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HOMESTYLE

Secrets of Risotto alla Milanese

Italy's Clara Raimondi shares her culinary passion and expertise to help you create this classic dish in your own kitchen.

By Susan Van Allen

It's a chilly gray morning in Milan, but the moment teacher/chef Clara Raimondi opens her apartment door, my world warms up. There's Clara's welcoming smile and one of life's most comforting aromas: meat broth cooking. Thus, the lesson begins:

"That broth is one of the secrets of risotto," Clara says, "I started making it at seven this morning."

This friendly, easy-going, yet precise manner is the signature style of Cook in Milano, Clara's company that offers cooking classes and wine seminars in her gracious home near Milan's city center. Clara is a classic Milanese woman, exuding elegance even in a simple chef's jacket and slacks. Her English is perfect, which she credits to spending a year in New York as a high school exchange student. Now she's in her 40s, married and the mother of two teenage boys, happy to be sharing her culinary passions and expertise with students from all over the world, who are either visiting or living in her native city.

The class seamlessly blends her chic business-like manner with deeply rooted family traditions. "It all started with my nonna," she says, pointing out her kitchen window to a terrace nearby, where nonna lived. "She was a great cook, and I loved spending time with her in the kitchen." Though a variety of classes are offered, I've come to learn Milanese specialties—specifically the secrets of one of my favorite Italian dishes: Risotto alla Milanese.

"There are three essential rules to make a great risotto," Clara begins: "First is the meat broth, which must be made that morning or the day before. The second is the marrow, which you scoop from



one of the shins, and melt with the butter to start the risotto process. And finally, you must use carnaroli rice.”

She explains how carnaroli has a higher starch content than other rices, so it can absorb more liquid, and its long grains remain separate when cooked, in contrast to such rice varieties as those used for sushi, which stick together.

Clara’s hands-on class is delightful, with all of us assigned different tasks which she oversees, pausing for coffee and prosecco breaks as we create a northern Italian meal. Along with the risotto, appetizers, and dessert, we make another Milanese classic—ossibuchi (braised veal shanks), which we sauce with gremolada, a savory anchovy/parsley/lemon mixture.

“The risotto is the very last thing you make,” Clara tells us. “When I have a dinner party, there are prosecco and appetizers in the kitchen so guests can join me as I cook, and then we serve immediately.”

It’s a joy to have Clara standing beside us at the stove, as we take turns stirring the rice and adding the broth. Clara’s instructions for this stage are to “make the wave”—or as the Italians would say, risotto all’onda. In other words, keep stirring and adding liquid so the rice keeps flowing, never drying out or sticking to the pan as it cooks.

Halfway through we add saffron powder, and a distinctive yellow color emerges. The story goes that this Milanese touch was inspired by a 16th century Belgian master glazer who was working on the stained glass windows of the Duomo. He became famous for using saffron to create golden colors. When his daughter was married in 1574, as a joke, his apprentices made a dish of rice colored with saffron for the celebration. Apparently it was a hit with the wedding guests, and Milanese have loved it ever since.

Our final risotto step is mantecatura—swirling in butter and cheese after the risotto has been removed from the heat. It feels as though we’re making magic. We move the class to Clara’s dining table, beautifully set with linens embroidered by her mother. She pours a Barolo wine, and we toast, clinking glasses, over fragrant plates of ossibuchi resting on golden risotto alla Milanese. There’s a silence as we take our first bites... then sighs of pleasure. Together we’ve created a classic, delicious lunch...alla Milanese.

Clara has generously shared her recipes for Milanese specialties with us, so you can be in on the secrets too. And if you’re in Milan, find her cooking classes: www.cookinmilano.com.

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Risotto alla Milanese

- 4 cups meat broth
- 6 tablespoons butter, divided
- 2 ounces veal marrow, scooped out from the hole in the veal shank
- 2 ounces onion, finely minced
- 10½ ounces Superfino Carnaroli or Arborio rice
- 2 ounces dry white wine
- 1 ounce saffron powder
- Salt, to taste
- 2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese

Boil the broth in a small pan, straining it before you use it.

In a large saucepan melt 2 tablespoons of butter and the veal marrow over medium heat—don’t let it brown. Stir in the onion and cook until it’s very soft but not browned.

Stir in the rice and cook, coating the rice, for a couple of minutes. Add the white wine, stirring constantly, until the wine has evaporated. Check the time: at this point there will be no more than 15 minutes of cooking.

Add one cup of broth at a time, allowing the rice to absorb each cup before adding more. The rice is ready for the next cup to be added when it is not dried out, but still liquidly enough to make a wave in the pan.

After 10 minutes stir in the saffron, to produce a lovely yellow color, and a pinch of salt. Stop adding the broth. After 5 minutes, test the rice for doneness, it should be firm, but not cooked through.

Turn off the heat and stir in the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter and the cheese, swirling it in with the rice. Serve immediately, preferably in a bowl topped with veal shanks and grated Parmesan on the side.

Makes 4 servings.

• Chef’s note: Acquarello makes the best carnaroli rice, that’s been enriched and aged, so it cooks perfectly in 18 minutes. It can be found in Italian specialty shops or ordered online.

Ossibuchi alla Milanese

- 2 cups meat broth
- 5 tablespoons butter
- 2 ounces onion, finely chopped
- 4 veal shanks, ½-inch thick
- 2 ounces all-purpose flour
- Salt and black pepper to taste

For Gremolada:

- 1 anchovy fillet, finely chopped
- 1 ounce fresh parsley, finely chopped
- Zest of ½ lemon

Heat the broth in a small pan. In a skillet large enough to hold all the veal shanks in a single layer, melt the butter over medium heat, then stir in the onion, cooking until the onion is very soft but not browned.

Coat the veal with flour and add them to the pan. Cook the shanks gently on both sides until they are lightly browned. Add the broth, the salt and pepper to the pan.

Cover the pan and cook over medium heat for half an hour, then turn the veal and cook for an additional half hour. If necessary, add more broth.

While the shins are cooking, make the gremolada by mixing together the anchovy, parsley, and lemon zest in a bowl.

The veal will be dark brown when done. Remove from the pan and set aside, covered. Add the gremolada to the pan where the veal shins cooked and stir together with the juices. Pour the sauce over the meat.

The ossibuchi can rest, covered, as the risotto cooks. Serve over Risotto alla Milanese.

Makes 4 servings.

Meat Broth For Risotto and Ossibuchi

- 9 cups water
- 1 carrot, not peeled
- 1 yellow onion, skin left on
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 beef bone
- 1 chicken leg
- ¼ pound beef (a small cut, leaving the bone on)
- 3 whole grains of black pepper
- 1 tablespoon of salt

In a large stockpot, add all the ingredients to the cold water. Cook at a low boil, covered, for 3 to 4 hours. Have a sieve handy so when you use the broth for recipes, you can ladle out the liquid through the sieve, keeping the bone, vegetables and meats in the sieve.

Makes about 8 cups of broth.