



Culinary Craftwork Newsletter: Sept. 2010

Italian Harvest

It's all about farm fresh ingredients!

Hot Off The Press!

My new website is up and running. Come visit and let me know what you think.

CulinaryCraftwork.com

This issue of the newsletter highlights fresh ingredients with an Italian accent. There are four easy and tasty recipes: **Bruschetta 'Caprese' (Page 5); Sicilian Eggplant Caponata (Page 6); Breaded Veal 'Giardiniera' with Tricolor Salad (Page 8); and Red Snapper 'Livornese' (Page 9).**

Culinary Craftwork is my business, which specializes in offering private, semi-private, and group cooking classes. Some of you may remember me from when I taught cooking classes at Williams-Sonoma in Los Gatos. I am grateful to all of you who encouraged me to branch out on my own!

The Culinary Craftwork experience is different in that the classes I offer are fully customizable to what you want. I teach the classes in your own home at a time that is convenient for you. And I do all the shopping.

It is my mission to give you the tools you need to prepare meals that will seduce you with savor and wow your guests.

My website contains many sample menus that focus on building different skills, but I am happy to partner with you and come up with something new. The classes are fun, informal, and informative—and you get to eat!

The Culinary Craftwork newsletter is a monthly publication that focuses on seasonal fare with recipes and pictures. My newsletter also includes a section called "Ask the Chef," so please don't be shy—email me with your questions.



Professional In-home Cooking Classes

Culinary Craftwork offers professionally taught in-home cooking classes by a chef with over 20 years' experience in restaurants and catering.

The classes are designed to build basic skills and boost confidence in the kitchen. I teach the classes in your own home, offer themed menus, cooking class parties and catered dinner parties.

Full class descriptions and prices are available on my website.

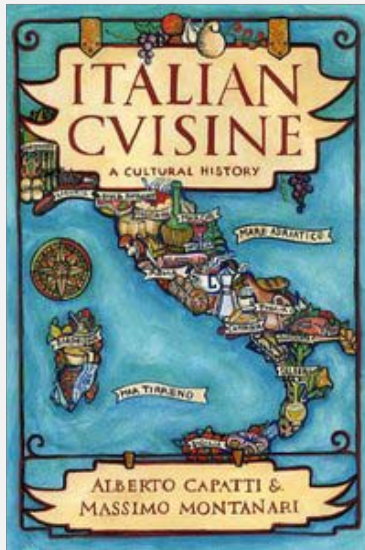
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Italy today is a multicultural melting pot, and its variety of culinary practices reflects its long history.

The authors of *Italian Cuisine: a Cultural History*, by Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, have produced a scholarly work that explores the culinary customs, food lore, and cooking practices of Italy, dating back to the Middle Ages.

Italian culinary practices have had a global effect on other cuisines. If you are a foodie at heart, you may find this an interesting read.

[Click here to view "Italian Cuisine: A Cultural History" online for FREE! from Google Books.](#)



We've had a cool summer this year, which delayed the harvest of many fruits and vegetables, and it will be over in just a few short weeks; already there is a crisp chill in the night air, but the markets are filled to capacity with ripe produce—and that's a good thing because this month's newsletter highlights Italian cuisine, which is built around using fresh, local ingredients. Celebrity chef Mario Batali is fond of saying that Italians feel it is their birthright to have only the freshest ingredients possible at their disposal, and I'm sure that's true.

Italian cooks typically go to market daily and choose the best produce, picked at the peak of freshness. And they tend to shop around. It's not uncommon for an Italian cook to travel across town to find perfect tomatoes. It may not be the most efficient way of shopping, but it is fun to check out the various markets and see what new things have come into season. I have to admit that I enjoy shopping this way—going from store to store in search of the best quality and best value—a bit time-consuming but generally worth the extra effort.

Tomatoes are at their best right now, and while used extensively in modern day Italian cooking, they only arrived in Europe in the mid-fifteenth century and were slow to catch on. But catch on they finally did—and with a vengeance. When we think of Italian food, pasta with “red” sauce has become iconic. Originally native to South America, tomatoes were brought north by indigenous peoples for cultivation.

Here in America we tend to think of many dishes as Italian when in fact they were new creations developed by the waves of Italian immigrants who settled here. For example, spaghetti and meatballs as we know it has no equivalent in Italian cuisine. In Italy meatballs, or polpetti, are served on their own—not with spaghetti. When the celebrated chef/author Anthony Bourdain traveled to Tuscany for his television show, *No Reservations*, he prepared linguine carbonara with meatballs for some Italian friends on the set. Unfortunately, the Italians were aghast and outright affronted by the giant, golf-ball sized meatballs and gooey pasta. It made good TV....

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Interestingly, Italian cuisine as we know it today has only been around for a comparatively short time. Prior to the late 19th century, Italy was not a unified country; rather there was a loose affiliation of some twenty or more separate regions representing different cultures, languages and eating habits. Each region depended on what was locally available, and so there evolved distinct regional diversity.

Whereas one region may utilize olive oil as the fat of choice in its cooking, another region will rely on butter. Pasta rules in the south, but rice is king in the north. A distinction between “northern” and “southern” Italian cooking came about in the 1970’s when restaurants were undergoing a renaissance and “la nouvelle cuisine” was all the rage. The division between northern and southern Italian cookery is a bit deceptive, however, as inland provinces eat considerably differently than coastal regions.

Typically, an inland city such as Milan relies on meats with rice or corn polenta, while a coastal city such as Venice feasts on fresh seafood. Both cities are considered “northern,” but their culinary patterns are quite different. The classic Italian meal is composed of the following elements: a soup, pasta or risotto followed by the main course (meat or fish with a vegetable), followed by a salad and then dessert.

It can be said that Christopher Columbus was the first Italian-American, though he came to America under the auspices of the Spanish crown; he returned to Europe with a large assortment of fruits and vegetables including sweet potatoes that were new. In years past, having fresh ingredients in the kitchen was more a matter of luck than design. In medieval times, food was heavily spiced for several reasons; one so that the founder of the feast could impress his guests with his conspicuous wealth and two, so that his guests wouldn't know how rotten the food they were eating really was.... The spices also helped act as a preservative for curing meats.

As Bay Area residents we are fortunate to have many well stocked stores and farmers’ markets. I love shopping—especially when there is nothing in particular that I am looking for, and there is no time pressure. I especially love browsing the exotics at stores such as [India Cash & Carry \(Yelp\)](#), and the International Food Bazaar ([Yelp](#)). For good olive oil and other products, the [Olive Bar \(Yelp\)](#) in downtown Campbell is definitely worth a visit. I’m especially fond of the extra virgin olive oil from Israel.

Whole Foods Market has a terrific produce section (along with a reputation for being expensive —“Whole Paycheck”), but I find there are some good values to be had there. Other high-end groceries such as Cosentino’s, Lunardi’s, and Andronico’s also have excellent produce. Recently, however, I’ve discovered a couple of independent produce stores that are worth mentioning: Foothill Produce ([Yelp](#)) in Los Altos is located a few doors down from Trader Joe’s, where I often shop, at the junction of Foothill Blvd. and Homestead; and Oakmont Produce ([Yelp](#)), located on Hamilton Avenue in Campbell at Darryl, has become one of my new favorite neighborhood stores.

Oakmont Produce carries a good assortment of seasonal fresh goods, such as sour cherries (which they had in early August—I did not see them at any other store) as well as a large number of specialty imports from Europe, Russia and the Middle East including meats, cheeses, dry goods and frozen specialties. Across the street from Oakmont Produce is the Hamilton Euromarket ([Yelp](#)), which specializes in European dry goods.

While I recommend shopping at the local farmers’ markets, the produce can be expensive and the markets are only open on certain days of the week. If you happen to be down by the coast, Watsonville has some nice farm stands along Hwy 152. You can make a day of it, visiting [wineries](#) and stopping for some locally grown produce. A new market recently opened in Sunnyvale, [Sprouts](#), which likens itself to a farmers’ market. (Actually, it is more like a cross between Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s—definitely worth a visit if you happen to live or be in that area.)

Locally grown produce makes a difference.



Locally grown produce tends to taste better.

Most likely it was just picked, which ensures crispness and flavor. Produce that travels long distances is typically several days older. Sugars turn to starches, plant cells shrink, and produce loses some of its vitality and flavor.

Locally grown produce tends to be more nutritious.

Once harvested, produce tends to lose some of its nutritional value over time.

Locally grown produce promotes energy conservation.

They say that on average food travels some 1500 miles from farm to fork. By buying locally, we conserve the energy that’s used in transportation.

[Click here for more information from sustainabletable.org.](http://sustainabletable.org)

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Northern California Harvest Calendar

Vegetables											
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Asian Greens											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Asparagus											
		●	●	●	●						
Beans											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Broccoli											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Brussels Sprouts											
●	●	●						●	●	●	●
Carrots											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Cauliflower											
●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●
Celery											
		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Corn											
				●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Cucumber											
			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Eggplant											
		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Garlic											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lettuce											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mushrooms											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Onions											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Parsnips											
●	●	●	●	●	●					●	●
Peas											
		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Peppers, Bell											
		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Potatoes											
●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●
Spinach											
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Squash, Summer											
			●	●	●	●	●				
Squash, Winter											
●	●								●	●	●
Sweet Potatoes											
								●	●	●	●
Tomatoes											
		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

[Click here to view a complete harvest calendar, which also includes fruits.](#)

Snap Restaurant Review: Maggiano's Little Italy in Santana Row

Over the past five or six years, my husband and I have patronized [Maggiano's Little Italy](#) restaurant in Santana Row. We go there for special occasions or at off-hours, as the place is always a hotbed of activity. Reservations are a must unless you are dining at the bar. The restaurant is large and noisy, and the service varies considerably, but we like the food which is reasonably priced and plentiful. In fact, we always end up taking leftovers home or sharing a single entrée.



Maggiano's Little Italy, Santana Row

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Maggiano's is not an "authentically" Italian restaurant—it is unabashedly Italian-American. It's my guess that Italians from Italy would be horrified by what passes for Italian food at Maggiano's, but much of the food is quite good (with some exceptions). They have a large menu featuring dishes served "family style," though many items are available in half-portions. It can be helpful, however, to know what they excel at in order to avoid disappointment. I find it best to stick with the known winners.

Appetizers are all quite good—especially the fried zucchini, calamari and stuffed mushrooms. Among the pastas and entrées, the gnocchi with tomato-vodka sauce is excellent and the wild mushroom ravioli baked in a cheesy cream sauce is heavenly but calorie-laden. I'm fond of Maggiano's eggplant parmigiana, though it is quite heavy. In fact that is one of my chief complaints about the food—much of it is very heavy. Eating small portions is definitely the way to go. Save room for dessert though because Maggiano's apple crostata, tiramisu, and profiteroles are scrumptious. Again, the portions are large, so plan to share.



[Click here to see what others have to say about Maggiano's Little Italy, Santana Row.](#)

About This Month's Recipes

The recipes that I've included in this newsletter are a few of my personal favorites: Bruschetta 'Caprese' with Tomatoes & Mozzarella; Sicilian Eggplant Caponata; Red Snapper 'Livornese'; and Breaded Veal with Tricolor Salad 'Giardiniera.'

The first two recipes are classic Italian recipes; the red snapper and breaded veal recipes, however, are newer creations that are Italian-American hybrids. 'Giardiniera' usually refers to a mix of pickled vegetables (such as onions, celery, zucchini, carrots and cauliflower), in vinegar or oil, and it can be either hot or sweet. The recipe for veal 'giardiniera' does not contain pickled vegetables, but includes a salad dressed with balsamic vinegar. I've always interpreted 'giardiniera' to mean 'garden style.'

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Bruschetta 'Caprese' with Tomatoes & Mozzarella



An Italian “antipasto” doesn’t get much simpler than Bruschetta ‘Caprese’—perfectly ripe tomatoes, diced and dressed with extra virgin olive oil, vinegar, a touch of garlic and lots of fresh basil and parsley paired with fresh mozzarella and set atop a slice of grilled rustic bread. I could eat this every day. Maybe twice a day. Bruschetta first originated in central Italy around the 15th century, and there are many variations from region to region. The following recipe is a classic.

Bruschetta 'Caprese' with Tomatoes & Mozzarella

Serves 4+ as an appetizer

Ingredients

- 4-5 ripe Roma plum tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 3 Tbs. extra virgin olive oil (approximately)
- 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 2 Tbs. red wine vinegar
- 2 Tbs. chopped Italian parsley
- 2 Tbs. shredded basil chiffonade
- Salt & freshly ground pepper to taste
- A pinch of crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 rustic Italian baguette, sliced on the bias
- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 ball of fresh mozzarella

Directions

1. In a bowl, combine the seeded, diced tomatoes (no need to skin them) with the garlic, extra virgin olive oil, chopped parsley and basil. Season to taste with salt, freshly ground black pepper, and a pinch of crushed red pepper flakes.
2. Slice the mozzarella into 1/8-inch slices and let come to room temperature.
3. Make the bruschetta (grilled bread). Brush the sliced bread on both sides with olive oil. Grill the bread on a gas grill until marked on one side; turn over and grill until marked on the other side. Rub the bruschetta lightly with a garlic clove to infuse its flavor. Alternatively, you can bake the toasts in a 400° oven for 10 minutes or until golden and slightly crispy.
4. Assemble the bruschetta: On a platter arrange the grilled bread. Top with a slice of mozzarella and a spoonful of the tomato mixture. Serve immediately.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Why Shop The Farmers' Markets



Freshness

With a few exceptions, produce is brought to market the same day or within a day of picking. That's fresh!

Flavor

Fruits like peaches, strawberries and tomatoes are picked when ripe, not before. Ripening on the tree or vine adds significantly to flavor.

Seasonal Variety

At the farmers' market I often find seasonal varieties that are not available in stores.

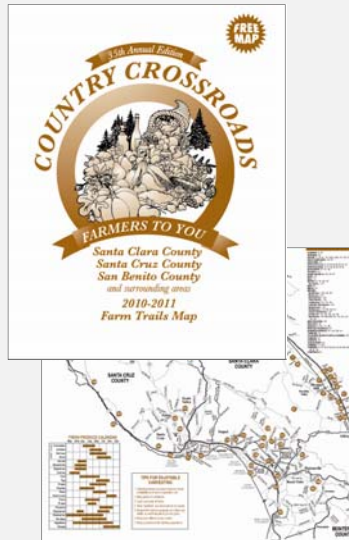
I often visit the Farmers' Market in Campbell on Sunday mornings (Campbell Ave. between 2nd St. & Central Ave., from 9 –1 pm). I also like the market in Los Gatos (Town Park Plaza, 8:00 am–noon Apr. thru. Dec. and 9:00–noon Jan. thru. Mar.)

The following links list many of the other farmers' markets in the South Bay.

[Click here for South Bay Farmers' Markets.](#)

[Click here for Farmers' Markets in Los Gatos, Saratoga, and Willow Glen.](#)

You can buy your produce at the farm.



For years independent farmers have been producing this pamphlet which lists farms that sell directly to the public in Santa Clara, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties. A map is also included.

Some farmers maintain roadside stands while others let you pick your own produce (u-pick). This guide can be the beginning of a family adventure in seeking out good food. Fun and educational for the kids.

Important Tips

1. Call ahead before you leave home to check availability and hours of operation, etc.
2. Bring plenty of containers.
3. Wear old clothes and sturdy shoes for U-pick.

[Click here to download a PDF copy of the Country Crossroads guide.](#)

Sicilian Eggplant Caponata



I've sampled more than a few versions of eggplant caponata, and the following recipe hits all the right marks. My husband (who, for the record, does not eat eggplant) devoured the dish. He was crazy about the savory sweet/sour notes (known as agrodolce), the salty olives and capers and the soft, oily eggplant and tomatoes. We consumed the entire recipe in just three days! This is an excellent dish to serve for people who are not fond of eating vegetables.

Caponata hails from Sicily, where it often includes anchovies. It is believed that caponata was brought to Sicily by the Saracens in ancient times. It is best to make caponata at least a day ahead and kept refrigerated to allow the flavors to meld. Let the caponata come back to room temperature before serving. You can eat it 'as is' or serve it with crostini (grilled bread slices).

Sicilian Eggplant Caponata

Makes about 4 cups, or 6–8 servings as an appetizer

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 4 cups 1/4-inch dice unpeeled eggplant (about 1-1/2 pounds)
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed or minced
- 3/4 cup finely chopped onion
- 1/3 cup finely chopped celery
- 1 large red bell pepper, diced
- 1/3 cup pitted green olives
- 3 tablespoons chopped drained bottled capers
- 1/4 cup red-wine vinegar
- 1-1/2 tablespoons sugar, or to taste
- 3 tablespoons golden raisins
- 3 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted lightly
- 3 plum tomatoes, cut into 1/4-inch diced (about 1 cup) or canned crushed tomatoes
- 1/4 cup finely chopped flat-leafed parsley leaves
- Salt & freshly ground pepper to taste

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

See next page for directions.

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Sicilian Eggplant Caponata (Cont.)

Directions

1. Prepare the eggplant: cut the eggplant into ¼-inch cubes and transfer to a colander. Sprinkle with kosher salt and place a bowl with a weight on top of the eggplant. Let drain for 1 hour. Blot the eggplant with paper towels.
2. In a heavy, preferably nonstick skillet heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil over moderately high heat until it is hot but not smoking. Add the eggplant in one layer, stirring, for 3 to 5 minutes, or until it is golden brown and tender; transfer it to a bowl. You may need to cook the eggplant in batches (if the eggplant is crowded, it will steam instead sauté).
3. To the skillet add 2 tablespoons olive oil and in it cook the onion, red pepper, garlic and the celery over moderate heat, stirring, for 5 minutes until the onion has softened. Add the olives, the capers, the vinegar, the sugar, the raisins, the pine nuts, and the tomatoes and cook the mixture, covered, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes more. Add the eggplant, and season to taste. Stir in the parsley, let the caponata cool, and chill it, covered, overnight for the best flavor.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Garden Fresh Tomatoes



This summer my husband and I planted tomatoes for the first time. Since we don't have much space, we planted them in large pots. The tomatoes that we are continuing to harvest have excellent flavor and have been a great return on investment.

Each plant cost approximately \$2.00 (we planted two types: Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes, and Mamma Mia plum tomatoes, for a total of three plants).

We also planted herbs—basil, thyme and chives—which are best used fresh. While I use many spices in my cooking (my spice cabinet is quite full), I rarely use dried herbs as I find the flavors to be overly intense or virtually nonexistent.

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Never refrigerate tomatoes.



Use wicker baskets to ripen/store tomatoes, which should never be refrigerated, as the cold inhibits ripening and has a detrimental effect on flavor.

Raffia helps cushion delicate produce, allowing it to breathe.

Breaded Veal 'Gardiniera' with Tricolor Salad



I'm not altogether certain about the provenance of the following recipe for breaded veal 'gardiniera' (or garden style); the dish was introduced to me by my stepmother, Susan, who has made it for years using veal or boneless pork loin. Turkey cutlets, pounded thin, would also be a good and less expensive option than veal. The meat is pounded thin, breaded, pan-fried in olive oil, and topped with a salad dressed with balsamic vinaigrette. Unfortunately, I can't think of anything breaded and pan-fried that falls into the category of healthy eating. <sigh> But it is so good... and the salad part is healthful, right?

Breaded Veal 'Gardiniera' with Tricolor Salad

Serves 2

Ingredients

- ½ cup balsamic vinegar
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 cup all purpose flour mixed with salt & pepper
- 2 cups Progresso Panko bread crumbs with Italian seasoning
- 2 boneless loin veal chops, butterflied and pounded to ¼-inch thickness (or scallopini)
- Olive oil for pan-frying
- 1 Belgian endive
- 1 cup of baby arugula
- 1 cup of radicchio leaves
- ½ cup ripe cherry tomatoes, halved
- Several slices of thinly sliced red onion
- Salt & freshly ground pepper to taste
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 shallot, finely minced

Directions

1. Make the balsamic dressing for the salad: In a small bowl, combine the balsamic vinegar with salt and pepper. Slowly beat in the extra virgin olive oil. Add the minced shallots and garlic. Prepare the salad greens, red onion and tomatoes in a bowl.
2. Preheat two skillets over medium-high heat. Add enough olive oil to liberally coat the bottom of each pan.
3. Bread the veal: Dip each veal scallop into the flour, shake off the excess, and dip it into the beaten eggs. Coat each of the veal scallops with the breadcrumbs. Pan-fry the breaded veal until the crumbs have formed a crisp, golden crust. Turn over and pan-fry on the other side until crisp and golden. Remove from the heat and blot lightly with paper towels. Transfer to serving plates. Dress the salad and season to taste with salt and freshly ground pepper. Distribute the salad on top of the cooked, breaded veal and serve immediately.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

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Red Snapper 'Livornese'



The city of Livorno is the third largest port city in Italy—located just to the west of Tuscany on the Ligurian Sea. The following recipe for Red Snapper 'Livornese' can be made with a variety of fish, depending on what's available at any given time. Once again, it is best to take advantage of which fish are in season and available locally. Red snapper is considerably more 'meaty' than sole or cod, which I don't recommend as the flesh is too soft. Swordfish is a good choice (either grilled or sautéed) as it can stand up to the assertive tomato sauce with olives and capers. Most recipes for Red Snapper 'Livornese' call for baking the fish in the sauce. I've made it that way, but as you can see in the photo above, the fish juices dilute the sauce, and it can be difficult to time for doneness. Texturally, I prefer the golden crispiness of sautéed fish to poached fish.

Red Snapper 'Livornese'

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 4 red snapper fillets
- 6 ripe plum tomatoes
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons of capers
- 1/4 cup of olive oil
- A pinch of sugar
- 2 large garlic cloves, sliced
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 2/3 cup Kalamata or Gaetta olives, pitted and halved
- 1/3 cup onion, finely diced
- 1/4 cup chopped Italian parsley
- Salt & freshly ground pepper to taste

Directions

1. Prepare the tomatoes: Trim the stem end of the tomatoes and make an "x" slice on the pointed end. Heat a pot of water to boiling. Add a bit of salt. Blanch the tomatoes in the boiling water for about 30 seconds; then transfer the tomatoes to an ice water bath. Slip off the tomato skins with a paring knife and squeeze the tomatoes to remove the seeds. Chop the tomatoes. You should have about 3 cups.
2. Make the tomato sauce: Heat the olive oil in a large sauce pan over medium heat. Add the sliced garlic and cook until golden brown and fragrant. Add the onion and cook until onion is translucent, about 8 minutes.
3. Add the tomatoes, ¼ cup wine, broth, sugar, salt and pepper to taste. Simmer for 15 minutes, then add the olives and capers. Simmer for an additional five minutes.
4. Heat two sauté pans over high heat. Add 2 Tbs. of olive oil to each. When the oil starts to shimmer, carefully place the fish fillets in the pans, skin side down. Sauté the fillets until golden, turn over and cook briefly till just done. Remove the fillets to a warm serving plate. Deglaze the pan with the remaining ¼ cup of white wine. Add 3 cups of the tomato sauce to the pan, along with the chopped parsley. Serve the fillets with sauce spooned over top.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

Use a nonstick pan to sauté fish.



I recommend using a nonstick pan to sauté fish (if you've got one).

Fish have a tendency to stick and can be difficult to turn over. Calphalon, All Clad, and Anolon make some excellent nonstick pans.

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Ask the Chef



I love hearing from people who have read the newsletter or taken one of my classes. I enjoy the opportunity to answer your questions in this general forum, and I hope that my advice is helpful.

Please continue to send me your questions, comments and ideas. They really make my day. 😊

Thank you!
Alyssa

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Fresh Pasta vs. Dried Pasta

Damian asks, "Is fresh pasta better than dry pasta?"

Reply: It's not really a case of which is better. Both fresh and dry pasta are good but different. Dry pasta usually does not contain eggs, and can be cooked "al dente." There are many excellent dried pasta brands, such as Del Cecco, which is available in most groceries. "Boutique" brands can be found at stores like Williams-Sonoma or Cosentino's. Fresh pasta typically contains eggs and is more tender; it cooks quickly but cannot be cooked "al dente" because it is so soft. I don't recommend using fresh angel hair pasta, as it is liable to turn into a mushy nest. Fresh fettucine or pappardelle, however, can be excellent.

Differentiating Pine Nuts and Pignoli

Leslie asks, "Is there a difference between pine nuts and pignoli? And where do they come from? Are they really nuts?"

Reply: Pine nuts and pignoli (or pignolias) are one and the same. There are several varieties—some bigger and meatier than others. Pignoli is the Italian word for pine nuts. They are harvested from the mature pine cones of specific cultivars and are seeds rather than true tree nuts such as walnuts or hazelnuts. While a wide variety of dried seeds and fruits are called nuts in English, only a certain number of them are deemed true nuts by botanists. Peanuts, for example, are from the bean family and are not tree nuts.

Cooking with Convection Ovens

Pat asks, "I just got a brand new convection oven. Are there some things that cook better without the fan on, and vice versa?"

Reply: Fan-assisted convection ovens distribute heat more efficiently, making them great for most baking. But it's a very dry heat—not so good for things such as roasting meats and baking bread. To compensate for the dry air in the oven, you can place an oven-safe dish of water in the oven, or throw a glass of water (or wine) in the roasting pan to get some steam going and accumulate pan juices.

When using a convection oven food tends to cook faster, and the temperature is 25 degrees hotter than the dial reads. For example, if a recipe calls for baking a cake at 350°F the temperature should be adjusted down to 325°F in a convection oven.

Using Fresh Herbs vs. Dried

Steve asks, "I don't like to buy fresh herbs because they are expensive and I always end up using what I need for a recipe and then throwing out the rest. What is the equivalent amount of dried herbs that I can substitute?"

Reply: The ratio of fresh herbs to dry is generally about 3 to 1. In other words, if your recipe calls for 1 Tbs. of fresh herbs, you would use 1 tsp. of dried herbs (there are three tsp. to a Tbs.). Some herbs intensify with drying, such as thyme and rosemary, so be careful when substituting dry herbs. When in doubt, use less. Other herbs such as cilantro and parsley lose much of their fragrance and flavor when dried. It is worth paying extra to have the incomparable flavors of fresh cilantro and parsley.

As you know, I'm a huge advocate of using fresh ingredients, but there are times when it makes sense to use dried herbs. I understand about not wanting to waste money or ingredients—that's just my two cents.