

Making tomato sauce — old-country style

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"If you know how Italian food is supposed to taste, you can only make it that way if you have good sauce," said Stea's eldest daughter, Angela DeAngelis, also of West Bloomfield, who assists her mother every year.

THE JOB is easier and quicker today because Stea's late husband, Salvatore, had the good sense to mechanize a hand grinder by connecting it to an old motor from a used washing machine.

While the contraption is known to emit electrical shocks and an occasional spit of tomato, and those who work it get covered with spatters of juice, Salvatore's mechanized creation has performed faithfully for 17 years.

The hand grinder was bought in New York City in 1962, shortly after Stea and three small children reluctantly followed Salvatore to the United States "just to see it."

Nine years later, after the family had settled in Michigan, Salvatore was killed in an auto accident, leaving Stea to finish raising the three children, then teens, and their two younger siblings who had been born in America.

She is now a seamstress at Brick-er-Tunis Furrier in West Bloomfield.

TODAY IS the day for sauce making. In addition to Angela, younger brother Joe is also present "to supervise." Joan Stea, once married to another of Maria's sons, Pete, and family friend Pat Gilonna of West Bloomfield are also helping.

Daughter Donna, who is returning to Puglia to marry next year, is at work and nobody seems certain where son Jerry, the youngest member of the family, is.

"In Italy, men not do this kind of work," Maria said, explaining Joe's self-appointed supervisory capacity and the unexplained absences of Pete and Jerry.

The job is done in a makeshift area of the basement, a small, awkward space that allows the pace considerably. An electric range is barely able to keep up with the volume of tomatoes requiring boiling and simmering.

Amid bantering and the occasional pop of a tomato on the cement floor, the work proceeds under Stea's watchful gaze and subtle directives.

THE FIRST tub of tomatoes is brought to a boil. They are hastily removed from the boiling water and instantly strained through cheesecloth. Straining is essential, the key to a thick, hearty sauce.

"I see jars in Abuzzi (a region in Italy), full of water. No like. Needs three, four hours cooking to destroy water," Stea said.

Otherwise, the sauce is runny and tasteless.

Once the straining is complete, Salvatore's mechanized creation is put to use. The tomatoes are spooned into the grinder. The separated pulp is prodded a second time, producing a surprising amount of additional puree that acts as a thickening agent.

THE SAUCE requires little sea-

soning, a dash of salt and fresh sprigs of basil. The puree is simmered three to five minutes and then spooned into one-quart canning jars that are sealed in the dry method, by simply adding the lid.

The final touch is provided by Stea, the only person present other than Angela with experience enough for the job.

The jars are put to bed in a dark corner of the basement, carefully placed side by side between thick layers of heavy blankets. It takes four days for the jars to cool. The popping of lids signals all is well.

"Once you get started, it's not so bad," Angela said.

Now it is well past midnight. The group has been working since 9 a.m., only taking time enough out to eat the hamburgers Pat Gilonna has grilled. Everyone is tired and speckled with tomato pieces.

Still, since Angela discovered Billy Joe's Fruit Market in Ecorse, she no longer has to drive to Windsor, Ont., to buy tomatoes. Billy sells plum-shaped Roma tomatoes, suitable for a genuine Puglia sauce.

Romas sold for \$6.99 a bushel this year, up nearly \$1 from previous years. Each bushel produces sauce enough for 10 quart jars. Stea and her helpers processed 17 bushels on this day.

Next year, we have to figure out a better system," Joan Stea said. "We say that every year," the others answered.

Now it's time to clean the mess left from canning 170 jars of tomato sauce.



Pat Gilonna (left) and Joan Stea help with the process of making tomato sauce.

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or hit the branches with sticks to make the olives drop.

Although Maria has lived in the United States nearly 25 years, she used olive oil from Puglia exclusively until recently. Because of the difficulty in buying it, she now uses a brand from Greece.

The people of Puglia are also the champion pasta eaters of Italy. Their traditional dish is fresh peas with a small tubular pasta called Hall Mary or Our Father after the two sizes of beads on a rosary. Maria uses only the larger of the two, Our Father.

Cavatelli pasta, a small rolled disc made of semolina flour, is another popular pasta, nearly always served with garbanzo or white beans.

But it is tomatoes, the "golden apples" first carried from Mexico to Europe hundreds of years ago, that figure most strongly in many Italian dishes.

Maria's pasta sauce recipes, handed down by word of mouth through unknown generations of the family, follow.

MARIA'S ORIGINAL MEAT SAUCE

Unlike other regions of Italy, ground meat is never used in Puglia sauce. It is best when a variety of meats is used.

Orecchiette pasta is a staple of Puglia. Made of semolina flour, small discs of dough are flattened with the thumb, forming a "little ear."

Ingredients:
 1/2 cup olive oil
 1/2 medium onion, chopped
 1 small beef shank
 1 small lamb shank
 1 pork shank, cut in half
 2 16-ounce cans plain crushed tomatoes, pureed
 4 fresh basil leaves or 1 tablespoon dried basil
 salt to taste

Heat olive oil in heavy frying pan. Brown meats and onions until browned. Add tomatoes, basil and salt. Cook for one-half hour. Reduce heat and simmer for 1 hour. Remove meat from sauce and serve in separate platter. Serve sauce over orecchiette pasta.

MARIA'S MEATLESS SAUCE

Ingredients:
 1/2 cup olive oil
 1 clove garlic, peeled and sliced in half
 1 small red chili pepper, finely chopped

1 16-ounce cans of plain crushed tomatoes, pureed
 4 leaves fresh basil or 1 Tbsp. dried basil
 salt to taste

Heat olive oil in heavy pan. Add garlic slices and red pepper until garlic darkens. Remove and discard. Add tomatoes, basil and salt. Simmer for one hour. For variety, add clams, calamari or shrimp and simmer another 15 minutes. Best served over thin pastas like spaghetti, linguini or fettuccini.

MARIA'S BAKED SAUCE

For a wonderful aroma throughout the house on a cold winter day, try this baked sauce.

Ingredients:
 2 pounds fresh tomatoes, sliced

1/2 cup olive oil
 4 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced in half
 1 small red chili pepper, finely chopped
 6 leaves fresh basil or 1 Tbsp. dried basil
 salt to taste

Layer bottom of 9-by-12-inch baking pan with tomatoes. Top with garlic slices, red pepper, basil and salt. Cover with olive oil. Bake at 350 degrees for two hours, occasionally

stirring and adding water if necessary. Sauce should be slightly runny. Serve over your favorite pasta.

BRUSCHETTA

A traditional lunch for peasants, bruschetta is now a celebrated antipasto treat.

Ingredients:
 18 pieces crusty Italian bread
 2 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced in half

18 fresh basil leaves
 1/2 cup olive oil
 salt and freshly ground black pepper
 2 large but not overripe tomatoes

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Toast bread on each side for 10 minutes. Rub with garlic. Arrange basil leaves on large platter and arrange bread over them. Warm oil in saucepan over low heat for 5 minutes and pour over bread. Salt and pepper to taste. Place 1 half-slice tomato on top of each bread slice.

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