

A Tour of Italy

Written by Debbi Covington
Tuesday, 04 January 2011 13:34



Have you ever dreamed of exploring Italy, visiting the cities and countryside, and eating as the Italians do? You have? Excellent! This week I'd like for you to join me on a culinary tour of some of Italy's 20 distinct regions. No passport? No Problem. Just choose a recipe and start cooking. Imagine visiting Milan, where we'll sample ossobuco, veal shanks simmered in a wine sauce. Next stop, romantic Venice for a taste of creamy risotto rice with peas. Then on to Tuscany where we'll savor a delicious and fun way to enjoy day-old bread in a flavorful soup. And that's just the beginning! Each region of Italy has its own culinary style, shaped by the climate, the geography and centuries of cooking. By cooking and sharing regional dishes, we can experience some of the color, flavor and tradition of Italy.

Ossobuco Milanese

4 (1½-inch-thick) meaty slices veal shank or 2 slices beef shank

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

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1 tablespoon olive oil

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 small onion, finely chopped

1/2 cup dry white wine

1 cup peeled, seeded and chopped fresh tomato or drained canned tomatoes

1 cup beef broth

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons snipped fresh Italian parsley

2 anchovy filets, drained (optional)

1 teaspoon finely shredded lemon peel

Trim the separable fat from the meat. Place the flour on a piece of waxed paper or in a shallow dish. Coat the veal with the flour; shaking off the excess. In a 4-quart Dutch oven with a

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tight-fitting lid, melt the butter with the olive oil over medium heat. Add the veal and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook until browned. Turn the slices and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Place the onion around the meat. Cook until onion is tender. Add the white wine and cook scraping the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. Stir in the tomato and broth and bring to simmering. Cover the pan. Cook for 1½ to 2 hours or until the veal is tender and pulls away from the bone, spooning sauce over meat occasionally. If there is too much liquid, uncover the pan and allow the liquid to evaporate (about 5 minutes). Remove veal to a serving dish. Skim fat from the sauce in pan, if necessary. In a small bowl, mash together the garlic, parsley, anchovy and lemon peel. Stir mixture into the sauce in the pan. Spoon sauce over the veal. Serves 4.

Venetian Risotto with Peas

6 cups chicken broth

1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped

1/4 cup olive oil

2 cups medium grain risotto rice

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 cups frozen shelled peas, thawed

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2 tablespoons finely chopped Italian parsley

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

In a saucepan, warm the chicken broth over medium-low heat. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, cook the onion in the hot oil over medium-low heat for 10 minutes or until onion is golden. Add rice and cook for 2 minutes, stirring often. Add about ½ cup of the hot broth and stir well. When the liquid is absorbed, continue adding broth ½ cup at a time, cooking until absorbed. After about 10 minutes of cooking time, stir in salt and pepper. Continue adding the liquid and stirring. (The rice should have a loose, somewhat soupy consistency.) If you run out of broth, use hot water. When the rice is tender yet still firm, remove the pan from the heat. Stir in the thawed peas, parsley, cheese and butter. Heat through. Serve immediately. Serves 6.

Leek Tomato and Bread Soup

2 medium leeks, finely chopped (2/3 cup)

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

3 large cloves garlic, minced

1/8 teaspoon crushed red pepper

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2 cups peeled, seeded and chopped tomato

6 cups chicken broth

8 ounces day-old whole wheat Italian bread, cut into cubes (about 6 cups)

1/2 cup chopped fresh basil

In a large pot, cook the leeks in hot oil over medium heat about 4 minutes or until tender. Stir in garlic and crushed red pepper. Add tomato and broth; bring to boiling. Reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add 4 cups of the bread cubes; simmer, uncovered for 15 minutes. Add the remaining bread cubes; simmer 5 minutes more. Just before serving, stir in basil and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serves 4 to 6.

Linguine with Walnut Pesto Sauce

30 large fresh basil leaves (1½ cups lightly packed)

6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 cloves garlic, halved

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6 quarts water

2 tablespoons salt

1 pound dried linguine

1& 1/2 cups walnuts, toasted and coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1& 1/2 cups grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

For the pesto, in a blender, combine basil, 6 tablespoons oil and the garlic. Cover and blend until a creamy paste forms, scraping down sides of the blender as needed. Set aside. In a large pot or Dutch oven, bring 6 quarts water and 2 tablespoons salt to boiling. Add pasta and cook according to package directions. Meanwhile, in a very large skillet, cook and stir walnuts in 2 tablespoons hot olive oil over medium heat for 2 minutes. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper; turn off the heat and carefully add 1 cup of the pasta cooking water. Drain the pasta and add to the walnut mixture. Stir well, heat through. Turn off heat and add the pesto, tossing well until all pasta is coated. Add the cheese and toss well. Serves 6.

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Pistachio Apple Salad

1/4 cup freshly squeezed orange juice

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

1 teaspoon hot sweet mustard

1 clove garlic, minced

2 tablespoons olive oil

4 cups mixed baby greens

1 tart apple, cored and thinly sliced

1/2 cup Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled

1/4 cup roasted pistachio nuts

For the dressing, whisk together orange juice, balsamic vinegar, mustard and garlic; gradually whisk in oil until well blended set aside to mellow flavors. For the salad, divide greens among four salad plates. Top with apple slices. Sprinkle with cheese and nuts. Whisk dressing over salads. Serves 4.

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Nectarines with Chocolate-Hazelnut Cream

2 & 1/4 cups water

1 cup granulated sugar

3/4 cup dry white wine

3 whole cloves

3 inches stick cinnamon

6 medium ripe nectarines, pitted and sliced

1/3 cup mascarpone cheese

1/3 cup chocolate-hazelnut spread (Nutella*)

2 tablespoons butter, softened

1/4 cup sifted powdered sugar

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1/3 cup chopped hazelnuts

In a medium saucepan, combine water, granulated sugar, wine, cloves and cinnamon. Bring mixture to boiling, stirring to dissolve sugar; reduce heat. Simmer, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Remove from heat. Cool for 30 minutes. Place nectarine slices in a large bowl. Pour syrup mixture over nectarines. Cover and chill for 4 to 6 hours. Meanwhile, for the chocolate-hazelnut cream, in a small bowl, beat together the mascarpone cheese, chocolate-hazelnut spread and butter until well mixed. Beat in powdered sugar. Cover and chill until firm. Use a slotted spoon to remove nectarine slices from syrup, reserving the syrup. Arrange in individual dessert dishes. Place a small spoonful of cream in each dish. Spoon 1 to 2 tablespoons reserved syrup over the nectarines. Sprinkle with hazelnuts. Serves 6. (*Chocolate-hazelnut spread (Nutella) is found in the baking aisle or peanut butter section of most supermarkets.)

The writer owns Catering by Debbi Covington and is the author of the cookbook, Dining Under the Carolina Moon. Debbi's website address is www.cateringbydebbicovington.com . She may be reached at 525-0350 or by email at debbic@cateringbydebbicovington.com.

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