishly) with good virgin olive oil. Use 1-1/2 tablespoons of crushed red pepper, a little salt and fresh ground black pepper, and rub all over the chicken. Put chicken on large broiler pan, broil top side about 15 minutes – not too close to the fire, so it doesn't burn. Turn over and pour a class of white wine on it, and broil the other side for 15 minutes. It should be golden and crisp. Place chicken in ovenproof dish, turn broiler off, but keep chicken in warm oven. Add more wine to the broiler pan and scrape off juices. You can pour any juices over chicken when you serve it. I also like to sprinkle a little fresh squeezed lemon.

Serve with:

Broccoli a Crudo

2 lbs. broccoli

5 tablespoons olive oil

3 cloves garlic

salt & pepper

2 cups white wine

Clean the broccoli, discard coarse leaves, peel the stems and cut into bite-size pieces. Divide the flowerets and leave in cold salted water until ready to be cooked. Heat the oil in a large pan and sauté the garlic until golden, not brown. Add the broccoli leaves and stems, season with salt and pepper, and continue to sauté until tender. Drain the flowerets well and add to pan. Pour in the wine. Bring to a boil, gently stirring occasionally until tender. Always have nice crunchy Italian bread to serve.

End the meal with poached pears with Gorgonzola cheese. Wash pears well, use half per person. Cut in half and gently clear seeds and stems. Lay on baking dish with white wine and bake at 350 for 15 minutes. Lay Gorgonzola cheese on top of pears and serve. A delicious end to a great meal! Buon appetito!

Meal 3: "Risi and Bibi" (Rice and Peas)

This meal is very popular in the Veneto region. Start with "Risi and Bisi" (rice and peas).

3 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons olive oil

pancetta - a few pieces chopped fine

3 or 4 green onions, chopped

3 cups of fresh-shelled peas (or equivalent frozen)

1-2/3 cups rice

about 10 cups of stock (chicken preferable)

Heat butter and oil in heavy large pan and sauté onion and pancetta. When it begins to brown, add peas and a cup of the stock. Turn to simmer for about 15 minutes, then add all of the stock. Bring to a boil and add the rice. Stir well, let simmer at lowest heat for about 20 minutes. Turn off heat. Stir well again, and add a little salt and pepper to taste. Stir again, then let rest covered for a few minutes. Serve with plenty of grated cheese and fresh chopped parsley.

Zabaglione

When I feel down, tired, out of sorts, I fix myself a zabaglione. I hope you will try it.

This amount is enough for three people.

4 egg yolks

3/4 cup sugar

3/4 cup Marsala wine

Combine ingredients in top of double-boiler. Cook over simmering water - not boiling - and beat or whisk the egg mixture until it is very thick, about 10 to 15 minutes. Serve in small cups or glasses. Delizioso! Makes you feel like royalty.

ITALIAN MEAT LOAF

2 lb. very lean ground beef
1 lb. sweet Italian sausages, casing removed
1 medium yellow onion, diced
5 cloves garlic, minced
3 cups fresh bread crumbs
1 cup Italian parsley, chopped
2 tbsp. Italian seasoning
1/2 tsp. salt
several grindings of black pepper
2 eggs, lightly beaten
1/2 cup tomato juice
1/2 cup dry red wine

Combine those in a large bowl and mix well. Lay out a large sheet of wax paper, spread meatloaf mixture in a 12" x 15" rectangle over the paper. Then lay on top 4 ounces sun dried tomatoes, packed in oil. Try to spread evenly, then add about 2 cups of fresh sweet basil leaves. Using the wax paper as an aid, start at the short side and roll like a jelly roll, peeling back the paper as you roll. Press the meat loaf lightly to seal. Put it on a jelly roll pan or broiling pan that has been lined with foil.

Bake at 375 degrees for 1 hour and 10 minutes. Serve hot or cold.

Buon appetito!

BAKED POLENTA WITH MUSHROOMS

Make polenta according to the package directions (use either the quick or the longer cooking polenta or corn meal).

When the polenta is about finished, stir in 1/4 cup butter and 1 cup grated parmesan cheese; beat well. Put the polenta into a 9x5 loaf pan and cool. Remove polenta, place on a cutting board and cut in half. Return one half to the loaf pan and cover with 1/3 of the mushroom sauce. Sprinkle some grated parmesan cheese and thin slices of mozzarella or fontina cheese. Put the other half of the polenta on top and repeat with sauce and cheeses.

For the sauce:

1/4 cup olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped fine

2 garlic cloves, chopped fine

1 tbsp. parsley, chopped fine

1 lb. crimini mushrooms, sliced

2/3 cup canned Italian tomatoes

a little salt and pepper

In a deep skillet, heat olive oil and saute the onion, garlic, and parsley until onion is soft - do NOT brown. Add mushrooms and tomatoes, a little salt and pepper, and cook over medium heat about 10 minutes. The mushrooms should be cooked but still firm.

Bake in a 350-degree oven until top has a golden brown crust. Enjoy!

Castagnaccia

Chestnut flour is a healthy, nutritious food - now difficult to find and expensive. During the war, when neither eggs nor sugar were available, the natural sweetness of it was enhanced with raisins and a little rosemary or lemon zest to make a tasty baked treat.

Franca's Recipe for Castagnaccia:

Ingredients: 1 lb. 2 oz. of chestnut flour, a pinch of salt, and enough water to convert the flour into a rather liquid dough. Add 2 teaspoons olive oil, a few fresh chopped rosemary leaves, and a teaspoon of lemon zest.

How to Mix: Put the flour in a mixing bowl and slowly add the water, stirring all the time. When it is in a consistency to pour easily, add the olive oil and mix well. Prepare a shallow cake tin and grease it with olive oil. Pour batter in, about 3/4" deep. Sprinkle with rosemary and lemon zest before you put it in the oven.

Optional: add raisins, pine nuts.

Bake: 350-degree oven until you can smell a delicious scent and the top is nice and brown (about 30 minutes).