

Cooking with Tony

By Tim Hoey, Photos by David Verdini

GREET THE SEASON *Italian Style*

Winter Dishes Set Joyous Holiday Tone

Italians, with their sharp sense of seasonal delights, love the year-end holidays. Families and friends use these opportunities to gather together, acknowledge nature's generosity, and share their *gioia di vivere*. That desire to celebrate is mirrored in Italian cuisine's winter dishes. The bonding between these hearty preparations and the season's sentiments is sealed through *la cucina italiana's* signature qualities: fresh flavor, healthy products, and well-made, satisfying substance.

Home cooks throughout Italy set a delicious tone for these meals by selecting locally produced, often homemade ingredients. In our area, we echo that approach by choosing organic or thoughtfully raised items. In Italy's smaller towns, one can also obtain live animals for use in a variety of rich, slowly simmering creations. We recently spoke with Tony Grande about these hearty dishes and how they reflect the Italian approach to wholesome cooking.



Tim: There's something of a universal connection between holiday celebrations and dishes featuring fresh meat. That certainly seemed to be the case in Italy when I lived there.

Tony: Holiday traditions, such as shared feasts, were a memorable part of life in my Calabrian hometown. People used to get together for the wine harvest in the fall. They also gathered at Christmas to slaughter a pig for the holiday meal.

Tim: Why was a pig chosen?

Tony: Most families raised animals over the summer to provide for the winter. The best one to raise was the pig. People could trust the meat from it, as they fed the pig a 100% organic diet.

Tim: What were they fed?

Tony: Sometimes, they ate the outside leaves of cabbage. They also were given unused fruit. They also had something called *crusca*, which are grain husks. We would boil that with water and carrots and use the mixture for feed. The pigs also ate acorns and corn. Their diet meant the meat would be full flavored. By the way—we never fed them any meat.

Tim: So the pigs would fatten up during the warmer months. How big did they get?

Tony: They averaged over 200 pounds when they were slaughtered.

Tim: The saying in America is that "everything from the pig is useful but the squeal." Was that the case in Calabria, too?

Tony: Well, we don't have that expression but, believe me, nothing was wasted. We could make so many delicious things from the animal, such as prosciutto and soppressata. And, of course, we used the ribs for dishes such as *costatine di maiale*.

Tim: Did you prepare the *costatine* the same day as the pig was slaughtered?

Tony: Yes. The dish also utilizes vegetables grown at home, such as green tomatoes, that we preserved for the winter.

Tim: The sauce has a superb flavor.

Tony: It's very similar to a *ragù*, but with some important distinctions. For one thing, the volume of tomato needed for the sauce is far greater than for a typical *ragù*. Also, with a *ragù*, one wants the meat flavor, but without actually leaving the meat in the finished dish. However, for this *costatine di maiale*, you leave the meat in and serve it with the pasta.

Tim: I notice that the dish calls for *paccheri*, a dry, rather than fresh, pasta.

Tony: *Paccheri* are large tubular pasta about two inches long. In our local dialect, we call them *scaffattuni*. You see, as they cook, they get a *scaffattuni*—a slap—and deflate a little from their original shape. The pasta, incidentally, takes a little extra time to prepare. For them to be *al dente*, they require about 15 to 18 minutes cooking time.

Tim: Can you find *costatine di maiale* throughout Italy?

Tony: This is a regional dish, characteristic of the Calabrian way of cooking. It's a style that's not so well known here. I hope that changes. The Calabrian way in the kitchen, of course, embraces more than just the ingredients. It creates a shared celebration that's in harmony with nature, friends and family. There's a saying in Italian that captures that feeling—*L'utile è il divertente*—"enjoy and accomplish".

Tim: We'll look forward to experiencing that sentiment here in New Jersey when we prepare our next *costatine*. Thanks, Tony. ▲

Paccheri con Costatine di Maiale alla Calabrese

Paccheri with Pork Ribs Calabrese style



Serves four

INGREDIENTS

2 lbs. pork ribs, trim fat, cut into 1 ½" long pieces
½ teaspoon chopped garlic
½ medium, chopped onion
2 tablespoons tomato paste
20 oz. peeled Italian tomatoes, chopped in blender
3 bay leaves
Bouquet garni, tied with string in a tight bundle:
1 medium carrot, cut lengthwise and in half
1 stalk celery, cut lengthwise and in half
3 stem fresh basil
3 sprigs fresh Italian parsley
½ teaspoon chopped hot peperoncino
Salt and pepper to taste
6 oz. extra virgin olive oil
30 oz. water
4 tablespoons, grated Crotonese cheese
1 pound paccheri

COOKING TIME: FOR SAUCE 1¾ HOURS
FOR PASTA 16-18 MINUTES

Place the extra virgin olive oil in a double bottom or thick bottom pan. Get the oil hot, then put in the pork ribs. Add salt and pepper and braise the ribs for 8 to 10 minutes, turning them occasionally with a wooden spoon. Once the ribs have a nice color, add garlic to the pan. Keep turning the ensemble for one minute, then put in the onions. Mix the ingredients and braise for another three minutes. Then, add the tomato paste, and braise for another four to five minutes.

After that, put in the crushed tomatoes, bouquet garni, water, and peperoncino. Bring the mixture to a boil, then simmer over low to medium flame for one hour and forty-five minutes. When the ingredients reach your preferred consistency, lower the heat so that the dish remains warm.

Meanwhile, put ¾ of a gallon of water into a large pot, add salt to taste, and bring the water to a boil. Place paccheri in the boiling water; cook it for 16 to 18 minutes, then drain. Then mix all of the pasta with ¾ of the sauce. After that, add 2 tablespoons of the grated Crotonese cheese and combine all the ingredients again.

Place the mixture in four bowls. Put the remainder of the cheese on top of each serving, then put the pork ribs on top of the assemblage. Garnish with fresh basil and serve.