



Isabel cooking with daughter, Shauna

Benvenuto alle Ricette della Famiglia!

Welcome to my how-to recipes. They're a part of my ongoing conversation with my daughters, in the family recipe book I'm writing for them. You may want to go to Chapter 4, 9 and 18 in NONNO'S MONKEY, to read how the roots of the family woman reach back and back to the soul of time. When I'm cooking with Erica and Shauna, I always tell the family stories, just as my Nonna did with me. If you're looking for quick and easy ... not. This cooking is a process, like life, which we all know, is not easy. "Only da-best-a!" comes the voice of Nonna. Don't be shy. Post your own and tell us a story!

~ One ~

*Nonna's Minestrone (From Chapter 18 in
Nonno's Monkey)*

Serves about 8

Our family ate this six days a week. If there was left over boiled beef or poultry, it was added to the Minestrone, but mostly, it was vegetarian except for the salt pork. On Sunday, we'd have meat, veal, or Nonna would kill a chicken. When I realized one Sunday, that my pet was the Chicken Cacciatora - I left and threw-up outside. From that point on, I'd always inquire, "Nonna is this my Sickie? (Sickie being the name I gave to the little White Leghorn Hens because their combs looked so pale) and she'd always answer, "No, eza notta you Sickie, eza you Zia's pullet." So, as a result of that inquisition, my feathered pets seemed assured a long life. If it was the unavoidable, because everything had to have a purpose in those days, nobody would answer the question and their mouths looked like somebody trussed them up with needle and thread, except for Mamma, who would holler something like, "Oh, get over it! We have to eat! It's a chicken, not a holy saint!" On that day, I was not required to eat the chicken "whatever," but I did have to sit at the table and not throw any mood, or dash out and up-chuck.

I preferred vegetarian minestrone. Comes now, the recipe.

Everything as fresh as you can get:

1 package frozen lima beans (Nonna used Shelly Beans. They're red speckled legumes that have the taste of limas.)

2 peeled and cut tomatoes

3T olive oil

1 pkg. carrots (small baby)
2 - 4 cubes chicken bullion, or beef for heartier flavor
2 full cups trimmed and cut fresh green beans
2 ears fresh corn, cut from the cob
1 can dark red kidney beans
1 can cannelloni beans
1 tablespoon sugar
2 tablespoons thyme
1 tablespoon oregano
White wine – drink some, pour some
1 cup long cooking rice
2 potatoes, cut into halves - you have to smash them against the pot in the last hour of cooking, if you dice the potatoes it's a detailed seek and smash operation.

salt to taste
white pepper
1 whole bunch of fresh parsley
1 cube salt pork
3-5 cloves garlic
2 packages Spanish saffron
2 C grated Parmesan (I usually go to Costco and buy Reggiano Parmesan, as the taste is superior.)

In a blender or by hand:

Pound garlic by placing it on a cutting board, cover with the flat part of a chef's knife, - and smack it with your fist. BadaBOOM! No garlic press needed. Chop the salt pork, add pounded garlic and chop the parsley with woody central stems cut off. Put everything together, and should all come together in a paste. Place paste into the soup kettle with a generous shot of Olive Oil. Saute a bit. Add about 6 to 9 cups water, all the spices and 2 cups white wine to start. This zuppa is very filling, so depending on how many you're cooking for, add more water and wine. I use junk white that is not expensive. Add bullion, peeled, cubed potatoes, Uncle Ben's LONG cooking rice, never instant, and carrots. Very slowly, because soup should only smile at you, never laugh, cook for about two and a half hours.

Momma's Rule: Add water and wine as needed because the rice will soak up liquid. Sip wine the entire time as a happy cook is a successful cook. Make

sure your guests are drinking too, as happy guests don't taste your mistakes. This soup must NEVER be overcooked.

About 40 minutes away from serving, rinse and drain all the beans and add. About a half hour away from serving, add the tomatoes, the fresh, cut green beans and 2 C grated Reggiano or cheap grated Parmesan. Smash the potatoes against the side of the kettle. I keep cheap Parmesan frozen and it's fine to use in the soup when it's smiling. At the very last minute, add 2 packs saffron. Your minestrone will turn golden yellow. I buy Spanish saffron at Cost Plus or some import place. Taste - correct seasoning.

The secret is to have fresh things. Serve with fresh crusty bread. Dip bread into olive oil, rather than buttering, although Northern Italians use butter, not the oil. That is more of a southern Italian or American restaurant habits. If you like, a thin slice can also be placed at the bottom of each bowl. It's a way to recycle stale bread and increase the volume of the soup for unexpected guests or requests for seconds when the pot is dangerously low. When ready to eat, ladle generously into soup bowls by the pot on the stove. Then, grate black pepper and fresh Parmesan, or Romano over the top of each bowl. Splash each serving with white wine. The alcohol from all the wine you've used evaporates with heat. However, what you have put into you, evaporates into your veins. Tra la.

End the meal with walnuts, fresh fruit, - traditional: excellent pears and soft cheese like Brie or Italian Fontina. Arsago, Parmesan, Gorgonzola or Romano work, but they are a bit strong. Enjoy! Very low in fat, and mostly vegetarian.

~Two~

Nonna's Holy Risotto

(From Chapter 4 in Nonno's Monkey)

As a child, Northern Italian Risotto was something I put into the book of holy orders. With its creation, the family women began to teach me to cook ... all except Mamma, your grandmother, herself, an excellent cook, who avoided any "woman stuff," because she was an accountant. The preparation would begin the week before with a trip into New Haven, Connecticut to see Ponti, the Italian importer. Only "da best-a" would be Nonna's mantra, as she dressed herself carefully in her fine beige suit, pinned on her Italian cameo, donned a hat, folded white gloves, and tucked money into her little zip purse. It was a whole family affair as we all piled into Uncle De's huge Chevy. Upon entering the store, Nonna assumed the look of a woman who wanted the importer to know she was onto his every move. Then, the selection began - curly, dried black mushrooms, unsalted butter in a brick, if there was any to be had during the War, a huge wedge of the best Parmigiana, creamy Fontina for dessert, maybe Italian sweet vermouth, walnuts in the shell, (Nonno, your great grandfather took delight in cracking them between 3rd and 4th fingers) and the final choice, the holy of holy's: Spanish saffron. Nonna would sniff it like some bloodhound, then, she'd squint at Ponti, and in her perfect Northern Italian, she'd ask its worth. The quiet man, himself a Northern, would only use eyes rolled up to heaven, and hand gestures - two circles made with thumb and forefingers, moved left to right - signifying "perfetto." It was always "perfetto." The day before, Nonna would kill an old hen, or go to Branford and buy one, which was rare. Somebody always had an old biddy to bludgeon in the neighborhood. Then, the men would be sent to buy only the freshest vegetables for the chicken broth. Beginning just after sunrise caffè, the fresh killed chicken would go on the huge yellow wood-burning stove, into the cavernous pot with spring water, the vegetables and all sorts of fresh-cut herbs from Nonna's kitchen garden right out the screen door. The guests began arriving shortly after Mass - which our family mostly didn't attend, except for Nonna, as we were a mixture of Episcopalian or nothing - Nonno. When the butter brick went into the pot, the sacred ritual began.

BROTH: One whole chicken. Add celery, spinach, garlic cloves peeled, large onion, parsnip (op) organic carrots, escarole lettuce (for the iron), scant salt

4 cups Uncle Ben's slow-cooking rice
generous amount of mushrooms
2 packs Spanish Saffron powder
1 cup white wine

2 cups Reggiano Parmesan - any GOOD Parmesan
Chicken bullion
Do not add salt, if you add bullion, as it's very salty

Set chicken broth aside. Remove the chicken, discard skin and save pieces if you're planning to add it later. Refrigerate. In another large kettle, begin to saute the garlic and onion in the brick of butter until golden and translucent. Pour in the rice and stir. Slowly begin to add one cup of chicken broth at a time. Never leave the pot. Continue stirring until the rice is almost cooked. Taste the grains. Just before serving add: mushrooms, chicken (op), one cup white wine (more if the rice is dry), Parmesan, and finally the two packs of Spanish Saffron powder. Wave the smell to your nose. You'll smell its readiness. Ring the dinner bell!

~ Three ~

*Le Patate Rigazze and il Presto Green
Beans*

(From Chapter 9 in Nonno's Monkey)

ספדגפגה חגפגה

One day in 1942, the postman arrived with a newfangled device Mamma had ordered from the Sears and Roebuck Catalog. She hollered out our kitchen window to the attic apartment where my Aunt Mimi lived with crazy Uncle De, Mamma's brother. In all things unimportant, like lightning and thunder storms, Mimi was a big fraidy-cat, but in a true crisis, she had the heart of a lioness. Mamma, who was great at starting things, always got others to finish them, especially if there was trouble. This day, she got Mimi to supply and peel ten potatoes, because "il Presto," the pressure cooker she was now calling the miracle pot, was supposed to get things done instantly. Your Uncle David and I were at the backs of their skirts when they, with Chesterfield Cigarettes

hanging out of the sides of their mouths, filled the pot with potatoes and water, tightened down the lid, added the doflicky pressure gage to the spike on top, and began waltzing around the kitchen puffing and hooting about not waiting for anybody - they were going to eat le patate right now! Il Presto started heating, the doflicky started dancing; Mimi and Mamma were shrieking, and then everything went dead silent. With a sound like a dragon, the doflicky shot up, embedded itself into the ceiling, followed by a geyser of steam coating everything with oozing potato gook. Mamma and Mimi dived under the kitchen table grabbing for our legs, screaming for us to fall down. Then, with the cigarette still dangling, Mimi slowly crawled out from under the table and knocked il Presto off the stove on the floor. She then grabbed David and me by the hair and dragged us out the door to safety. Momma popped out a second later, and all the women in the near vicinity gathered for what they thought was murder and mayhem underscored by murderous squawking. By five, all the family men began arriving home from work. Nonno went into the kitchen, took the top off of il Presto, and came out giving everybody a lick of what remained inside the exploded bomb. Every day for two weeks, crazy Uncle De would stick his head in the kitchen window to see if his sister had pried the doflicky out of the ceiling or cleaned up the ooze. Mamma, not known as a great homemaker, refused, now on principle, and anybody who stuck their heads into that window got a pitcher of water in the face. Her victims included the gas station man announcing a repaired car, the postman, and the priest wanting to know where Nonna was. Years later, I bought a Presto. Shauna put potatoes in it, but forgot the water, and melted it. Then, I in 1997, at Anima, our cabin, I had a whole houseful of traveling women coming, and I wanted to pressure pork for some New Mexico posole. The meat clogged up the doflicky, and history repeated itself, with the doflicky implantation and geyser of liquid pork sprayed onto my just painted snow white ceiling. Outside, I had to use a sledge hammer to open that pot. I did rescue the pork. A third Presto has served me well. Green Beans ala il Presto, always work, but how I chuckle whenever I tighten the lid and hoot, "Mamma! Mimi! Stay outta my pot!"

Two pounds good, fat green beans cut with scissors into 2 inch sections
Hold a handful, using scissors, trim off the little dog tails on each end

Into a pot, or il Presto, put:

2 chicken bullion cubes (1 c white wine) or

2 beef bullion cubes (1 c red wine)

1 can tomatoes (whole) – or fresh vine ripened – placed in hot water first to get off

the skin

1 teaspoon sugar

white pepper with white wine and chicken bullion, or

black ground pepper with red wine and beef bullion

One whole white or yellow onion sliced very thin

A couple of cloves of garlic, chopped medium

Oregano, if you choose beef and red wine

Thyme, if you choose chicken and white wine

Little dash of salt - careful, bullion is salty

When doflicky starts dancing, **off the heat immediately!** Run pot under cold water until steam quits. Nudge the doflicky until it stops speaking to you. Open - perfecto! If doing the beans in a regular saucepan, follow all directions above, and in high altitude New Mexico, about 8 minutes on a full boil covered will do the trick. But, the beans aren't as tender as with il Presto.