

Columbus' voyages laid a path for a worldwide food exchange

By DANA JACOBI
SPECIAL WRITER

Because he was born in Genoa, we often eat Italian foods on Columbus Day, which is Monday, to honor the man who officially, if not technically, discovered America (he got as far as the West Indies). But the dietary influence of Christopher Columbus is bigger than that.

Columbus was responsible for the beginning of the Columbian Exchange, a massive crossing over between the Old World and the New, of plants, animals and more. That exchange, which followed Columbus's two voyages across the Atlantic, truly changed the world.

Traveling from west to east, chocolate, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, squashes, many kinds of beans, turkey, avocados and other tropical fruits first became known in the Old World after Columbus's travels. Equally important was the movement from east to west, introducing to the New World wheat, citrus fruits, grapes, sugar, cabbage, lettuce, beef cattle, pigs and sheep.

Lasagna was already known in



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Go Italian: This lasagna is layered with ricotta, mozzarella and, ideally, authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses, plus spinach.

Europe before Columbus set sail, perhaps by the 13th century, according to The Oxford Companion to Food. It was a dish layered with strips made with wheat flour, interlaced with a savory filling and baked in the oven. It was not, however, until well after the Columbian

Exchange that the dish was bathed in tomato sauce.

Making lasagna used to be as daunting as voyaging into unknown territory. For years, I avoided making lasagna al forno, with its homemade tomato and bechamel sauces, meats, cheeses and cooked ribbons of pasta.

Then, versions slanted toward New World sensibilities emerged.

An instant, no-boil version of pasta is a major convenience. These corrugated sheets produce a fine lasagna when paired with the right combination of other ingredients. In this version,

tomato sauce enriched with roasted red peppers makes a robust, red sauce. It is layered with ricotta, mozzarella and, ideally, authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses, plus spinach. The result is memorably intense yet light. It freezes beautifully, so make a spare.

LASAGNA WITH SPINACH AND RED PEPPER SAUCE

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided

2 Spanish onions, one thinly sliced, one chopped

4 garlic cloves, chopped and divided

1 jar (12 oz.) roasted red peppers, drained and chopped

1 jar (25 oz.) or 1 can (28 oz.) tomato sauce

1 cup water, divided

1/2 tablespoon crushed dried basil

3 packages (10 ounces each) frozen chopped spinach, defrosted and squeezed dry

1 container (15 ounces) low-fat ricotta cheese

1 cup (4 ounces) shredded reduced-fat mozzarella cheese

12 sheets oven-ready lasagna noodles

1 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

In a small Dutch oven or large, heavy saucepan, heat 1 tablespoon oil over medium-high heat. Sauté sliced onion and half the garlic until onion is translucent, 4 minutes. Add peppers, tomato sauce

and 1/2 cup water. Simmer 20 minutes. Puree in blender or food processor.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In large, non-stick skillet, heat remaining oil over medium-high heat. Sauté onion and remaining garlic until onion is translucent. Add spinach and 1/2 cup water. Cook 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Meanwhile, combine ricotta and mozzarella cheeses in a bowl.

Spoon 1/4 sauce to cover bottom of 9x13x2 inch baking dish. Arrange 3 sheets pasta over sauce. Cover with 1/3 spinach. Spread over 1/3 cheese mixture. Sprinkle on 1 tablespoon Parmesan. Repeat process twice more. Top with remaining pasta, sauce and Parmesan.

Cover with foil and bake 45 minutes. Remove from oven and let sit, uncovered, 15 minutes before serving.

Makes 9 servings.

Nutritional information per serving: 350 calories, 13 g. fat (5 g. saturated fat), 42 g. carbohydrate, 18 g. protein, 6 g. dietary fiber, 640 mg. sodium.

Dana Jacobi writes for the American Institute for Cancer Research book and is the author of *The Joy of Soy*.

Enjoy this quick, easy vegetarian minestrone

See related column by Beverly Price. Recipe courtesy of Annabel Cohen at www.annabelcooks.com

SHORTCUT VEGETARIAN

MINISTRONE

Minestrone is one word for soup in Italian and minestrone means big soup.

There are probably as many minestrone soup recipes as there are Italians. This one is easy, fast and vegetarian, and feeds a crowd. For variation, you could add some green cabbage or diced potatoes.

- 1/4 cup olive oil (not extra virgin)
- 2 cups chopped onions

- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 8 cups vegetable broth, stock or water
- 1 15-ounce can white beans (such as cannellini)
- 1 15-ounce can garbanzo beans or chick peas, drained
- 2 cups diced carrots
- 1 28-ounce can (approximately) diced tomatoes with juice
- 1 10-ounce package frozen spinach, not defrosted
- 1 teaspoon fresh rosemary leaves or dried
- 1 teaspoon fresh or dried oregano
- 2 tablespoons dried parsley

Freshly ground pepper to taste

Salt to taste

4 cups cooked small pasta, such as shells

Freshly grated Parmesan cheese to taste

Heat oil in a large soup pot over medium-high heat. Add onions and garlic and sauté until softened, about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients except pasta and cheese. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a slow boil and cook, uncovered, for 1 hour. Remove from heat and ladle out about one-third of the soup. Let the third of soup cool to warm and puree in a blender or bowl of a

food processor until smooth.

Return the pureed soup to the pot of soup and stir until completely incorporated.

Heat the soup until very hot and adjust seasonings to taste. About 5 minutes before serving, add pasta so that it doesn't become mushy. Add Parmesan cheese and more fresh ground pepper, if you'd like. Makes 16-20 servings.

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