

Italian Cooking 1

The Key is in the Sauce

I want to introduce you to my version of Italian Cooking (keeping in mind that I am not Italian). My version evolved from a set of recipes given to me by my parents (both professional chefs) and modified over the years to suit modern tastes. Referring to Italian Cooking is a bit like trying to discuss Canadian food – there are so many regional variations, the generic term becomes meaningless. However, in this Italian Cooking Lesson (If I may call it that), I am going to give you recipes for three sauces, each one different but each one containing that mysterious essence that tells your taste buds that you are eating Italian. The secret is indeed in the sauce and in the time it takes to get it right. One sauce, the Bolognese (meat and tomato sauce), takes time to prepare and is, in fact, better if prepared ahead of time. Pesto take only seconds to prepare and serve while the Carbonara sauce needs to be made just before serving and requires you to be near the stove for at least 20 minutes. With Carbonara sauce, the timing of the rest of the meal is most important.

With each sauce, I will give you the ingredients and preparation methods just as any recipe book will do. However, I will then suggest full meals to serve using the basic sauce so you can try it out. One of the really useful things about these sauce recipes is that they can be scaled up for bigger crowds.

To make things easy, I have put the recipes in order of complexity (easiest to hardest) so that you gain confidence as you work your way through these recipe ideas.

Bolognese Sauce (Basic Spaghetti Sauce)

This simple recipe provides a basic chunky meat sauce that can be used over a variety of noodles.

Ingredients

- 1 kg lean ground beef
- 3-5 cloves garlic (finely chopped)
- 2 medium onions (coarsely chopped)
- 1 green pepper (coarsely chopped)
- 2 cans mushroom pieces, drained (can substitute 2/3 cup of fresh mushrooms)
- 4 28 oz cans of stewed tomatoes (diced)
- 4 tsp (teaspoon) Italian seasoning – see recipe next page

I like to do all of the chopping, dicing, etc, before I start. I put each ingredient into its own small metal bowl as they are ready. That way, I don't have to interrupt the flow to chop an onion or a green pepper when I should be adding it to the pot.

In a large stewing pot, brown the ground beef and garlic over medium heat until thoroughly cooked. Drain and return to the stove. Add onions, mushrooms and peppers. Sauté for another 5 to 10 minutes or until onions become soft. Add the remaining ingredients (tomatoes and seasoning), reduce heat and simmer for at least two hours stirring occasionally (the longer the better).

I like to make this sauce in large batches ahead as the taste improves with time. It freezes well and will keep in the refrigerator for up to three days. The above recipe will result in up to four family meals depending on appetite.

Italian Seasoning

I have tried a variety of commercial Italian Seasonings but still come back to one I make myself using dried spices. This works well with any tomato-based sauce.

Oregano	4 tbsp (tablespoon)	60 ml
Basil	2 tsp	10 ml
Marjoram	2 tsp	10 ml
Sage	1 tbsp & 1 tsp	25 ml
Rosemary	1 tbsp & 1 tsp	25 ml
Thyme	1 tbsp & 1 tsp	25 ml

Meal #1: Spaghetti, Salad & Garlic Buns

As you prepare the sauce, the wonderful smells will fill your kitchen and make mouths water. As mealtime approaches, you need to get the other parts of the meal ready. I suggest that you get them ready in the following order: garlic buns, salad then pasta.*

Ingredients You'll need for the Meal

Garlic Buns

- 1-2 per person Ciabatta Buns (aka Italian "Slipper" Bread)
- 1/2 cup butter or margarine
- 3-4 cloves garlic (finely chopped (NOT minced)
- 2 tsp finely chopped sweet basil or chives (dried)

Salad

Make your favorite salad but I recommend a Caesar salad. Use whatever ingredients you are used to using.

Pasta

Select the pasta you want to try. As noted below, regular spaghetti works very well here.

Olive Oil (You should always have a bottle of good olive oil in the kitchen)

Parmesan Cheese (Here is another ingredient you should always have. Deli cheese is the best but the canned grated cheese is okay)

Step 1: (Assuming the sauce above has been simmering for the 2 hours), preheat the oven to 400°F.

Step 2: Once the oven is ready, mix the ingredients for the garlic butter (butter, garlic, & basil or chives) and spread thickly on the sliced buns. Wrap the buns in aluminum foil and place on a baking sheet (a cookie sheet is fine for this). Set the timer for 25 minutes (but be prepared to check the buns after 20 minutes).

Step 3: Start the pot of water on the stove as per the directions that came with the pasta.

Step 4: Prepare the salad but do not add the dressing until the last minute to keep the greens crisp.

Step 5: At the required time, add the pasta to the boiling water (stir occasionally as the water will have a tendency to foam up and boil over if you don't).

Step 6: When the pasta is ready, drain (rinse if the package calls for it) and return to the pot. Remove the garlic buns from the oven. Add the dressing to the salad and put into individual bowls.

Step 7: Serve. On each plate place some pasta and add a large spoonful of the sauce on top. Sprinkle with a generous portion of parmesan cheese (or Romano if you prefer). Place a garlic bun on the plate. For a little extra zip. You can add some crushed red peppers to taste but be careful until you get used to them.

Step 8: Eat and enjoy. ***Now that's Italiano***

The leftover sauce should be divided into 3 equal portions and frozen. One portion will be for a repeat of the meal you just had. The other two are for the next two meals.

***A Comment on Pasta**

Regular spaghetti works very well for this dish but this tomato sauce works well with a variety of other pastas as well. Note that although dried pastas are good, freshly made pastas (available in your grocery store deli or meat area). You can also use elbow macaroni, linguini, fettuccini, penne or fusilli or for a more robust meal, use a meat- or cheese-filled ravioli or tortellini (reduce the amount of ravioli or tortellini that you use as these types of pasta are much more filling than regular pastas).

The Italian Pastas acquired their names based on their shapes. Here are some examples of the most common Italian pastas:

Spaghetti	“Cord” or Spago
Linguini	“Little Tongues”
Vermicelli	“little worms”
Rigatoni	“Furrows” – short, wide, fluted tubes
Fettuccini	“Small Ribbons
Ravioli	“Little Turnips”
Rotini	“Spirals” or “Twists”
Capellini	“Angel Hair” or “Fine Hairs”
Fusilli	“Little Spindles” or “Spirals”
Penne	“Quills”
Tortellini	“Little Cakes”
Cannelloni	Tubes

Meal #2: Chicken Cacciatori with Penne and Spinach Salad

Ingredients for Main Dish

Penne (a tube-like pasta)
Basic Bolognese Sauce
Chicken Breasts (fresh boneless, not frozen*) – 1 per person
3 cloves garlic (finely chopped)
2 tsp Italian Seasoning
Olive Oil
2 cups Mozzarella Cheese (Shredded)

*Frozen chicken breasts will tend to turn black and unappetizing so I highly recommend avoiding using frozen chicken whenever possible.

Ingredients for Salad

Fresh Baby Spinach Leaves

Ingredients for Salad Dressing

¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup plain yogurt
1 tbsp fresh lemon juice
¼ cup sliced almonds
1 small can tangerine orange slices (drained)

Should be served with French Crusty Bread. For a little extra zip, you could butter the bread with home-made garlic butter.*

The Night Before

In preparation for this meal, you need to thaw a package of the basic Bolognese sauce. It is best to do this overnight in your fridge. If you are in a hurry or forgot to take out the sauce, it can be thawed in the microwave in a few minutes (I prefer slow thawing but the microwave will do in an emergency). You might also consider making some garlic butter – see recipe below.

Step 1: One and a half hours before the meal. In an electric frying pan, add a splash of olive oil and the chopped garlic. When it begins to sputter, add the chicken breasts, cover and let cook. Set your timer

for 25 minutes. After about 10 minutes turn the breasts and sprinkle with the Italian Seasoning. Cover again and let simmer. If the meat is cooking too fast, turn down the frying pan. If the breasts appear to be drying out, add about a half of a cup of water and cover to let the chicken finish cooking. Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Step 2: As the chicken is cooking, put the Bolognese sauce, a bit at a time, into a blender and puree at high speed for about 20 seconds (for each batch) until all of the sauce has a coarse texture (but no individual pieces are recognizable). This will take a bit of practice and some time before you find a texture you prefer.

Step 3: When the timer goes off, remove the chicken breasts from the frying pan, pat dry and place in a baking dish big enough to let you put all of the chicken in it in one layer. Cover the chicken in the Bolognese sauce and put it in the oven. Set the timer for 35 minutes.

Step 4: Mix all of the ingredients for the salad dressing and wash the spinach leaves. Pat dry.

Step 5: Start the pot of water on the stove as per the directions that came with the pasta.

Step 6: When the timer goes off, take the chicken dish out of the oven and cover the chicken and sauce with a generous amount of mozzarella cheese. Return the chicken to the oven and turn on the broiler. Add the pasta to the water and cook as per package directions. Set the timer to the appropriate time.

Step 7: Slice the bread and set it on the table along with the garlic butter you prepared earlier. Toss the spinach with the dressing and set it on the table as well. Your guests will want second helpings of this salad.

Step 8: When your timer goes off, drain your pasta and return it to the pot. Remove the chicken from the oven.

Step 9: Serve. One each plate, put some penne and top it with a cheese covered chicken breast and some of the sauce. Serve the salad in individual bowls. Enjoy!

Garlic & Chive Butter

Ingredients for Garlic Butter*

- ½ cup butter (softened) or margarine
- 2 tbsp crushed garlic
- 2 tbsp dried chives

Preparation

Simply mix all of the ingredients together and chill for about a half hour. You could fill 3 or 4 little serving dishes or, once chilled, form the butter onto a long cigar-like shape (about an inch or 2.5 cm in diameter) using wax paper. Freeze in the wax paper with the ends twisted to keep the air out. You can take it out of the freezer and slice off individual pats of butter as needed (using a hot knife) before returning it to the freezer. It will keep for 1 or 2 months. You can butter warm bread with the mix or for garlic toast, butter the bread and then put it under a broiler for a few minutes (until the butter begins to sputter).

Meal #3: Meatball Sliders with Raw Vegetables & Avocado Dip

This is almost a finger food meal with tiny hamburgers and raw vegetables with a dip. It is an excellent meal for company but it does take a bit more work to prepare. However, once it is ready, it can sit on the stove until you are ready to eat.

Ingredients for Main Dish

Basic Bolognese Sauce

Meatball Ingredients

- Olive Oil
- 1 pound lean ground beef
- 1 pound lean ground pork
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup cream (I use half and half)
- ¼ cup chopped fresh oregano

¼ cup chopped fresh basil*
6 tablespoons grated Romano cheese
½ teaspoon salt (optional)
½ teaspoon black pepper (optional)

*There are many types of basil so be sure to get what is referred to as “sweet basil.” Otherwise, the meatballs might be a bit bitter tasting.

Other Ingredients

Arugula or romaine lettuce leaves (optional)
8 tablespoons Romano cheese (grated)
18 small soft dinner rolls, split horizontally
Some garlic & chive butter (see recipe above)

Ingredients for the Veggies & Dip

Fresh broccoli
Fresh cauliflower
Fresh baby carrots
2-3 Avocados (soft & ripe)
2 small tomatoes (chopped & seedless)
2 tbsp lemon juice
1 small onion (finely chopped)
2 cloves garlic (finely chopped)

The Night Before

In preparation for this meal, you need to thaw a package of the basic Bolognese sauce. It is best to do this overnight in your fridge. If you are in a hurry or forgot to take out the sauce, it can be thawed in the microwave in a few minutes (I prefer slow thawing but the microwave will do in an emergency).

Step 1: Combine all of the meatball ingredients in a large bowl. Form into meatballs (will make between 18 and 24 depending on how big you want them). In a heavy skillet with a lid*, heat a small amount of olive oil over medium-high heat, brown the meatballs in small batches until they are brown all over and have become somewhat firm. Transfer them to a plate and drain the drippings from the skillet.

* I use a deep “enamel on cast iron” skillet because although it is slow to heat up, it retains the heat far longer than conventional skillets.

Step 2: Put the Bolognese sauce, a bit at a time, into a blender and puree at high speed for about 20 seconds (for each batch) until all of the sauce has a coarse texture (but no individual pieces are recognizable).

Step 3: Return the skillet to the stove and pour in the Bolognese sauce into it. Allow about 10 minutes for the sauce to warm up and then add the meatballs. Cover, reduce heat and let simmer. This part of the meal is ready and can be served anytime

Step 4: As the meatballs and sauce are simmering, peel the avocados and mash them. Sprinkle the lemon juice into the mixture. Add the onion, garlic, and tomato and gently mix until all of the ingredients are blended. Set aside in the fridge in a bowl with a clear plastic wrap resting on the surface of the avocado mix.* Do not remove the plastic wrap until you are ready to serve.

*Avocado, like apples, turns brown when exposed to air. They will discolor quickly so you will want to delay exposure to air until the last possible moment.

Step 5: Wash the veggies and cut into bite-sized pieces. Keep them large enough to encourage people to eat them with their fingers.

Step 6: As soon as you are sure people are ready to eat, toast the buns using the broiler in your oven. Butter each piece with garlic butter (see earlier recipe)

Step 7: Serve. Put out small plates of vegetables for each person and put the avocado dip into individual bowls as well (this discourages "double-dipping"). Place a romaine or arugula leaf on a toasted bun, add one meatball, a little sauce and sprinkle with grated Romano cheese. Top with the other half of the bun. Place 2 on each plate. Enjoy.