

Cooking with Tony

By Tim Hoey, Photos by David Verdini

Gusto Di Mare

(the sea's taste and character)

Italy's long coastline offers delicious rewards to those who cherish the sea's gifts. Calamari—better known as squid—is a case in point. It's one of the humbler sea creatures, lacking big-game fish's excitement or shellfish's elegance. Yet, Italians who prepare calamari are richly compensated with wonderful dining possibilities consistent with the country's feeling for environmental harmony and culinary grace.

The Italian approach characteristically emphasizes buying morning-fresh squid, obtaining locally grown ingredients, and using time-tested cooking techniques. That formula for success is something home cooks in our area can confidently follow. However, a calamari dish in either country is much more than just a recipe, as Tony Grande noted in a recent discussion at Il Capriccio.



Calamari Affogati al Peperoncino



Fresh squid in a spicy tomato sauce

Serves four

INGREDIENTS

40 oz./medium-sized squid. The squid's tube should be 4 to 6 inches long. Cut tube into 1 - 1½" rings. Include tentacles, but do not cut them into pieces.

2 teaspoons chopped garlic

1 ½ tablespoons tomato paste

10 oz. crushed Italian tomatoes

4 sprigs chopped fresh Italian parsley

½ teaspoon chopped hot peperoncino

Salt and pepper to taste

5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

6 oz clam juice

3 oz. white wine

Procedure

CLEANING THE SQUID

Place the squid on a clean cutting board. Remove the head gently from the tube. After that, take out the inside of the tube, including the cartilage. Then cut the tentacles from the head just below the eyes. Discard the ink sac. Carefully wash the remaining parts of the squid. Then put squid in a strainer with a bowl underneath it. Place both strainer and bowl in the refrigerator for one hour, so that all the water drains from the squid. After that, cut the squid into 1 - 1½ inch rings.

PREPARING THE DISH

Place the extra virgin olive oil in a skillet at medium to high heat. Get the oil hot, then put in the garlic. As soon as the garlic reaches a light golden color, add white wine. Let the wine evaporate for a couple of minutes, then add the tomato paste. Braise, then add the crushed tomatoes. Briefly cook, then add the clam juice. Shortly after that, add salt, pepper, and parsley, and peperoncino.

Cook the ensemble for 5 minutes. Do not let the dish get too dry during cooking. When the dish reaches an appropriate consistency, put in the squid rings. Cook the calamari and the assorted ingredients for 18 minutes over high heat.

Dish may be served on its own as an appetizer, as a main course, or combined with pasta such as linguine.

Tim: Calamari dishes always struck me as a labor of love for home cooks.

Tony: Well, all Italian dishes involve love. In addition, calamari requires some focus, as well as comfort with basic kitchen skills. More importantly, you need patience, knowledge, and a little time to prepare what an Italian of any generation would recognize as "calamari."

Tim: I'm assuming fresh ingredients are essential to any calamari dish.

Tony: Absolutely. When I lived in Calabria, we had something called pescivendolo ambulante. This refers to the fish sold by vendors who went from town to town in the three-wheeled Vespas you see throughout Italy. The fish was extremely fresh. Now keep in mind we didn't have the convenient refrigeration we're accustomed to today. We purchased our calamari around nine in the morning and cooked no later than noon.

Tim: Was calamari something of a treat?

Tony: In a way, yes, in that a well-prepared calamari dish gave poor people a chance to feel rich. As I experienced in my family, a home cook's love, attention and touch can elevate the taste of the dish. Calamari dishes aren't about the money you spend on them. It's about bringing out its

value. And that takes love and focus, from the moment you choose the squid to the presentation of the dish.

Tim: That brings up an interesting point: how do you determine freshness for calamari?

Tony: When you buy calamari, its color should be light gray and some purple and very bright. The flesh should be firm. And calamari has to pass the "smell test." When you put it to your nose, it should smell like something fresh from the sea, and not like a "fishy fish."

Tim: In our area, we're accustomed to associating calamari with heavy fried offerings. You're talking about something quite different here.

Tony: Calamari is a light fish rather than a "fine" fish. People love squid for its particular taste. Calamari needs to be nice and tender. Above all, it must have that gusto di mare—the sea's taste and character.

Tim: Do you prepare calamari for yourself now?

Tony: Yes, I enjoy it. I have it about once a month. There are many ways to make calamari and I cook it as the situation calls for. The calamari affogati al peperoncino preparation (see recipe) is just one way to go. It's good at this time of year. It also has the advantage of versatility, as calamari can be served as a main dish, with pasta such as linguine, or as an appetizer.

Tim: Where does the recipe come from?

Tony: Definitely from Calabria, but it's a recipe found with minor variations throughout southern Italy.

Tim: I look forward to using the recipe. Thanks, Tony. ▲