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Tastes of Bologna:

The Real Thing

by Susan Van Allen

I am immersed in a barrage of enticing smells: nose-tingling parmigiano, salt-cured salami, and the comforting scent of ragu—the beloved sauce that makes Bologna a top destination for foodies. Here in the city's historic center, I've entered Tamburini, a temple of deliciousness that's been around and family run since 1932. I was lured in by window displays of humongous hanging prosciutto, rounds of mortadella (the Grandpapa of America's baloney), and a cafeteria counter where I spotted local school kids and businessmen lining up.

I grab a plastic tray and follow along to order what everybody else is having: "Tortellini, per favore"—a heaping plate of cap-shaped, meat-filled pasta, delicately sauced. With a tumbler of vino rosso, I score a seat at a wooden table and lean in for a warm, fragrant inhale. Certainly I won't finish all this pasta, I'm thinking. After one bite that notion disappears. For the natives surrounding me, it's just an ordinary lunch day. For me, it's a revelation. Particularly the sauce.

I had always taken pride in my Pasta Bolognese made from a decades-old Marcella Hazan recipe that has impressed many guests. But now I'm humbled by what the locals simply call ragu. This is the real thing: simple, richly flavored, and all about the meat.

"It's not a red sauce; real Bolognese is brown!" says Lucia, my cooking teacher at the Culinary Institute of Bologna where I signed up for a Pasta Making morning to discover the secrets of Bolognese. As I hover around the stove with an American couple, I watch Lucia stir in just two tablespoons

LET'S EAT!

of tomato into the big pot, equivalent to a whisper of vermouth in a fine martini. This is how ragu has been made in her family for generations. The Italian-American version we call Bolognese has evolved into a "heavier on the tomato" sauce.

The ragu simmers as we launch into the delightful process of rolling pasta dough with a giant wooden mattarello. Lucia expertly oversees our work, directing us to roll with our hands in the middle, applying just the right pressure and turns, till the dough becomes thin enough to slice into light strands of tagliatelle.

It's a bit of a workout, but such fun that the time slips by, and when we're done, we feel we've earned lunch. The pasta cooks in a few minutes, we stir in the fragrant ragu that's been cooking on the stove for hours, fill our bowls, and sigh as we take our first tastes of the wonderful real thing.

For more information, visit www.cookingclassesinbologna.com.

Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*; *Letters from Italy: Confessions, Adventures, and Advice*; *50 Places in Rome, Florence, and Venice Every Woman Should Go*, and the *Golden Days in Italy* blog. She travels frequently to Italy, the native land of her grandparents, and lives in Los Angeles. susanvanallen.com.

Veal Scallopini in Balsamic Sauce

- 1 small onion
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 4 thin slices veal
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 4 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Mince the onion until it is almost a paste. In a pan that can contain all the veal slices, melt half the butter, add the onion, and sauté over low heat. Put flour on a plate and dredge the veal slices through it until they are coated on both sides. Add the veal to the pan with the butter and onion, and cook, turning, for no more than 5 minutes. Add the balsamic vinegar to the pan and cook until the liquid has evaporated, about 5 minutes. Transfer the scallopini to a platter. Whisk the remaining butter into the pan, to make a sauce. Strain the sauce through a sieve as you pour it over the platter of scallopini. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Ragù

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2½ tablespoons butter

- 2 tablespoons minced onion
- 1 tablespoon minced carrot
- 1 tablespoon minced celery
- ⅓ cup minced pancetta or non-smoked pork belly
- ¾ pound ground beef (sirloin is best, but cheaper cuts, such as from the shoulder, are okay)
- ½ cup dry white wine (optional)
- 2 heaping tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 cups meat stock, divided
- 1 chicken or rabbit liver, minced (optional)

Put the olive oil and butter into a large saucepan over medium-low heat. When the butter has melted, add the onion, carrot, and celery. After 1 minute add the pancetta or pork belly. The vegetables and fat should caramelize, not burn; it should take about 10 minutes. Then add the ground beef, stirring and cooking for about 10 minutes.

When the liquid from the meat has evaporated, stir in the wine (if using) until it has evaporated. Stir the tomato paste into 1 cup of meat stock. Add the mixture to the pot and stir (the color will be brown, not red). Partially cover the pot and simmer the sauce. When the sauce dries, add the remaining cup of stock and continue to simmer for at least an hour.

If using the liver, add it toward the end of the cooking time, for 30 minutes.

This ragu is traditionally served with handmade tagliatelle, but any good quality pasta is okay. This recipe makes enough ragu for one pound of pasta.

Makes 4 servings.

Friggione

- 4 medium tomatoes
- 2 cups white onion, peeled and thinly sliced (about 2 medium onions)
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Place the fresh tomatoes in boiling water for about 5 minutes. Remove them from the pot with a strainer and allow them to cool, then peel and discard the skins. Cut the tomatoes into quarters.

Pour the olive oil into a large saucepan, add the onion and tomatoes. Cover and cook over medium-low heat for about 45 minutes. When the juice from the tomatoes and onions has evaporated, add the salt and pepper and serve.

Variation: You can add two cups of quartered potatoes, sliced red and green peppers, and/or sausage to the tomato-onion mixture, either in combination or just one or two of the extra ingredients.

Makes 4 servings.



Simply Roman:

The Joy-A Of Cooking

by *Susan Van Allen*

W

e're going to make this dinner in an hour!" my cooking teacher, Gioia Acon, tells me as we tie on aprons in her Roman kitchen. Her name (pronounced JOY-a), suits her perfectly. Every moment I'm by this lovely signora's side, I'm swept up by her happy spirit. She embodies the pleasure-loving character that Eternal City natives have been known for every since the days of the Empire.

Gioia was born in Rome, then, as her father was a diplomat, lived in the United States during her high school and university days. She speaks perfect English, accented with Roman entusiasmo. Her classes delightfully blend her vast knowledge of Italian cuisine, practical tips, and a passion for her beloved city.

"Did you see the sunset tonight?" she asks moments after I'd arrived. I had. It was one of those gasp-inspiring, rosy-gold-tinged-clouds-scenes, with sparrows circling the sky in thick, mesmerizing formation. "I've lived here most of my life, and that still amazes me," Gioia says. We sigh together over our love for Bella Roma—Gioia thrilled that I "get it," me thrilled that I'm with someone to share it with.

Gioia's home is north of the historic center, off the tourist track, near the hip and happening Ponte Milvio neighborhood that over the past 10 years has become packed with lively restaurants and bars, beloved by locals. The centerpiece of the area is the majestic arched Ponte Milvio Bridge, built in the 2nd century. This is where soon-to-be Emperor Constantine won a famous battle in 312AD, and had a vision that converted him, and



VEAL SALTIMBOCCA
garnished with sage

thus the Romans, to Christianity. Gioia loves Ponte Milvio's huge daily market, where she's gathered the best ingredients to make our traditional Roman dinner.

It begins with Rigatoni all'Amatriciana—pasta with pancetta, onions, tomatoes and pecorino. Amatriciana's origins go back to a sauce called Gricia, created by shepherds living in the hills surrounding Rome. They'd build a fire and mix sheep's cheese (pecorino), onion, and guanciale (cured pig's cheek) with their pasta. Tomato was added to the recipe in the early eighteenth century by the people of Amatrice, which was then part of the nearby Abruzzo region. When borders changed in the early twentieth century, Amatrice became part of Lazio, and today Romans claim all'Amatriciana to be one of their most beloved specialties. Gioia, like many Romans these days, prefers to use pancetta (that comes from the belly of the pig), rather than guanciale, (from the cheek), as it's less fatty. I'm grateful, as pancetta is so much easier to find in stores back home.

Veal Saltimbocca (that translates to jump-in-the-mouth) is quickly prepared next. Fabulous smells of sage and bubbling tomato sauce fill the kitchen as we sip white wine. It's a surprise to see her pull out a pre-prepared crust for her ricotta tart dessert. "Why not? It's so much easier!" she says, as we mix fresh ricotta together with sugar and chocolate bits for the filling and pop it into the oven.

I love her easygoing style—passion meets practicality. Though for holidays and in other classes she'll spend hours making specialties, such as lasagna and homemade pasta, the focus of this fun evening session is how simple and quick it is to make an authentic Roman meal.

As promised, we're seated at the table in an hour. Had it been warmer, we'd be outside on Gioia's terrace—a lovely spot with pots of ficus, palms, and herbs which overlooks the greenery of the neighborhood. Just like a woman anywhere in the world—Roman or not—Gioia apologizes for the weather. But I love settling into her cozy kitchen. We clink our glasses, celebrating the bold richness of Rome, as we joyously dig in to its delicious flavors.

To experience a meal like this, or something similar, see Gioia of Cooking on Facebook.

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Saltimbocca alla Romana

- 1 cup flour
- 1 pound veal, sliced thinly and pounded
- ½ pound of prosciutto crudo, thinly sliced
- 1 bunch fresh sage leaves
- Toothpicks
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup of white wine
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Sage leaves for garnish

Lightly flour the veal and cut into small rectangles, about 4 inches long, 2 inches wide. Add a slice of prosciutto and a large sage leaf on top of each piece of veal and fasten to the meat with a toothpick.

In a large frying pan, add the butter and olive oil and when the butter starts to lightly sizzle, add the veal and cook on medium heat. Add the white wine. When one side is golden-browned, flip over and cook the other side lightly. Allow about 3 minutes per side. Flip back and serve with the prosciutto and sage side up. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 4 servings.

Rigatoni all'Amatriciana

- 1 medium onion
- 4 ounces of smoked pancetta
- 1 pint of fresh, sweet cherry tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 cup grated pecorino cheese
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 pound rigatoni

Thinly slice the onions. Cut the smoked pancetta into cubes. Dice the cherry tomatoes.

Coat a large frying pan with the extra virgin olive oil, add the thinly sliced onions and the pancetta cubes and sauté lightly until onions are cooked and pancetta is browned. Add the diced cherry tomatoes and simmer all together for about 10 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Grate ¾ cup of the pecorino into the sauce and leave the rest to sprinkle over the pasta.

Boil the water, salt it, and add the pasta. At about half cooking time, take a ladle of pasta water and add to sauce. Cook pasta according to time stated on the package. Drain the pasta and add it to the sauce. Add salt and pepper to taste. Grate additional fresh pecorino cheese over each serving, as desired.

Makes 4 servings.

Fresh Ricotta Tart

- 2 cups fresh ricotta
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg, beaten
- ½ cup chocolate chips
- 1 prepared pie crust (to cover the bottom only of an 8- to 9-inch pan)

Preheat oven to 370°F.

In a bowl, mix the ricotta with the sugar, blending well with the back of a fork until smooth. Add the beaten egg and mix until creamy and smooth. Stir in the chocolate chips.

Line a pie pan with the pie crust. Spoon and spread the mixture evenly on top of the crust. Bake about 30 minutes.

Makes 6 servings.