

Shabbat Dinner To Go # 3

Kitchen Notes

Jews have called Italy home since the Roman Empire. Evidence suggests that Sephardic Jews brought eggplants and artichokes to Italy, and Jewish traders introduced saffron to regional Italian cuisine. Golden fried and visually enticing *Carciofi alla Giudia*, literally *Artichokes of the Jews*, are a mainstay in Roman trattorie and Neopolitan fry shops to this day.

Or so I'm told. I've never been there, and I'm entirely Ashkenazi, but I learned to cook during high school when I was a busboy in a neighborhood Italian restaurant in New York, doing tasks for the chef from the Adriatic coastal city Bari who had fallen in love with an American Jewish young woman years earlier, converted and married. I went back to bus tables at that restaurant every winter and spring break during college, and every summer, arriving early and staying late to peel garlic and help with other menial kitchen tasks.

Like the previous Shabbat Dinners To Go, this one has all the elements of a traditional Friday night dinner—challah, fish course, soup, generous main course, dessert—but with dishes not likely recognizable to our predecessors.

Even if you only eat red meat once or twice a year, please try the **Beefcheek Gnocchi**. I don't really use beef cheeks, although they are kosher and wonderful for the kind of slow braising I like to do. One of the things I learned from Vinnie, the Italian chef who became a Jew, was to make potato gnocchi by hand. If you're serving dairy, the best way to serve it is with true basil pesto.

If you're lucky enough to have day old braised beef on hand, let it simmer away for a few hours while you bake your potatoes, scoop out their flesh, press it through a potato ricer, quickly kneed it with flour and a grind of nutmeg and a couple of egg yolks, then roll it into ropes, slice them into little dumplings, and poach them one batch at a time in simmering salted water. By now your beef has broken down into the deepest flavored meat sauce you've ever tasted, at which point you toss it with the soft potato gnocchi and bake it, preferably in a Vulcan

oven like the one in the Kneseth Israel kitchen that is as old as I am. Iron and fire from a time when no one knew the words “microwave,” “convection oven,” or even “self-cleaning.”

At home I call the fish course, a salad of chilled **cioppino**, “deconstructed gefilte fish,” because it has all the elements of the Ashkenazi classic, minus the grinder and binder. Wild caught white fish fillets such as flounder, haddock and pollock are gently stewed in house made fish stock and white wine with familiar carrots and onions—and decidedly unfamiliar tomatoes. A little bit briny with magnified flavors and ever so slightly sweet. The portion is small—imagine the size of a thick slice of gefilte fish.

Of all the items on this menu, the **lentil rice soup** is probably closest to what Italian Jews, *Italkim*, might have served at their Shabbat tables. They were generally working poor, and their cuisine haimishe. This hearty soup, flavored from chicken bones, necks and a few wings, is both warming and satisfying. Nutritionists today tell us the combination of legumes (lentils) and carbohydrates (rice) so common in Italy’s *cucina povera* [poor folks’ cuisine] forms a complete protein with some fiber thrown in for good measure. We just think it tastes great.

What broccoli would look like if Dr. Seuss imagined it into being? That’s what **rapini** (pronounced “rah-pea-knee”) look like, with its curvy stems, odd shaped florets and spiky leaves. When the entrepreneurs behind the Andy Boy brand introduced their hybrid perfected for California cultivation to American produce aisles, someone came up with the really bad idea to call it, “Broccoli Rape,” intending to pronounce it “broccoli rah-pay.” They thought if they called it broccoli, all those millions of people who love to eat their broccoli would buy it, even though it’s not even from the same family as broccoli. (It’s actually related to turnips, but I digress.)

And if calling your new vegetable that isn’t really broccoli “broccoli” wasn’t mistaken enough, expecting customers to pronounce something spelled r,a,p,e “rah-pay” sure was. So the marketing geniuses at Andy Boy changed the name to “broccoli raab,” however that is supposed to be pronounced. Meanwhile, its

curious appearance, emerald green color when cooked properly, and pleasingly bitter taste caught on. Now they call it what Italians have always called it, *rapini*. (Except for the Italians who call it *cima di rape*, pronounced, “cheema di rah-pay,” but that’s another story.)

Ilanit Evers will be making her ethereal Israeli challah with the assistance of a new (to us) 20 quart Hobart stand mixer that her husband Aloys tracked down from a kosher restaurant in New York, thanks to a generous contribution secured by Rabbi Weisblum. I’m naming it Yankel.

Leah Prichep will surprise us with her dessert that always look as great as they taste, and I’m hoping once again she will make extra for the Kiddush that Saturday.

A special thanks to the kitchen day crew, Paula Carrigan, Susan Maier, Lesley Harris, and Gilbert Mouyal, and the night crew, Marshall Mentz, Glenn Carr, Anna Foer, Catherine Davidson, and Larry Wolf. Thanks to David Cohen for coordinating the Shabbat Dinners to Go program and to Rabbi Weisblum for kosher supervision.

Most of all, thanks to you for enjoying your dinner.

- Steve Lebowitz
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