



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Make the food the evening's entertainment

The first time I tasted spinach pasta I was disappointed. I had expected an assertive spinach flavor. It wasn't there. I've since discovered that spinach is added to pasta dough not for its flavor but to make a softer dough and for its color. It is especially pleasing when the color of the sauce being used is white or contains tomato.

I have also learned that homemade pasta has a delicious flavor all its own — like homemade bread — that comes from such simple, basic ingredients as flour and water or flour and eggs.

It is almost a shame to bury such pasta under a heavy meat sauce. Its delicate flavor shines through when lightly dressed with a fruity olive oil and some garlic or when tossed with fresh vegetables and topped with freshly grated Parmesan.

In "The Classic Italian Cook Book," Marcella Hazan gives the recipe for a tomato sauce to top fresh pasta. It bears no resemblance to any tomato sauce that comes out of a can or jar. It is basically a puree of tomatoes and heavy cream. Although the tomatoes called for are canned (so this can be made more than a few weeks of the year), do not use just any canned tomatoes.

Take the time to search out Italian plum tomatoes, which are a meatier variety than the others. They can be very difficult to find, but I have had good luck finding them in local A&P stores.

I HAVE TRIED recipes similar to Marcella Hazan's. Some call for tomato paste, flour, garlic, herbs or spices. The beauty of this recipe is its lack of these additional ingredients. It has a delicacy of taste and texture unmatched by more complex sauces.

It sits lightly on the stomach, stimulating the appetite rather than deadening it. It prepares the diner for the

course or courses which follow in an Italian meal.

The Italians, who make an art of eating, serve and savor each course separately, allowing none to dominate, none to clash. Each complements the others. There is no "main" course. Soup, pasta, fish, meat, vegetables, cheese, salad — each is an individual celebration.

The night I served Marcella Hazan's Tomato-Cream Sauce with pasta, I followed it with an onion fritatta. Unlike the French omelet, the Italian is cooked slowly over very low heat, is firm rather than creamy, and is served flat rather than being rolled over.

THE FRITTATA was accompanied (American-style) by a spinach salad. There was no problem with repeating the spinach that had appeared in the first course.

Since I had ruined the spinach pasta I was attempting, the Tomato-Cream Sauce had been served with egg pasta — not as colorful but equally delicious. Anyone limiting cholesterol intake might be interested to know that four large eggs went into one pound of pasta. Since a quarter pound of pasta is generally considered to be an average serving, that is an egg per serving — more than I would have guessed.

This made a delicious, satisfying, simple meal. It might even be used as an informal supper to share with good friends. If you want a more elaborate meal, you might precede the pasta with an antipasto — perhaps a salad with drizzle before being sealed for dinner.

A jug of red wine would go nicely with the spirit of the meal. Finish up with fresh fruit and cheese for dessert.

UNLESS YOU make your own pasta from scratch, this menu can be made with a minimum amount of time and effort.

Just take great care to obtain the

best quality ingredients — fresh pasta. Italian plum tomatoes, crisp salad greens, your own vinaigrette, good cheese from a specialty store (try a new variety) and unblemished, in-season fruits.

This food may be quick to prepare but is not meant to be eaten that way. In Italy, two hours are set aside for the mid-day meal. Stores, shops, and factories shut down for this, the main meal of the day.

Although not practical at mid-day in our culture, this same leisurely attitude can prevail at the evening meal. Don't try to squeeze in a menu like the one described above before the theater or a game.

Make the food the evening's entertainment. Savor each bite, sit back and bask, for at least a few hours, in la dolce vita.

TOMATO AND CREAM SAUCE
6 servings

1 lb. butter
3 tbsp. finely chopped yellow onion
3 tbsp. finely chopped carrot
3 tbsp. finely chopped celery
2 1/2 cups canned Italian tomatoes, with their juice
2 tsp. salt, more if necessary
1 tsp. granulated sugar
1 cup heavy cream

Put all the ingredients except the heavy cream in a saucepan and cook at the merest simmer for 1 hour, uncovered. Stir from time to time with a wooden spoon.

Pure the contents of the pan through a food mill (you can prepare the sauce up to this point ahead of time, and refrigerate it for a few days) or freeze it into a saucepan and bring to a simmer, stirring with a wooden spoon. Add the heavy cream and stir-cook for 1 minute more. Taste and correct for salt. Use immediately.

FRITTATA CIPOLLE
(Open-faced Onion Omelet)
2 servings

2 medium onions, chopped (1 cup)
1 tbsp. cooking oil
4 eggs
2 tbsp. milk
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
Dash pepper
1 tsp. cooking oil

Cook onions in the 1 tablespoon hot oil until brown, about 15 to 20 minutes. Blend eggs, milk, cheese and pepper. Heat remaining 1 teaspoon oil in an 8-inch omelet pan. Pour in the egg mixture and cook over low heat until eggs are set and golden on the bottom (surface should still be moist). Sprinkle with browned onions, place under broiler and cook until eggs are thoroughly set on top, about 2 minutes. Slide omelet onto serving plate and cut into wedges.

Plum sauce complements spare ribs

As the Michigan plum crop hits its peak, the state Department of Agriculture releases a plum sauce recipe recommended for spare ribs or roast loin of pork.

Michigan's pruned plum production ranks fourth highest in the nation. Two-thirds of the crop goes to processors for making jams, jellies, preserves and other products. The remainder are home preserved, used in cakes, tarts, pies, salads or out-of-hand eating.

PLUM SAUCE
1 1/2 pounds fresh plums, halved and pits removed
1 cup sugar
1/2 cup horseradish
1/4 cup chopped onion
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 tsp. salt

Combine all ingredients, bring to boil and simmer until plums are tender. Put in blender and puree (half the mixture at a time). Reheat. Makes two cups.

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