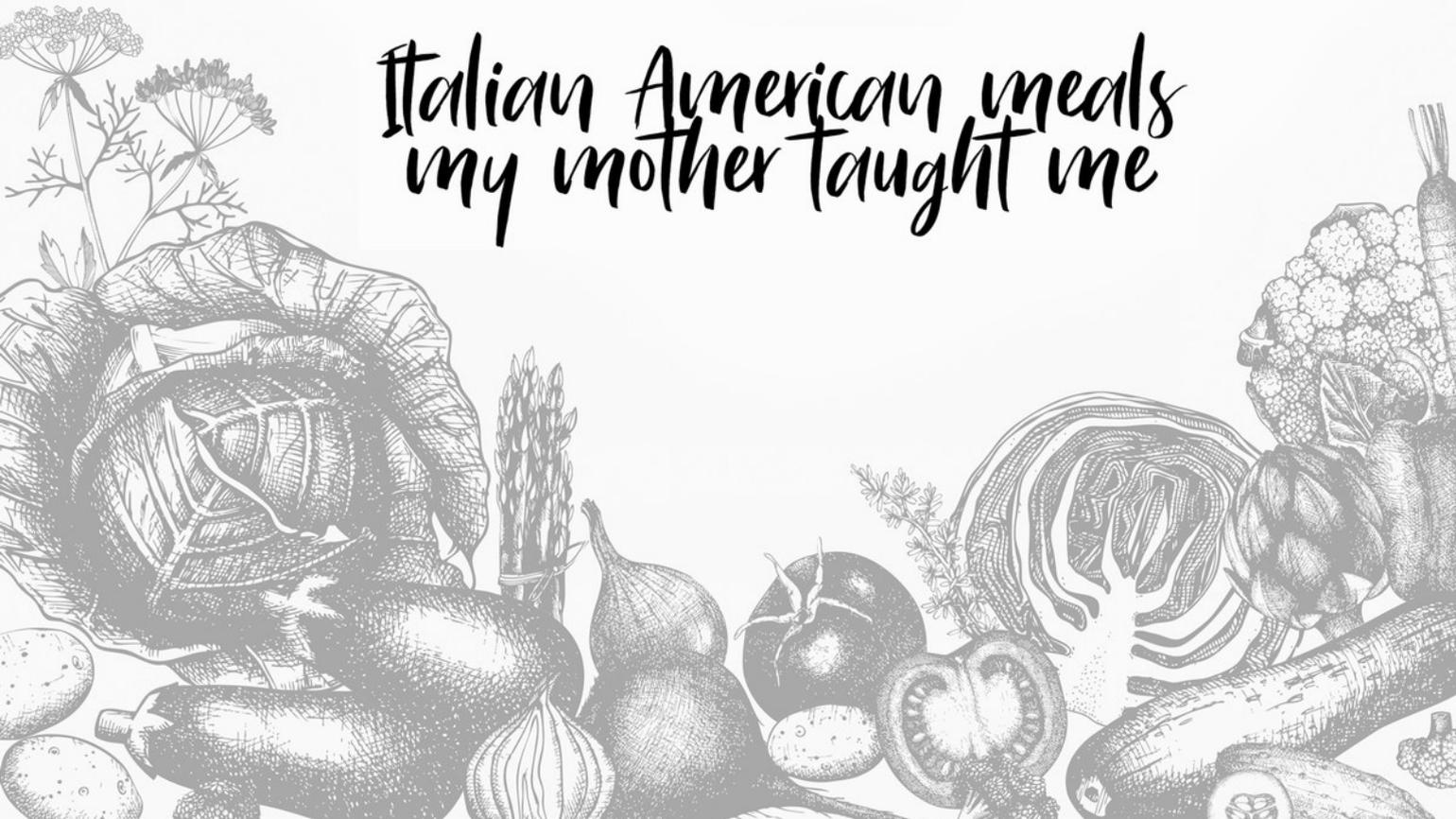


Noni and Nancy

Italian American meals
my mother taught me



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Introduction

Aspiring to cook well is to engage in an all-consuming endeavor. Much like the arts of painting, music, poetry and literature, cooking can rise to become an art form in and of itself, but practicing art and being artful are two distinctly different things. For fine dining the presentation must be artful to be enticing to the diner, but the true art of a meal is not in the plating of the food but the cooking of it. Great meals do not rely on the presentation so much as the preparation of the ingredients and understanding the choices made in combining them.

Noni and Nancy knew nothing of plating. They served their meals in the most practical way, each item placed on the plate separated from the others. Their interest was strictly in the quality of the food by way of the process, not the artful appearance of it. Keeping with their serving style it has been my wish to present these meals to you in the way they were served to our family. When I have added something of my own, I have noted it.

Each year thousands of students graduate from culinary schools having learned to make food exciting and delicious in ever so many new ways, often garnishing with hard to find ingredients that add more to the visual interest than the core flavor. In a restaurant environment, excitement is stimulated when the plate is presented to the diner at the table. It's not until then, that the guest truly begins salivating.

But for home-cooked meals, excitement begins long before the food is placed on the table. Entering an Italian-American household, even many hours before the meal, one is confronted with the smell of what is being prepared, as when my mother was making spaghetti sauce. It could be six hours before meal time, but the entire household would be inundated with the aroma of her tomato sauce. It was a sauce no restaurant could match. Great cooking is more alchemy than science, more magic than religion. It was a tradition practiced by Noni and Nancy,



Nancy Lyons, my mother, grew up during the depression in a small town named Eclectic, a tiny community in rural Alabama. Her family grew their own vegetables, and raised their own chickens and collected their eggs. Butter was hand-churned in the kitchen. Her father was a prolific fisherman, catching a frequent dinner from the nearby lake. The Lyons had no indoor plumbing and water was provided by a well in the side yard, later replaced with a lever-handled pump. Mom learned Southern cooking from her mother. Her fried chicken and cornbread were among the very best.

My siblings and I knew our grandmother, Rose Caporale, simply as Noni. My father was the oldest of her four children, two boys and two girls. He was named after his father and I after him, being Michael the third. Everyone called my grandfather Mike and my dad Mickey. I was called by my full name, Michael.



The Caporale family was not rich by any means, but during the depression, it might be said that they were prosperous by comparison to others, since my grandparents owned an Italian-American grocery store. Rose's kitchen was always bustling and her family always ate well, as did the many employees of the store she shared her breakfast kitchen with. A pot of soup was always on the stove and the fridge was stocked with cold-cuts, Italian table cheese and roasted red peppers. Every day the baker dropped warm, pointed Italian loaves off at the store, and the smell of fresh warm bread always permeated the kitchen. Noni was very frugal and she went daily to the store and returned with the fruits and vegetables that were spoiling. Removing the bruised and spoiled parts and saving the good flesh, she made fruit salad with pears, peaches, bananas, apples, grapes and plums..

When dad married my mother, she did two things. She converted to Catholicism and she learned to cook Italian from Noni. More than either of Rose's two daughters, Marie and Anne, Nancy's Italian meals were indistinguishable from Noni's. Her spaghetti sauce was mellow and sublime. Her meatballs were tender and melted in your mouth. Noni never cooked her pasta al dente, but preferred to make it somewhat soft, as did my mother. Their skills and preferences were identical. My mother endeavored to provide continuity to my father's home life and my brother and sister and I learned to judge all other Italian cooking by the standards of my mother and Noni. Restaurants just could not live up to it, nor could my father's sisters for that matter. While they were good cooks, their tomato sauce was just not quite like Noni's. Mom worked at it. It was her mission and she was committed.

We never called tomato sauce “gravy.” nor did we call it “red sauce.” “Pasta sauce” is an acceptable term but “gravy” is anathema to my sensibilities and while we used tomato sauce on many pasta dishes, not just spaghetti, I hope you will indulge me if I continue to call it spaghetti sauce.

It might be said that the best meals start with the best ingredients, but that is not always the case. The rich history of Italian cuisine often reflects the inventiveness of the peasant culture to adapt by preparing delicious and satisfying meals from lesser cuts of meat or from limited resources. Really great cooking can be very simple. A few regular ingredients are all that is necessary. In Italian cooking, it's olive oil, garlic and tomatoes. By the addition of a single ingredient, a tomato sauce or a soup can take on an entirely new identity.

But the real trick to great cooking is the application of time and temperature. Knowing how hot and how long is what it is all about. It needs to become instinctive. A cookbook can set the path, but it cannot be the destination.

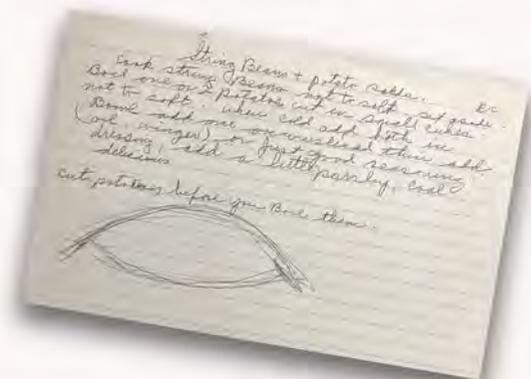




In November of 2022, my grandson, Cameron came to my home for a visit. He had been working as a chef at a resort restaurant in Jackson Hole, Wyoming and had the month of November off. He, like his mother, my oldest daughter, Marissa, had expressed an interest in learning to cook our family recipes and particularly to make tomato sauce like Noni and my mother. Since he was staying for the better part of the month, I prepared a list of her most served meals and decided to teach them to Cameron while photographing them to make a cookbook we could share with the rest of our family.

Unfortunately, there were more meals than days in our plan and together we only got about half way through the cooking and photography. The remaining meals and images were prepared after he left, in December and January.

The desire to share these meals with our family and future descendants is born of the same desire that burned in Noni and Nancy to share their lives with their closest family, communicating their love for them through cooking. Any guest who sits for a meal in my home will get the same experience, as a well prepared meal is a bonding gift of love.



Antipasti



Antipasti could very well be a snack plate eaten any time of day, especially while watching TV, but was usually served as the prelude to a formal sit-down on holidays like Easter and Christmas. Today most people call this charcuterie, but to me it will always be “antipast,” (the last vowel being silent). If you order antipasti from a restaurant, it will most likely be a salad with some meats, cheeses, and pepperoncini in oil and vinegar, but not ours. Salad was a separate event at the end of the meal.

Noni’s antipasti consisted of a variety of deli meats (prosciutto, pepperoni, salami, capicola, and prosciuttini), a selection of pickles (dill, sweet, bread and butter), sweet pickled watermelon rind, pepperoncini, pickled beets, finook (fennel), cheeses (asiago, provolone, parmesan, mozzarella), artichoke hearts, olives, roasted red peppers, and a hard boiled or deviled egg, best served with a torn piece of crusty Italian bread.





LA VALLI
D.O.P.
San Marzano Tomatoes
of Agro Sarnese - No. 1
ITALIAN WHOLE PEELED
In tomato puree with

ORGANIC ORGANIC
CENTO
ORGANIC
PRODUCT OF ITALY
CHUNKY STYLE
CRUSHED TOMATOES
NET WT. 28 OZ (794g)



Tomato Sauce

The centerpiece of truly great home-cooked Italian meals has to be tomato sauce. While there are many great recipes, nothing compares with the mellow flavor of Noni's sauce as passed on to my mother. The secret is time. It takes patience to make a great sauce. In today's world of two-income families, stay-at-home moms are a vanishing breed. Few have the time to spend all day cooking a great tomato sauce. Perhaps that is why it is most often prepared on Sundays, as a special treat.

It starts by browning meats to be cooked in the sauce. Noni used meatballs, Italian sausage, bracciole and pork shoulder.

Start by slicing several garlic cloves and browning them in olive oil then add two cans of San Marzano plum tomatoes, a can and a half of water, and a can of tomato paste. Crushed tomatoes will work but Noni always preferred to use whole tomatoes that she would cut up by stabbing them repeatedly with a sharp knife while still in the can. Modern cooks might gravitate towards using their Vita-Mix.

Add the meats with all the drippings and cook all day, at least five hours minimum. Salt to taste. You can't add too much garlic. By all means never use oregano in tomato sauce. Adding oregano makes it pizza sauce. Oddly, Noni never used wine, basil or sugar in her sauce. Try it this way first and then make it your own next time. Check on the sauce regularly, as the water will cook off and you will need to add more. Use a very low heat to avoid burning the sauce and stir periodically.





Preparing a meat sauce

Noni's meat sauce always included meatballs, bracciole, pork shoulder and Italian sausage. Fry in olive oil until golden brown. Add the meats and much of the drippings to the tomato sauce.

Meatballs

Mix all ingredients by hand and form into 2 inch size meatballs. Fry in olive oil until browned.

1 lb ground beef
2 large eggs
stale bread or
bread crumbs
chopped parsley
Parmesan cheese
sliced garlic







My kids referred to this dish as “beef in bondage.” It’s a thin cut of flank steak stuffed with parsley, garlic and parmesan cheese, rolled up and tied, then cooked for hours in tomato sauce until tender, and shreds easily when touched with your fork. Although I never saw my mother tenderize it with a meat hammer, I prefer to add this step to further prepare the meat prior to cooking which not only tenderizes it but also thins it a bit, making it easier to roll..

Bracciale



Chicken Cacciatore

Start with a hefty cleaver and section a small chicken, chopping through the bones to expose the marrow. The marrow contributes to the subtle flavor of the sauce. Remove the spiny back with all the small bones and toss it away.

In a large stockpot add one 32 ounce can of crushed tomatoes and a 15 ounce can of diced tomatoes and sixteen ounces of water. Slice 8 cloves of garlic, a sliced large onion and a small basket of mushrooms (any variety) also sliced and add to the sauce. Add the cut chicken pieces and cook on low for a minimum of about two hours. Serve over your favorite pasta. check ewwery half hour and add water as needed.

Extend the time to reduce the liquid and thicken the sauce.







Eggplant Parmesan



Eggplant comes in many varieties. The most familiar is the dark purple/black bulbous eggplant, but other varieties include white, magenta, variegated, Thai and Amish. Shapes can be long and tubular or small and round, but the best for eggplant Parmesan are the larger varieties. For our purposes, let's just call the purple eggplant "Italian eggplant," since that's the only kind my mother or Noni had access to and used, but the flesh of all these varieties is the same.

Start by peeling the eggplant and cutting it into $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick slices. Be careful not to cut them too thin or the pieces will disintegrate into a mess when trying to serve it.

Dredge each piece first in flour and then in egg. Be sure to add a little water to thin the eggs. Fry them in a pan of hot olive oil and set aside.

Layer the cooked eggplant with tomato sauce, Parmesan cheese and top each piece with mozzarella. Laying them out in a pan such as pictured here makes it easier to serve. Both Noni and my mom layered them stacked in a round casserole dish for baking, but the soft eggplant and cheese binds the pieces to one another and serving them, while equally tasty, becomes more difficult, especially to separate the slices to be used in sandwiches later.

Bake for 20 to 30 minutes at 350 or 400, enough to melt the cheese and brown the top.

*Stuffed
Artichokes*



Stuffed artichokes are a treat usually reserved for our big family gatherings on holidays like Easter and Christmas or formal sit-downs. Originally, the artichokes were served without the breadcrumb/cheese stuffing but have evolved into what is presented here.

Start by trimming the thorny points from the leaves with a sharp scissors, then cut the remaining crown off and remove the stalk with a knife. Spread the “petals” by hand and then insert sliced pieces of garlic cloves into each pocket.

In a mixing bowl mix Parmesan cheese and bread crumbs in a 2:1 ratio and add finely chopped parsley. Spoon this mixture into the pockets between the petals of the flower you have created and drizzle with olive oil. Place in a pressure cooker with a small layer of water in the bottom and cook for 18 minutes at full pressure. The artichokes should be practically falling apart.

Remove to a serving dish and drizzle with more olive oil and lightly salt the artichoke. The leaves are eaten by turning the leaf soft side down and scraping the meat and stuffing off on your bottom teeth, When all the main leaves are consumed, pull the remaining thin, flimsy leaves from the crown and remove any stringy debris, leaving the prize, the artichoke’s medallion to consume.



Escarole is a green leaf lettuce with firm stalks and a more delicate leaf. It can be used for salads but Noni always made it into a soup with great northern beans. In our family it was always pronounced as “shca-dawl,” a somewhat guttural pronunciation, rather than the clarity of precise English phonetics.

Start by making a base of chicken broth, then add the beans and let them cook a while to soften before adding the escarole. Give them at least a half an hour to an hour. Slice a few cloves of garlic and add to the broth. Don't be shy. You can never have enough garlic, so be liberal with it. The escarole will decompose into the broth if cooked for too long, so about 15 minutes should do it on medium heat. It will be soft, yet still be somewhat firm. This dish is bland without salt, so add some to the soup while cooking, but be careful not to overdo it, leaving some room for personal discretion at the table. If served without any salt, it will be too bland for most pallets



Escarole and Beans





My uncle Eddie with Noni in front of Caporale's Food Fair around 1980.