

# Gianni Gosetti at the Ristorante Roma at Tolmezzo in Friuli gets his maize flour from the local mill

and makes *polenta* in a heavy copper pan with a cone-shaped bottom (*caldiera*) which fits into a hole in the hearth (*foger*). He stirs the thick, gurgling, splattering mass for three quarters of an hour, in the old way, with a wooden oar (*caldina*). Friulo, in the north-east of Italy near the Yugoslav border, is a bit of a backwater and has kept its traditions more than the rest of Italy. Although they are famous for their fruity white wines and their sweet and tender cured hams, Friulans complain that no one knows they are there, that everyone thinks Italy stops at Venice and that they are poorer than anyone else in the

north. They make cheese in cow sheds and smoke ham and geese in bedrooms with the smoke that comes up through the floorboards from burning juniper and fruit wood in the kitchen; and they make their own wine and *grappa*, a powerful alcohol distilled from grape seeds and skins.

Gianni Gosetti's father cooked sophisticated international dishes for King Victor Emanuel of Italy, but Gianni, at home in the Carnia mountains, has gone back to peasant food. For starters he offered us San Daniele ham, fresh, creamy ricotta made from the morning's milk, *porcini* mushrooms picked in the fields and a bowl of rocket and other wild salad leaves. To follow there was *cjalson*—large half-moon shaped ravioli stuffed with a mixture of ricotta, wild herbs, grated cheese, raisins, fried onion, cinnamon and bread crumbs soaked in milk. Then came pheasant in a wine sauce on a bed of polenta and a warm apple slice with walnuts, cinnamon and grappa. Gianni says he learnt how to make all these from the *nonnine* (little grandmothers) in the surrounding villages.

There is a passion now in Italy for rediscovering tradition and poor peasant dishes, such as *polenta* and bean soup; and those based on bread or dried chestnuts, or made with offal or wild plants or game, are especially popular and fashionable. Until the Second World War the cooking had been the same for hundreds of years. But eating habits changed with the dramatic transformation of the country in the 1950s and 60s from an agricultural world with archaic farming methods into a highly industrialised modern consumer society. When peasants abandoned the land for the cities and people from the poorer south invaded the richer north in search of work and a better life, there was some homogenising of cultures and cooking styles. Nonetheless every region in Italy is a world in itself with its own identity. The landscape, the vegetation, the climate constantly change, and every town or village is quite different from the next. The architecture, the ambience, the way people behave are different and you can hear different dialects, even different languages. In fact, there is no such thing as Italian cooking, only Sicilian, Piedmontese,

Neapolitan, Venetian, Florentine, Genoese, and so on. And regional patriotism—they call it *campaniolismo*—is such that every region feels strongly about its own food and lays claim to having the best.

This extraordinary diversity is a legacy of Italy's fragmented past and its division, until the unification of the country a hundred and thirty years ago, into many independent sovereign states. There were kingdoms, duchies, lordships, and republics, papal and city states, each with its own history, culture and traditions. A kaleidoscope of foreign influence—the French in Piedmont; Austrians in Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto; Yugoslavs in Venezia Giulia; Spaniards in the south; Arabs in Sicily—reinforced the differences. The regions and even towns and villages had their own dishes. The broad divisions were between north and south. Butter was the cooking fat in the north, porkfat in the centre, and olive oil in the south. The Italy of *polenta* and rice and boiled meats lay to the north, and the Italy of pizza and dried pasta and aubergines was in the south. Black pepper was used in the north, hot red pepper in the south. In the north they cooked with wine, in the south with tomatoes.

Now the culinary borders have been blurred and there is no longer a precise geography of food, but the differences have not been entirely wiped out. The past twenty five years have seen the *invasione pizzaiola* and the adoption of pasta (both hardly ever eaten in the north before) in every corner of Italy. Mass production has brought standardisation. Professional cooks in all the main cities are mostly from the south and this has had a major influence on national taste. And Italy has succumbed to fast foods and has gone through many fashions from steak and salad after the war (a reaction against meat only once a week, the case for most country people) and French cuisine in restaurants, through hamburgers, sandwich and salad bars and nouvelle cuisine. Now there is dieting and concern with health which has made the 'Mediterranean diet' of the south more popular than the rich food of the north; a passion for wild things like mushrooms and salad leaves; and the cult of the new led by young people who do not want to

spend their money to eat what their grandmothers make.

*Cucina creativa*, the Italian version of *nouvelle cuisine* means that you may get risotto with strawberries and kiwi, ravioli stuffed with smoked salmon and spaghetti with curry sauce in any corner of Italy.

But despite all this, regional cooking is undergoing a renaissance. As their world rapidly changes and the old traditions seem to vanish, and when they appear to lose touch with their roots, people have begun to hanker for the good things of the past. Afraid to lose forever their culture and their link with the land, they have started to rediscover their heritage with dishes that evoke the 'happy days' when peasant farmers had many children, when the kitchen was the dining room and meals were convivial. Because the cooking is so varied, it was never formalised as it was in France and there is no *haute cuisine* or *cuisine bourgeoise* or classic national style.

The cooking of Italy is basically country cooking, a combination of peasant food and the grand dishes that belonged to the nobility which were eaten by the peasantry on special occasions, some only once a year at carnival time. Chefs explained that they wanted to update and revitalise tradition not embalm it. They make things lighter, with less stodge and less fat, and present them beautifully. When *polenta* was at the heart of the cooking of the north, and eaten for breakfast, lunch and supper, it was poured onto a huge wooden board and cut with a thread. Now it is served in small portions in the form of elegantly crisply fried or toasted slices (*crostoni*).

Once tourists would only ask for *spaghetti bolognese* or *alla carbonara*. Now, increasingly, they are keen to discover traditional regional cooking. For them many restaurants have begun to bring out in the summer months menus featuring '*cucina tipica*'. Here is some of it, a few favourite recipes from my book *The Food of Italy* (Chatto and Windus and Arrow).

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**BRUSCHETTA AL POMODORO**

*Toast with tomatoes*

**Serves 4**

8 small, thick slices of rough country bread  
1 clove garlic, cut in half  
Salt and pepper  
Olive oil  
2 large, very ripe tomatoes, roughly cut  
1 small sweet onion, chopped (optional)  
4 anchovy fillets (optional)

*Toast the bread on both sides. Rub one side with garlic, sprinkle with salt and pepper and olive oil. Cover with tomatoes and, if you like, a sprinkling of onion or a fillet of anchovy.*

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**FOCACCIA CON LE OLIVE**

*Flat bread with olives*

**Serves 8**

1 kg (2 lb) flour  
Salt  
50 g (2 oz) fresh – or 25 g (1 oz) dried yeast  
350 ml (12 fl. oz) warm water  
1 pinch of sugar  
150 ml (quarter pint) olive oil plus 6 tablespoons to brush on at the end  
150 ml (quarter pint) dry white wine  
400 g (14 oz) black olives, pitted and coarsely chopped  
1 tablespoon thyme  
2 tablespoons oregano

*Put the flour and a pinch of salt in a bowl and make a well in the centre. Dissolve the fresh yeast in half a glass of water, adding a pinch of sugar. Leave it to froth then stir into the flour. Or follow the packet instructions for dried yeast. Stir in 150 ml (quarter pint) olive oil and the wine, then add*

*the rest of the warm water, working it in with your hands—just enough so that the dough sticks together in a ball. Knead well for 10-15 minutes until soft and elastic, adding a little flour if it is too sticky. Then work in two-thirds of the olives and the thyme. Leave the dough to rise in a bowl covered by a damp cloth for 1-2 hours until doubled in bulk, then punch down and work for a minute or two. Roll out on a floured surface with a floured rolling pin to a thickness of about 1 cm (half an inch) and place on oiled trays, spreading it out with your hands. Sprinkle with salt and oregano and spread the rest of the olives over the top. Make many depressions all over the dough with your finger, bake at the hottest possible heat for about 25 minutes until lightly brown. Brush with the remaining oil and serve hot.*

**INVOLTINI DEL MELANZANE  
ALLA MOZZARELLA**

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*Aubergine slices stuffed with mozzarella*

**Serves 4-6**

1 very large aubergine (400-500 g, 14-18 oz)

Salt

Oil for frying

250 g (8 oz) mozzarella

8 basil leaves

Freshly ground pepper

*Slice the aubergine thinly, salt and leave to drain for an hour. Rinse and dry. Fry quickly in hot oil until tender and slightly brown. Drain on kitchen paper. Cut the mozzarella into slices, place a basil leaf on each slice, sprinkle with pepper. Roll each aubergine slice around a piece of cheese until the cheese softens. Serve at once.*

### **FAVE STUFFA AL CACIO**

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*Broad beans with fresh sheep's or goat's cheese*

**Serves 4**

1 kg (2.2 lb) fresh broad beans  
1 large melon, chopped  
4 tablespoons olive oil  
Salt and pepper  
250 g (half a pound) soft, barely salted sheep's or  
goat's cheese (*caprini*), cut into thick slices.

*Shell the broad beans. Fry the onion in oil till golden. Add the beans, stir for a minute or two. Then cover with water, season with salt and pepper, and simmer until they are very tender and the liquid absorbed. Serve hot with goat's cheese, warmed under the grill, on the same serving dish.*

### **VERMICELLI ALLA SIRA CUSANA**

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*Vermicelli with peppers, tomatoes and aubergines*

**Serves 4**

1 largish aubergine, cubed  
Salt  
1-2 fleshy yellow peppers  
3 tablespoons olive oil or more if needed.  
1 clove garlic  
2 anchovies, finely chopped  
4-5 tomatoes, peeled and chopped  
Pepper  
8 black olives, pitted and cut into pieces.  
1 tablespoon capers, their vinegar squeezed out and  
chopped  
Small bunch of basil, chopped  
400 g (14 oz) vermicelli on spaghetti  
Grated caciocavallo or pecorino cheese (optional)

*Sprinkle the aubergine cubes with salt and let the*

juices run out for an hour. Then rinse and dry them. Roast the pepper by turning it under the grill until the skin is brown and blistered. Put it in a polythene bag, close it, and after about ten minutes peel it (putting it in the bag makes it easier). Remove the seeds and cut the pepper into ribbons. In a large pan, fry the aubergines in oil, turning to brown them all over. Add the garlic, and when the aroma rises, the anchovies and then the tomatoes. Season with salt and pepper and simmer for about 15 minutes until the aubergines are tender. Then add the olives, capers, basil and yellow pepper, and cook a minute longer. Boil the vermicelli in plenty of salted boiling water until cooked al dente. Drain and serve topped with the sauce and pass the grated cheese around.

### **ZUPPA DI ZUCCA CON LE MANDORLE**

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Pumpkin soup with almonds

Serves 4

*This is a recipe from Jolanda Migliorini who cooks at her husband Valentino's restaurant, at Caorso, south-west of Cremona in the Piacentino.*

450 g (1 lb) pumpkin, peeled and diced  
900 ml (1 and a half pints) of milk  
Salt and pepper  
Freshly ground nutmeg  
300 ml (half a pint) single cream  
4 tablespoons chopped almonds, toasted

*Put the diced pumpkin into a saucepan, add milk, salt and nutmeg to taste. Bring to the boil and simmer for about 30 minutes. When it is tender, pour into a blender and process until smooth. Pour back into the saucepan, stir in the cream, taste and adjust seasoning. Reheat and serve, sprinkled with the toasted almonds. **NOTE** The success of this soup depends*



*on the flavour of the pumpkin. With so many varieties available, it is worth experimenting.*

**PESTO**

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*Genoese basil and pine nut sauce*

**Serves 4**

*A sauce to serve with fresh egg pasta such as fettuccine and tagliatelli.*

2 cloves of garlic, crushed

50 g (2 oz) pine nuts

Salt

4 tablespoons grated pecorino sardo or parmesan

50 g (2oz) basil, weighed with the stems (or 8 supermarket bunches)

150 ml (5 fl.oz) light olive oil

2-3 tablespoons prescinsoa (a creamy, acid ricotta) or fromage frais (optional)

*Pound the garlic and pine nuts in a large mortar with a little salt. Add the chopped basil leaves (the amount takes into account that the basil in Northern Europe is less perfumed), a few at a time, pounding and grinding the leaves against the sides of the bowl. You can also put anything in the blender. Now stir in the grated cheese and mix very well, then gradually beat in the olive oil (the olive oil of Liguria is very light, delicate and perfumed) and the prescinsoa or fromage frais.*

**SPAGHETTI ALLA 'PUTTANESCA'**

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*Spaghetti with olives, capers and anchovies*

**Serves 4**

*No one knows the origin of this name which appeared*

40 years ago. Before that, it was simply called *alla marina*. The sauce is very popular all over Italy and it is also served with *vermicelli* and *linguine*. *Gaeta olives* are used.

3 cloves of garlic, chopped  
4-5 tablespoons olive oil  
500 g (1 lb) tomatoes, peeled.  
50 g (2 oz) capers, squeezed  
100 g (4 oz) fleshy, tasty black olives, pitted  
100 g (4 oz) of anchovy fillets, finely chopped  
1 small, hot chilli pepper, chopped  
A few sprigs of oregano  
Good bunch of parsley, chopped  
500 g (1 lb) spaghetti vermicelli or linguine  
Salt

*Prepare the sauce: fry the garlic in two tablespoons of olive oil until golden. Add the tomatoes, capers, olives, a little pepper and oregano and simmer for about 10 minutes, then add the rest of the oil. A minute before serving, add the anchovies and parsley, and the salt if necessary (you may not need it). Cook the pasta in boiling, salted water until al dente, drain quickly and serve with the sauce.*

### **SPAGHETTI ALLE COZZE 'IN BIANCO'**

Spaghetti with mussels

Serves 4

*Spaghetti with shellfish (it is usually clams – vongole) is the most popular dish on the southern coast. Other pasta like linguine, vermicelli and other shells, like sea dates, datteri, are also used, and the sauce is made with or without tomatoes. There are those who like to remove the shellfish from their shells and those who like to leave them in.*

1 kg (2 lb) mussels  
400 g (14 oz) spaghetti  
Salt

4 tablespoons olive oil  
2 cloves of garlic, chopped  
Pepper  
Bunch of parsley, finely chopped.

*Clean and open the mussels in a large pan. Remove them from their shells or leave them in, as you wish. Strain the juices from the pan. Cook the spaghetti in plenty of vigorously boiling, salted water for 15 minutes. In the meantime, fry the garlic in the oil and add the strained mussel juice. Boil vigorously to reduce the liquor then add the mussels. Sprinkle with salt and pepper—the mussels only need to be heated through. Drain the spaghetti quickly when it is al dente, cover with the mussels and sprinkle with the parsley. Do not serve grated cheese.*

**VARIATION** for a sauce with tomatoes—spaghetti alle cozze pomodori—add 350 g (12 oz) very ripe, peeled and chopped tomatoes with the strained mussel juice to the garlic when it begins to colour. Simmer until reduced to a thick sauce, then continue as above.

### **FARAONA ALLE ERBE AL CARTOCCIO**

*Guinea hen with herbs in foil*

**Serves 2-4**

A guinea hen  
Salt and pepper  
Juice of one half to one whole lemon  
2 tablespoons of olive oil  
1 clove garlic, crushed  
Sprig of rosemary  
A few sage leaves  
2 bay leaves

*Season the guinea hen with salt and pepper and lay it on a large sheet of foil. Sprinkle with lemon juice and olive*

oil, crushed garlic and herbs and wrap it up in the foil. Bake in a 260 degree C (400 degree fahrenheit, gas mark 6) oven for about an hour, opening out the foil for the last 15 minutes to let it brown.

### **FIOR DI MANDORLA**

*Almond blossom—a pastry*

**Makes about 27**

*Most of the pastries in Sicily are Arab in origin and based on almonds. Angelo Lauria, pastry-maker of Licarta near Agrigento, offers a huge and delicious range. These were my favourites.*

400 g (14 oz) ground almonds

200 g (7 oz) sugar

10 (3 and a half oz) honey

1 teaspoon of cinnamon

Zest of 1 lemon

2 egg whites

Icing sugar

*Mix the ground almonds, sugar, honey, cinnamon and add only just enough egg white to make a soft, firm paste (it is important not to add more than you need). Start kneading the mixture when it is still dry, like damp sand, and the oil in the almond will help to hold it together. Shape into little cakes about 5 cm (2 inches) in diameter and place on greased foil on a baking tray. Bake in a preheated oven at 150 degrees C (300 degrees F, gas mark 2) for 20 minutes. Let them cool, place them on a serving plate and dust with icing sugar.*

**DOLCE DE RICCOTTA**

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*Ricotta Pudding*

**Serves 6**

*This is a little different from the Roman dessert made with ricotta.*

100 g (4 oz) almonds, finely chopped  
2 bitter almonds or a few drops of almond essence  
300 g (11 oz) of fresh ricotta  
300 g (11 oz) of good scented honey  
3 eggs  
Butter to grease the dish  
2 tablespoons of breadcrumbs  
Juice of 1 orange

*Put the ricotta through the blender, then add the almonds, almond essence, 200g (7 oz) of the honey and the eggs. Grease a flan dish and dust with breadcrumbs, then pour in the ricotta mixture. Bake at 200 degrees C (400 degrees fahrenheit, gas mark 6), for about 45 minutes until its top is golden. Turn out. Beat the orange juice into the remaining honey and pour out.*

*Serve cold. It is even better the next day.*