

La Cucina Povera

MY SISTER NICKI AND I have been trying to gather our, as yet unwritten, family recipes for the next generation. These aren't the generic Italian-American dishes you find in many restaurants serving the kind of food non-Italians think Italians eat. There's none of that restaurant-style lasagna or "veal parm" in our cookbook with their rubbery layers of mozzarella and loads of garlic. For us there's no simple thing called "spaghetti sauce"; we have dozens of sauces that go with various types of pasta in strict combination. Most of the recipes we include are the ones our grandmother, Nicolina, brought with her to America from Salerno more than a hundred years ago. This is truly *la cucina povera*, the cooking of the poor. She made use of the bits and pieces the landowners her family worked for didn't want. After they took the best of the seafood and cuts of meat, she used the scraps to make sauce and, with what they called weeds, she made salad.

My sister learned to prepare these dishes by spending time in the kitchen with our mother and aunts and by watching and doing. She knows what it means to chop *enough* parsley, add *some* pepperoncini, and to cook something *until it's done*. Instructions like these aren't very helpful unless you've lived with them. Growing up as an Italian-American prince, I was rarely in the kitchen, but I've learned the basics of cooking since then, enough anyway to be able to help Nicki with the recipes.

A large part of the tradition revolves around our religious holidays. For us, like many Italians, Christmas Eve is a bigger celebration than Christmas Day. In the past, meat wasn't permitted on the Eve, so fish became the main part of the meal. Christmas Eve dinner began with various salads, including a standard made with *polpo*, *calamari* and *scungilli*, i.e. octopus, squid and sea snails dressed with olive oil and lemon juice. The next course was pasta *frutti di mare*. If guests asked for cheese to sprinkle on their pasta, we of course had to tell them they couldn't have any. Everyone should know it's a mortal sin to put cheese on seafood. The pasta course was followed by other things that swim and were available at the end of December. A standard was *baccala*, dried cod fish, prepared both as a salad and a stew. It's so dry it resembles a plank of wood when you buy it. Although caught and processed in the North Atlantic, dried

cod has been a Mediterranean staple for centuries where the Norwegian *klippfisk* became the Italian *baccala* and the French *morue*. It must be soaked in cold water for days, changing the water often, to soften it and remove the salt used in the drying process before you can even think about cooking it.

Our non-holiday meals might begin with antipasto which, unlike the French, would include cheese in the first course rather than the last. We'd also serve cured meats like prosciutto and capocollo but which we pronounce in Grandma's dialect, "braschute" and "gabbagoul." And as for our last course, ignoring the tiramisu and ricotta cheese cake you get in Italian restaurants, dessert isn't a big part of our tradition. Typically you'll find espresso, cordials or Asti, perhaps fruit, fresh or dried, possibly in autumn, nuts, or maybe just some biscotti to dip in your coffee. A guest might bring pastry, which would be served at dessert on a special occasion, but that type of thing is more typically eaten when we're just serving coffee, not dinner.

Times change and traditions like these can be forgotten. When I think about my childhood family meals I can still smell fresh-cut lemons and dried oregano, and hear the sizzle of my mother's breaded veal cutlets frying in olive oil. The shades of color in an arugula, romaine, and blood orange salad bring back memories of much more than just something to eat. Dinner was a good time of day for our family. School was out, work was finished, and everyone was together anticipating a meal certain to be festive. The kitchen and dining room were crowded with my mother, aunts, and sisters coming and going, chopping and mixing, constantly adding to the process that would result in dinner. Nicki and I have such wonderful memories of these family meals which meant so much to us – with good food, children laughing, and adults all talking at once – that we want our descendants to have the same enjoyment. We've instilled many of these feelings in our children, who play an important role in our family dinner preparation, and now their children are beginning to take their own place in this ancient cultural tradition. I handed my fourteen-year-old granddaughter, Molly, a sharp knife, a cutting board, and five pounds of sardines and asked her to clean them. After I showed her how to do it, she worked on them until she was left with a neat pile of fillets, without



PHOTO 1: My wife Bridget, sister Nicki, granddaughter Molly, and daughter Kristina preparing a family dinner. Photograph by Robert Iulo © 2013.



PHOTO 2: Nicki and Robert in the kitchen. Photograph by Robert Iulo © 2013.

once saying “Ew” or “Yuck.” I was as proud of that as I was of her straight-A report cards.

Nicki and I have been recording the recipes in as much detail as possible, as well as taking pictures of the finished dishes, so our children and their families can continue our

culinary traditions. It’s sometimes difficult to measure, cook, and photograph, but it’s not all work because my wife Bridget, Nicki, and I regularly invite family and friends to dinner parties to sample the results. These dinners are a lot like the ones we remember, but instead of all the guests living on the same block in Little Italy or even in the same building, they might have to do some traveling to get to our table.

At one of these gatherings Nicki said to me, “It would be terrific if we could come up with Mommy’s *soufritte* recipe.”

I remembered it well and how delicious it was, but I had eaten it for years never knowing what was in it because as a child, if I knew, I wouldn’t have eaten it. *Soufritte*, the pinnacle of *la cucina povera*, is made with cow organs: heart, lung, and liver cooked in a rich thick tomato sauce. I didn’t tell Nicki at the time but I decided to resurrect the recipe. After a few tries I came up with an onion-based sauce made with tomato paste and beef stock very close in flavor to what I remembered. After adding some oregano and bay leaf I got it



PHOTO 3: Six-pound beef heart before it was cleaned. Photograph by Robert Iulo © 2013.

just right. While I was experimenting I used stew beef until I was ready to try it with the organs.

I initially got some bad news and good news. The bad news was from a friend who was a chef. He told me the Department of Agriculture no longer permitted the sale of beef lungs. This was also the good news because I was dreading having to deal with anything so gross. At least a heart was a muscle, so how bad could it be? I went to my local butcher, Schatzie's on Amsterdam Avenue. Schatzie has always been able to supply whatever esoteric cut of meat or poultry I needed, and when I asked him for a beef heart, unfazed he said, "Sure, come back tomorrow."

In the past he'd always ask me how I wanted my purchase made ready for cooking; trim the fat, remove the bone, or whatever else would make it easier for me. When I went to pick up the heart he just gave it to me in a plain brown paper bag without showing it to me first or asking any of his usual questions about my recipe. There were other customers in the store and I got the impression he didn't want them to know what he was selling me. I felt like I was buying contraband, and I saw why when I got my heart home. As I unwrapped it and put the heart on the kitchen counter, Bridget left the room and wouldn't come back. I then understood Schatzie's behavior.

The heart was deep red and larger than a football, a full six-pound mass of muscle and yellowish wax-like globs of fat with large tubular blood vessels running in and out of it. I don't remember ever seeing anything like that in my Mother's kitchen, and it didn't look at all like the dainty bits in the finished dish she served. I didn't know where to start and after calling Nicki, found she didn't either, so I Googled,



PHOTO 4: Jack filling cannoli shells with his mother. Photograph by Robert Iulo © 2013.

"preparation beef heart," and came up with a method of cleaning it. Over an hour later I was left with about two of the original six pounds of what looked almost like pieces of steak. After that the rest was easy.

We invited ten for dinner. After the antipasto we had fusilli con broccoli rabe, which we serve with toasted bread crumbs just as Grandma had done when she couldn't afford cheese. Then came the main course, *soufritte*, which was modernized due to the lung prohibition, to contain some cubed pieces of sirloin in addition to the heart and liver. With her first taste Nicki got teary eyed and nostalgic because it reminded her so much of our Mother's recipe.

I said, "So, what do you think?"

"You got it right. It tastes just like Mommy's."

We had another main course, chicken with lemon and parsley, along with the *soufritte* because we couldn't count on everyone liking it. Well, everyone did like it, except my ten-year-old grandson Jack. Although he loves steak and chops, the idea of eating an organ was just too foreign to him. At four years younger than his sister Molly, he already likes being in the kitchen when he's not playing baseball or football. His specialties are stuffing cannoli shells with ricotta cream and pounding veal for scaloppini. But even with my offer of five dollars and lots of encouragement from the guests around the table for him to take one forkful, he turned it down.

Maybe he'll never eat *soufritte*. And maybe I could have kept him in the dark about the ingredients like I was as a child, but I don't think so. We're honest with our kids and with our cooking. We'll keep making our traditional recipes and he'll

have other opportunities to try that that one bite, perhaps inspired by a larger bribe. But whether he ever likes it or not, Jack will remember the food served at these dinners and who was at the table and some of the conversation. That's what the

tradition is about. Jack will have the recipes, and one day when he's grown up and if he wants to, he'll be able to serve similar meals and continue the tradition that crossed the Atlantic from Salerno a long time ago. ©