

Varina Palladino's
Jersey Italian
Love Story

A Novel

Terri-Lynne DeFino



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RECIPES

Sunday Gravy

Gravy or sauce? Pasta or macaroni? The debate is real. In Jersey, we grew up having macaroni and gravy at our grandparents' house on Sundays, always around two in the afternoon.

INGREDIENTS

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 1 head garlic, crushed and chopped (yes, a whole head. At least. More, if you're so inclined.)
- 2 lbs meat, any cut, on the bone or boneless (pork makes a sweeter gravy, beef a heartier one. A combo of both is divine.)
- 3 28 oz cans crushed tomatoes (yes, canned. It holds up better to long cook times.)
- 1 6 oz can tomato paste
- 2 tbsp* dried basil
- 1 tbsp* dried oregano
- 1/2 tsp crushed red pepper (optional)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 cup vermouth (you can use wine, red or white. I prefer vermouth.)
- 2 tbsp butter (optional)

Put olive oil, onion, and garlic into a heavy stockpot. Sauté on medium heat until translucent. Don't let them brown! It makes for

a bitter gravy. Brown whatever meat you're using to sear in the juices, and so your sauce doesn't taste "bloody." You can use pretty much any meat in the gravy. Italians are a resourceful people. Whatever cut was available—usually the cheapest—went into the pot. Remove from heat (so you don't get splattered . . . but you will anyway at some point) and add the crushed tomatoes and tomato paste, basil, oregano, red pepper, and salt. Stir until well incorporated and return to heat. Keep it on medium until it's simmering, then set it to low. Put the lid on, but leave it tipped just a little to let some of the heat/steam escape. Now, the most important part—**NEVER LET IT GET HOTTER THAN A LOW SIMMER.** Boiling takes away all the flavor. Low and slow is key. Give it a turn every once in a while, but let it cook at least two hours before checking the meat for doneness and flavor. Thicker cuts (like braggiol' or a pork loin) will need longer. Something like Bolognese** will be just about done. Meat should be fork-tender.

Once the meat is fall-apart, add the vermouth and butter. Let it simmer another ten minutes. If time allows, take it off the heat and let it sit, covered, for an hour (more or less is fine).

Mangia!

*When making Sunday gravy, always use dried herbs. Fresh herbs lose all their flavor over the long cook. The measurements above are rough ones, and probably on the too-little side. It all depends upon the palate in question, and the quality of the dried herbs. If you can't smell them when you open the container, you'll need more . . . or a new container of bas'nigol'.

**If you want Bolognese, use a combination of beef and pork three parts to one. Brown lightly at the outset. Drain the fat if you're a fool . . . I mean, if you want to be healthy and cut down on your fat intake.

Varina's Meatballs

Easiest thing to make; hardest to get right.

INGREDIENTS

2 eggs

1 cup *Italian seasoned** breadcrumbs

1 lb ground beef (85/15 is the leanest you should go)

1/3 lb ground pork

olive oil

And that's it. You make or break a meatball by how you roll them, the ingredients you use, and the proper sear before they go into the sauce.

Whisk the eggs and breadcrumbs together. Add the *cold* meat to the mixture. Do not overmix, or the warmth of your hands—yes, use your hands, so take off your rings—will break down the fat in the meat.

Once everything is incorporated, you roll. Ping-pong sized, or tennis balls, roll lightly. Pack them tight and you'll have dense meatballs. Sear in olive oil, getting a good crust but not cooking through, before adding them to your pot of gravy.

Whatever their size, let them cook at least a couple of hours for the magical transfer of tomato to meat, meat to tomato to occur.

*Italian seasoned breadcrumbs will have all the garlic, salt, onion, cheese, and herbs you need. The sauce will already be seasoned enough otherwise.

Varina's Chicken Picatta

This sounds fancy, but it's one of the simplest things to make, and doesn't take long at all.

INGREDIENTS

Four chicken breasts, pounded thin
Flour to coat (gluten-free option: almond flour)
2 to 3 tbsp olive oil
2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced
1 shallot, minced
1 cup chicken broth
2 to 3 tbsp butter
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup white wine (or vermouth—I always prefer vermouth)
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp cornstarch*
Juice from 1 lemon
1 heaping tbsp capers
A good handful of fresh (dry doesn't cut it) Italian parsley

Coat the chicken breasts in flour and give them a quick sear in the olive oil. Set them aside. Add the garlic and shallot to the pan, sauté until translucent (never brown). Deglaze the pan with the chicken broth, then return the chicken to the pan, along with the butter and wine. Bring to a gentle simmer and let cook until the chicken is done. If you've pounded the chicken thin enough, it won't take long. Maybe ten minutes. As always, never let it get above a simmer, otherwise you'll lose all the flavor of the wine and butter, and the chicken will be tough.

*If you like your sauce more brothy, skip the cornstarch.

Once the chicken is done, remove the pan from the heat. In a separate bowl, add about 3 tbsp of the liquid from the pan to the cornstarch, stirring until well incorporated. Slowly stir this mixture into the pan, along with the lemon juice, capers, and parsley. Put back on a very low heat, stirring until thickened (about three minutes).