

À TAVOLA!

WHEN **DANIELA MASSENZ** TOLD US ABOUT HER ITALIAN MAMMA ISSUING THIS CRY TO COME TO THE TABLE WHEN A MEAL WAS READY, IT WAS A REMINDER OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EATING TOGETHER. MEALTIMES ARE A BIG DEAL IN AN ITALIAN HOUSEHOLD, SHE RECALLS.



styling **HANNES KOEGELENBERG**
photos **ED O'RILEY**

MY PARENTS WERE born and bred in northern Italy. I was bred there, but born in Johannesburg. Being Italo-South African/Safrican-Italian can feel a bit schizophrenic. I am at once both and yet neither – though I choose to believe I contain the best of both. Growing up with an Italian filter on my South African life has given me a rich overlay I am very grateful for. Much of it centres on the importance of food.

My parents were both excellent cooks. My mother, Rita, was known as one of the queens of Italian cooking in Cape Town. They met while working at a swanky hotel in the ski-resort town of Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomites. (The James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*, featuring Roger Moore skiing down a mountain pursued by men on weaponised ski mobiles, was filmed there.)

My father, Fiore, who was the dashing young maître d', caught sight of the raven-curling, blue-eyed seamstress and his tunic began shedding its buttons like leaves in autumn. The rest, as they say, is *la storia*.

They formed a formidable culinary team and, over the years, ran several restaurants and cafés. As you can imagine, our lives pretty much centred around food – hence our side of the family looking the way we do.

I am still amazed when I recall how, after a hard day's work, Mamma would pull various rabbits (sometimes literally) out of the hat to cater for the wide-ranging tastes of her picky children, producing a feast of a meal in record time.

THE RULES

Italian life is fairly mannered, and there are certain things that just don't fly. Food, while a source of great joy, is an infinitely serious business. Things have to be *come si deve*, or as they should be.

For instance, you never – ever – serve carrots with polenta, according to Mamma.

The shape of the pasta determines the sauce used. You would never serve ragù (a meaty 'Bolognese' sauce) with thin spaghetti strands. They simply can't hold it

'Food, while being a source of great joy, is a serious business.'

'While foraging may currently be enjoying a moment in haute culinary circles, it is a way of life for Italians.'

properly. The sauce would be served with a larger noodle like tagliatelle or penne.

Certain things are only eaten at the appropriate time of year: artichokes and asparagus in spring, for example, when they are in season and at their best. None of this year-round nonsense.

Everyone's mother makes the best version of whatever dish there is to be had. And recipes vary between families, villages, towns and regions. Ours is the best, naturally.

No fruit on a savoury pizza – ever! Just google the YouTube video of the Neapolitan pizza order with pineapple to witness the pizzaiola's expression (and refusal!).

Although my husband, Chuck, would never let me live it down if I failed to mention our visit to Italy, which included a pizzeria outing with the cousins. My cousin's kids put chips on their pizza. Chuck couldn't have been more delighted. Italian food snobbery felled with a *slap* chip!

Cheese comes before dessert. And woe betide anyone who cuts off the rind or cuts across the cheese rather than down the side.

My friend Mariola once provoked a response worthy of a Puccini death scene from Papà when she sneakily cut the rind (because that's her favourite bit) from the Parmigiano.

DOMENICA

Sunday lunch was the high point of the week for my family. It was a fact of life all my life, and we would gather weekly without question. Our nuclear family – Mamma Rita, Papà Fiore, big bro Oscar, big sis Nadia and I, the baby – would be joined by our aunt, uncle and cousins. And family friends would drift in and out fluidly in a great communal osmosis. No one was ever turned away, and there was always extra for unexpected arrivals.

Later, as adults with families of our own, we would still gather everyone together or in some combination of the sibs and families, despite the fact that

getting everyone together became a stretch as the numbers grew.

My infinitely patient Chuck was usually the lone Englishman among us. Although, it must be said, he has a bit of a Latin sensibility (not really surprising, as he is a Classicist). He delighted in the Italian-ness of the *pranzo* (lunch). His mother once told me that, while they were on a family trip to Italy, the 11-year-old Clive stated that he would marry an Italian one day.

When he would rise to help us – the women – clear the table after lunch, he would be stoic in the face of the ragging he received – 'Chuck, be a man!' – from the Italian male contingent. I would try to shame them with a withering retort that 'a real man helps his wife', but this would flow like so much water off their entitled backs.

I was the *laatlammetjie* in the family, so I was last to leave the nest. This meant it was my duty to do Sunday lunch prep: extend the table (or tables once the grandchildren came along) to accommodate the gathering, arrange the requisite number of settings, as well as set up the coffee and dessert.

Mamma and Papà would cook from Saturday evening, and I'd wake on Sundays to the aromas of ragù simmering, the sounds of chopping and Julio Iglesias or Pavarotti warbling in the background.

FORAGED FOOD

While foraging may currently be enjoying a moment in haute culinary circles, it is a way of life for Italians, particularly of a past generation. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of tramping the slopes of Newlands forest for porcini (*cep*) mushrooms and chestnuts. And we would collect white and black mussels and periwinkles from the sea, clean them in seawater and make delicious pasta sauces.

Back then we would only ever encounter other Italian, German, Portuguese and French folk on our 'mushy

missions'. We would eye each other warily and walk away from our secret treasure trove to throw each other off the scent. Watch the delightful film *The Truffle Hunters* for an idea of how serious this foraging business can get.

These days, it has become harder and the finds less rich, as more people have cottoned on to the wealth beneath their feet.

We knew that a few days after good soaking rain followed by a few days of sun, it was time to fetch the porcini.

One year in the late 70s was truly bumper. My dad went up day after day and brought home bags full of *funghi*. We spread one haul out on the kitchen table where the mound extended more than a metre, piled up high.

Over the next while, we had grilled porcini steaks, risotto con porcini, pickled porcini... you get the idea. Worst of all, our blankets were commandeered for drying the porcini on the balcony. The stench of drying mushroom that permeated the house for weeks was overpowering and left me nauseated. I developed an aversion to mushrooms for a very long time, and the only way I can eat them even now is in a risotto.

FISH WHAT?

There was no such thing as convenience food in our house. I encountered Aromat and fish fingers for the first time when I slept over at a school friend in my teens. I loved them, of course. And I was astounded when I realised that at friends' houses, dinner was often a toasted sandwich. They loved coming to us and would gorge themselves at every opportunity.

My school lunchboxes were also a subject of much excitement among my classmates. They would cluster around to see what the delight of the day was, and I would often swap my soup, lasagne or stew (or whatever) for a much-coveted peanut butter and jam sandwich. I was a spoilt brat.

EVERYTHING HAS A SEASON

We looked forward to the seasonal vegetables. Spring was eagerly awaited because it would herald the arrival of artichokes, and my mother's most-delicious recipe – she simmered them in a stock with garlic, parsley and anchovy. My own family adores it just as much.

Papà would make pesto Genovese when basil was in season and we had gathered pine nuts in the forest. His trick to keep the basil from oxidising and going dark was to mix in a handful of lettuce. His beautifully green pesto is still hands-down the best I have ever tasted.

We also grew our own vegetables and fruit. A fig tree was *de rigueur* and my uncle would send us seeds to grow our own bitter radicchio. My mouth waters at the thought of a simple salad of radicchio, finely sliced red onion, olive oil, red wine vinegar, salt and pepper, accompanied by a hunk of crusty bread. Pure heaven.

When my parents and Oscar's family shared a house, my dad planted a pear tree. In the first year, it produced a solitary pear. He watched it almost obsessively and became increasingly excited as it matured. We would be given updates on its progress.

He waited patiently for the day he could harvest it at peak perfection. The day arrived, and he went down to pluck it, only to find it gone. *Sparito*. Disappeared. Vamoosed.

This provoked a rage of intense proportions. He accused everyone in the house of stealing his pear, ultimately fingering my poor nephew Paolo, who swore blind that he hadn't touched it, as the culprit.

We heard about this perfidy for months, and it is has gone down in the annals of family legend as Peargate. No one has ever fessed up. Some bird had probably been waiting just as eagerly as he had!

RECIPES FOR YOU

WE HAVE MANY OUTSTANDING FAMILY RECIPES AND HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FEEL-GOOD (IE, CARB-RICH) FAVOURITES. *BUON APPETITO!*



recipe preparation **LOUISA HOLST**
styling **HANNES KOEGELBERG** photos **ED O'RILEY**

PAPÀ FIORE'S RISOTTO CON FUNGHI

COOK'S NOTE The rice you choose will give different results. For a creamy risotto, use Vialone risotto rice if you intend to par-cook the risotto beforehand, or Arborio if you are cooking it at once. Tastic works well if you want chewy, separate grains. Pearl barley is a great low-carb substitute.

Use fresh as well as dried porcini for a more robust taste, or use any other mushroom for a more subtle flavour.

Serves: 4

- fresh and/or dried porcini (Keep as large slices or chop up, to taste. If dried, presoak in warm water for a couple of hours, then squeeze out the water. Keep the water for the stock.)
- 1½-2 litres fresh chicken/beef/vegetable stock, or make up stock using good-quality stock cubes, water and the mushroom water (You can buy porcini stock cubes at Italian delis to add extra flavour.)
- 1 large onion, finely chopped

- 2-3 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- rice – 1 generous fistful per person, plus 1 for the pot
- ½ to ¾ cup of white wine
- olive oil and butter
- Parmesan or pecorino cheese, including the heels
- parsley, chopped

METHOD

1 Sauté the fresh mushrooms in a little butter and wine until they're soft and melting. Set aside. Bring your stock to the boil and keep it simmering throughout the cooking process.



MAMMA'S CROSTOLI

MAMMA RITA'S GNOCCHI



- 2 Heat a large, heavy-bottomed pan. Add a generous glug of olive oil and a large knob of butter and allow to melt.
- 3 When the oil and butter are sizzling, add the onion and cook gently until it becomes glassy (about 4 minutes).
- 4 Add the garlic, dried and soaked porcini and the 5 fistfuls of dry rice.
- 5 Stir every few seconds to coat the rice so it toasts without catching, about 3 minutes. (If you're par-cooking, stop the process here. Heat it up again when you're ready to continue.)
- 6 Add the white wine and let it be absorbed completely. Then start adding the stock, one ladleful at a time.
- 7 Stir the risotto every few seconds and allow the liquid to be absorbed before adding the next ladle of stock.
- 8 Add the cheese heel chunks for extra flavour. They will soften to a chewy

- consistency. Remove them before serving – although some people love finding these tasty prizes.
- 9 After about 15-17 minutes of stirring, start tasting the rice to check if it is cooked.
 - 10 The rice is done when it is still firm, a bit al dente, but there are no hard bits in the centre.
 - 11 Add the cooked fresh porcini and then season to taste with salt and pepper.
 - 12 Leave your risotto to rest for a minute or two, then stir in another knob of butter.
 - 13 Sprinkle with parsley. We sometimes add lemon zest for freshness at the last minute.
 - 14 Serve immediately with grated Parmesan or pecorino.

MAMMA'S CROSTOLI

(aka chiacchiere/bugie/
galani di Venezia)

COOK'S NOTE These celebration treats, which are served at Carnevale, Christmas and New Year, are given to friends and kept at the ready for guests. They're shaped like Chinese bowties but are much, much more delicious. Serve with prosecco or Cap Classique.

Serves: 4

- 500g cake flour
- 1 tsp baking power
- 1 tsp vanilla extract or essence
- ¼ cup icing sugar (plus extra for dusting)
- 1 large lemon, grated (and orange, if you prefer)

- ¼ cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 tbsp grappa or brandy
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- oil for deep-frying
- pasta machine for rolling the dough

METHOD

- 1 Combine the flour, baking powder, vanilla, icing sugar and lemon zest in a large bowl. Rub the butter into the mixture until it forms crumbs.
- 2 Add the alcohol and eggs and mix with your hands to form a dough.
- 3 Transfer to a floured surface and knead for a few minutes until firm, but yielding. Cover with plastic wrap and leave to rest for 30 minutes.
- 4 Divide the dough into four pieces.
- 5 Dust the rollers of the pasta machine with a little flour. Roll each piece through the machine on the widest setting. Fold in half and roll through again. Do this several times until smooth. Dust with extra flour, if needed, so the dough doesn't stick to the rollers.
- 6 Adjust the setting to one notch narrower and roll through again. Adjust the setting again. Roll the dough through the rollers repeatedly until you get to the narrowest setting. You will end up with a long, very thin sheet of dough.
- 7 Lay this sheet of dough on a floured surface. Repeat with the remaining pieces of dough.
- 8 Cut the sheets into strips 3-4cm wide. A ravioli cutting wheel gives a decorative edge, if you have one. Cut a small slit lengthwise into the middle of each strip. Or you can pull one end through the slit and twist to form a bowtie.
- 9 Deep-fry small batches of three or four crostoli in oil heated to 180°C. Work quickly as they fry and form bubbles in about 30 seconds. Flip over and fry until just light golden – brown is burnt.
- 10 Drain on paper towel and sprinkle with icing sugar. They are best served

fresh, but will last up to five days in a sealed container. Good luck getting them to last that long – they are very moreish.

MAMMA RITA'S GNOCCHI WITH BURRO FUSO E SALVIA

(browned butter and sage)

COOK'S NOTE Use floury or multi-purpose potatoes. These have a lower moisture content, so you use less flour. Use the least amount of flour you can get away with for a light and tender gnoccho. Moisture is the enemy, so older, drier potatoes are best. Also, work while the potatoes are hot or the gnocchi will be chewy.

Serves: 4

GNOCCHI (WHICH MEANS LUMPS)

- 900g potatoes
- ⅔ cup good-quality plain flour
- 1 large egg, beaten
- ½-1 tsp salt

BURRO E SALVIA

- 200g butter
- 1 bunch sage, washed and dried (about 4 leaves per person)

COOK'S NOTE We often make a 'half and half': half burro e salvia and half Napoletana (tomato) sauce.

METHOD

TO MAKE THE GNOCCHI

- 1 Boil the potatoes, or bake in their skins until tender (about 45 minutes for baking). Use only one potato as your tester (with a skewer) as you don't want them to get soggy. Drain well.
- 2 When cool enough to handle but still hot, peel the potatoes and mash until smooth (a potato ricer works brilliantly).
- 3 On a clean surface, make a mound of half the flour and the salt. Make a well in the middle. Place the potato

and egg in the well. With clean hands, start mixing the flour, egg and potato together, working inwards with your hands, as with bread dough. If the mixture is sticky, add a bit more flour until it forms a soft but firm dough. Shape into a ball. Don't overwork or it will become tough.

- 4 On a floured surface, cut the dough into quarters. With floured hands, roll out each quarter into a sausage about 2,5cm in diameter. Cut each sausage into 1,5cm cubes.
- 5 Use your thumb to push each cube over the floured tines of a fork so it rolls up and gets those sauce-catching grooves, or – like Rita does – on a floured grater for little dimples.
- 6 Place these gnocchi on a floured tray and do not allow them to touch. Leave to air-dry for 10 minutes. They also freeze well.

TO MAKE THE BURRO E SALVIA

- 1 In a small, heavy saucepan, melt the butter, sage leaves and a pinch of salt over a low flame. Do not allow the butter to burn although browning it gives it a lovely nutty flavour. The sage leaves should fry and be a bit crispy.
- 2 Pour half the burro e salvia into a large, warmed bowl. Keep this in the oven.

BOIL THE GNOCCHI

- 1 Bring a large pot of water (at least 5 litres) to the boil. Add a pinch of salt to the boiling water and reduce the heat to a simmer. Drop a few gnocchi into the water at a time and stir gently. When they rise to the surface, they are cooked. Use a slotted spoon or sieve to scoop out the cooked gnocchi and drain well.
- 2 Toss the gnocchi into the heated bowl of butter sauce and mix to coat with the sauce.
- 3 When all the cooked gnocchi are in the bowl, pour over the rest of the sauce and toss. Serve immediately with grated Parmigiano or pecorino and freshly ground pepper.