

A Week in Italy

Una Settimana in Italia

*A basic guide to Italian-style cooking
including menus for seven delicious meals*



By Frank Cassara

A Week in Italy

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Printed in the United States of America

Introduction

It amazes me when I think about how our present-day culture has raised the interest in cooking to such giant proportions. Chefs have become celebrities; some have almost reached the status of kitchen athletes. Truly, cooking is an art, and I admire the skills and creativity of these folks, but really, they are doing something that our mothers and grandmothers did every day!

These women worked all day every day preparing three wholesome, nutritious meals for finicky children (and husbands)—and what thanks and appreciation did they get? Maybe a card and flowers on Mothers Day and their birthday? Certainly they were not lionized on TV for being masters of their kitchens.

In my experience, women (and not just those of Italian background) had to work so hard at cooking that it became a drudgery. I have heard it said by some older women that one of the perks of getting old is that they don't have to cook anymore! But cooking can be fun. It can be a creative and artistic activity.

This little manual is therefore dedicated to my mother and grandmother (*nonna*) who instilled in me an appreciation not only for enjoying good food but also for enjoying the creation of it. They wanted to make enjoyable meals so that their family would stay healthy and strong. Meal time was also a time for fostering family unity.

I cannot say, however, that I learned to cook on my mother's knee. The truth is, I was a very finicky eater as a young child, so my mother had to work extra hard at making meals

that I would eat. As I got older, however, through constant encouragement from both my parents, I developed a better appetite. As I got older still, I developed an even greater appreciation for my Italian background. And now I have developed a passion for cooking in the style of my heritage.

The regional Italian cuisine that my parents were brought up with provided them with a great many delicious choices. But being an Italian-American, I can look at the whole of the Italian peninsula and the adjoining islands and appreciate the wonderful variety of cuisine that encompasses all the regions of Italy—not just those dishes and styles of cooking that are typical of Naples (my mother) and Sicily (my father). While visiting Italy (Venice, Florence, Rome, Bari, Sorrento) and touring Sicily, I was able to taste these flavors firsthand. It was a thrill to enjoy the signature Sicilian dish *Pasta con le Sarde* on the waterfront of the little fishing town where my father grew up.

There really is no one style of “Italian” cooking; rather there are regional styles that use the ingredients that are most easily found in that part of the country each season. One region’s cooking is not better than another, just different. This manual includes dishes from all these areas without regard to regional snobbery.

What we call “Northern” cuisine is a misnomer because there are several regions in the north of the country that have different traditional styles and dishes. I have heard it said that “Northern” cuisine uses white sauces and “Southern” uses red sauces. Not only is this oversimplification, it is inaccurate. There are red sauce dishes in the North and white sauce dishes in the South. Currently this so-called “Northern” cuisine is considered more fashionable and chic, while the

“Southern” cuisine is considered less “gourmet” and has fallen somewhat out of favor with American “foodies.”

Part of the reason for the attitude is the saturation of “Italian” restaurants from the 1950s through the 1980s. Many of these places made the same dishes and not even all that well. I would venture to say that every American has had “spaghetti and meatballs” at least once in their lives. In Italy, meatballs (*polpetti*) are not served over the pasta but rather in a separate dish with the cooking sauce spooned over them. What’s worse is that I have almost never been in a U.S. restaurant that can make a dish of pasta without overcooking it. Thus “Southern” cuisine, which also encompasses several regions, has not been well represented in America of late.

This little manual is certainly not a “be all end all” for Italian cooking. The format is intended to help neophytes learn some of the basics. I have put together menus for an entire week. These menus are merely suggestions to help new chefs learn how an Italian meal is prepared. A full Italian meal has four courses: antipasti, primi, secondi, and dolci. But don’t think that modern Italians eat four courses every day at home!

Although each menu is named for a day of the week, it is solely for suggestion purposes. Only the fish meal on Friday is a throwback to previous custom. Traditionally, the midday meal is the larger meal; Italians would then have a lighter supper. In this country, because of the way we work, Italian-Americans would have a meal like this only on Sunday or holidays when the whole family and extended family got together. Many nights we would have just pasta with a meat sauce or just fish with vegetables and a starch (potatoes or rice)—or sometimes, typically American, steak, potatoes, and vegetables.

This manual will give new chefs an idea how to pair dishes for first and second courses. It is much more interesting to have meals served in courses, as in a restaurant. And it is not that difficult to do at home for two to four people.

I have selected dishes that are relatively easy to prepare. Always keep in mind that these recipes are only guidelines. As you get more experience, modify them to your taste. Use different herbs, spices, sauces, etc.

I hope you enjoy the recipes and have fun putting the meals together.

Why do I enjoy Italian-style cooking ?

To me, preparing a meal is a form of self-expression and self-indulgence. I love to cook because I get to savor the ingredients much longer than those who only sit down to eat the meal.

The ingredients used in Italian cooking look and smell wonderful before they are cooked. The purple of an eggplant, the red of a tomato, the fragrance of fresh basil are exciting sensory experiences before you even begin! But when you start to sauté onions in olive oil or add the tomatoes, you are treated to new fragrances all through the process. Heavenly!

The last experience, of course, is tasting your creation and watching the faces of those you have served and seeing their pleasure. That's what kept Mama and Nonna going every day!

Buon Apetito!

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Ingredients

There are certain ingredients typical of all regions of Italy that any would-be Italian chef needs to keep on hand. There are other ingredients that are needed to cook in the style of certain regions: these may be bought as needed. Clearly, the better the ingredients are, the better the results will be. So, whenever possible, buy ingredients imported from Italy.

Ingredients to Keep on Hand

- ✦ *Canned tomatoes* – plum tomatoes, crushed and diced
- ✦ *Tomato paste*
- ✦ *Sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil*
- ✦ *Crushed red pepper flakes*
- ✦ *Fresh herbs* – basil, oregano, sage, rosemary, parsley, dill, and mint. These are indispensable for real Italian flavor. They can make a good dish into a great dish. And the fragrances while working with them are wonderful. If you can, plant an herb garden in your yard or in the house.
- ✦ *Dried herbs* – The one I use most is oregano. Dill, thyme, and marjoram are also ok dried.
- ✦ *Chicken stock* – I use cubes and reconstitute with water. It takes up less space in your pantry.
- ✦ *Extra virgin imported olive oil* – always have plenty on hand
- ✦ *Garlic*
- ✦ *Onions* – red and white
- ✦ *Olives* – Black and green work very well. You will occasionally want to use Sicilian or Greek olives.
- ✦ *Capers*

Basics

Sauce

There are two words that Italians use for what we call “sauce.” The words *Salsa* and *Sugo* seem to be used interchangeably. An interesting note is that in my own family in New York, Neapolitans and Sicilians, some families referred to this item as tomato *sauce* while other families referred to it as *gravy*. So, just as the Italians have two words for the same thing, so do we Italian-Americans.

The Southern-style cooking that we have all been exposed to in this country usually uses a red tomato sauce. This basic sauce is also used in many Northern-style dishes. After reading dozens of Italian cookbooks, I concluded that there is no one best tomato sauce recipe because ... you guessed it: they are all good. Good, but they differ in ingredients. The only constant is olive oil and tomatoes. I will offer only one sauce recipe here: the one my mother and grandmother used.

These basic sauces were also referred to in my family as *Salsa di Marinara*. The word *mare* means “sea.” Although there is no fish or seafood in the sauce, it can be called “of the sea” because there is no meat in it. A meat sauce is made simply by browning sausage or chopped beef in the olive oil before adding the tomatoes.

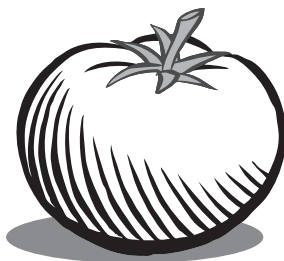
As a child, I loved the fragrance of the garlic and onions sautéing. When the tomato was added, my mouth would start to water. My mom made this sauce two to three times a week, and the Sunday afternoon meal would usually include sausage, meatballs, or chopped meat.

I suggest that you make as much of this sauce as you can on a weekend. Keep some on hand in the fridge (about one week) and freeze the rest in meal-sized portions that you can use over six months (remember to date the containers).

When I lived in Brooklyn, New York, there was a woman next door who had come directly from Italy—Calabria, I think. Every fall, she and her family would buy fresh plum tomatoes, cook the tomatoes, then run them through a food mill by hand to remove the skins and seeds. The family would then use mason jars to bottle the tomatoes until needed. What a mess! Their entire driveway was filled with red skins, seeds and juice. The woman would hose the driveway down, but then the mess all ended up in the street in front of our house.

I use canned tomatoes. You should too.

The sauce recipe here is a concentrated mix of tomatoes and tomato paste. Tomato paste (*estratto*) is nothing more than a thick, rich reduction of tomatoes made using the sun. In Sicily, they dry the tomatoes on a wooden board, stirring them over several days. You can do a similar thing, drying the tomatoes in your oven. But why? Just open a can and ... *ecco!* (there it is!)



Basic Tomato Sauce

Salsa di Pomodoro

Makes about 4 cups

- ♦ 2–3 large cans of whole tomatoes and their juice
- ♦ 1–2 cans of tomato paste
- ♦ 1 large onion, chopped
- ♦ 4–5 cloves garlic, peeled, either whole or sliced very thin
- ♦ ½ cup of chopped fresh basil leaves, plus 6–10 whole leaves
- ♦ Salt/black pepper to taste
- ♦ ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- ♦ ½ cup dry red wine (*optional*)

Many recipes suggest a pinch of sugar or finely chopped carrot to cut the tartness of the tomato. It's up to you. We never did.

1. In a large sauce pot, cover the bottom with a thin layer of olive oil. Heat over medium-high heat until just before smoking.
2. Add the onions and sauté until they are translucent and soft.
3. Add the garlic and sauté for a minute. **Don't burn it.**
4. Add wine if you are using it.
5. Add the tomatoes and stir.
6. Stir in the tomato paste.
7. Add the basil leaves and stir.
8. Simmer for 30 minutes or more to the desired thickness. If it gets too thick, turn the heat down and add some water.
9. Serve or store.

Jovedi (Thursday)

I have always liked Thursday because it was the day before Friday, which was the day before Saturday. Fridays were usually a more relaxed day at school and later on at work. Generally there are better TV shows on Thursday night. We don't start to watch TV until 9 p.m. as we like to read and do paperwork after dinner.

In other words, this is my night to *fare il ponte*. Literally, this means “to make the bridge”; figuratively it means “to bridge the gap” between the workweek and the weekend. This, I guess, is equivalent to the American expression of calling Wednesday “hump day” because once it's over, you are over the “hump” of the middle of the week. I reserve this feeling for Thursday.

This might be a night when you want to try something a little more complex. This pasta dish is a classic from the area near Rome. The second course is one of my favorite ways to prepare pork because it adds many interesting flavors and fragrances and also keeps the meat tender and juicy.

Per Primi

Bucatini with Bacon, Tomato in the Style of Amatrice *Bucatini al'Amatriciana*

Serves 4

This dish is named for the small town of *Amatrice* which is about an hour east of Rome. As I consider Rome to be the dividing line between North and South in Italy, this is an example of the use of a red sauce in a “Northern” pasta dish.


I know that Rome considers itself “Northern” because of a funny experience I had in a restaurant in a Roman residential neighborhood (as opposed to a tourist area).


My wife and I had wandered into this restaurant at about 6:30 p.m. We were hungry after walking around Rome all day. The restaurant, of course, was empty as this was not a tourist section and the locals come in much later. So the staff knew right away that we were *touristi Americani*.

We were seated, and the waiter approached us and greeted us in English. We had a very nice meal as we watched the staff running around preparing for the real customers. After dinner, I requested a *cannoli* for desert. The waiter stopped writing on his pad, looked up at me, and stared as though I had just requested a dog turd. After a couple of uncomfortable seconds, he looked down his nose and simply said, “That’s Southern,” as though I were asking for something from another planet. Moral of the story: If you travel in Italy, try to educate yourself as much as possible about the food in various regions.

Another taboo in many parts of Italy is the use of grated cheese with fish or seafood. A friend of mine who was visiting Rome was having *spaghetti con vongole*, spaghetti and clam sauce. He asked a waiter walking by if he could have grated cheese. The waiter saw what he was eating, threw up his hands, muttered something under his breath, and simply said “No!” as he continued to walk away. My father grew up in Sicily and he would always use cheese on clam sauce. Go figure! I never use grated cheese in Italy unless it is offered.

Anyway, back to cooking ...

- ✦ About 4 Tbsp olive oil
- ✦ 12–14 ounces Pancetta or quality American bacon
- ✦ 1 red onion, sliced thin into half-moon sections
- ✦ 2–4 garlic cloves, sliced thin (Try the razor technique I mentioned earlier.)
- ✦ 2 cups of your pre-made basic tomato sauce
- ✦ 1–2 tsp crushed red pepper (Adjust to taste and tolerance for spicy food.)
- ✦ 1 pound Bucatini or Perciatelle 
- ✦ Grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- ✦ 6–7 whole basil leaves, plus 4–8 more for garnish

 *Tip:* Bucatini and Perciatelle are very thick spaghetti with a hollow through them. They are not always available, but ask your grocer to order them. They cook up firm and are the traditional pasta for this sauce.

1. Start the water boiling and add 2 tablespoons of salt.
2. In a 10–12 inch sauté pan, heat the oil and bacon until bacon has rendered its fat. Add the onion and garlic, and cook until the onion is translucent.
3. If there is excess fat, drain it. Add the tomato sauce, crushed red pepper, and basil leaves. Turn up the heat and bring to a boil. Then lower the heat and simmer for 6–7 minutes.
4. Add the pasta to the water and cook for about a minute less than the package calls for. Be sure it is firm. Drain.
5. Either pour the pasta into the sauce pan or the sauce into the pasta pan. Toss well so the pasta is evenly coated.
6. Ladle the mixture into four heated bowls, sprinkle grated pecorino, add basil leaves, and serve.