

Cooking with Tony

By Tim Hoey, Photos by David Verdini

Gioia Di Vivere

Right now—the transition between primavera and summer—finds us joining the natural world's state of reawakening. It's a time when we renew our palates, our bodies and our spirits with fresh, healthy food and invigorating outdoor activities. This atmosphere encourages us to savor what life offers—what Italians call the gioia di vivere.

Mediterranean cuisine comfortably fits this way of gracious living. Its light, healthy dishes swing with the season's warmer, longer days. The food's refreshing taste awakens senses dulled from months of cold weather cuisine. Its creation, typically involving simple preparation and brief cooking times, dovetails with the season's "less is more" feeling. To gain greater insight about this appealing lifestyle, we recently spoke with Tony Grande at Il Capriccio.

Tim: We're seeing more people choose healthier lifestyles, especially concerning what they eat. In Italy, there's a long history associated with this pursuit.

Tony: Its culinary origin is associated with the Etruscans, a highly developed Italian civilization that predated the Roman Empire. They had a very healthy way of eating known as the *dieta mediterranea*. It consisted of vegetables, fruit and very little meat.

Tim: The *dieta* seems ideal for this time of year.

Tony: Yes. The body needs a break from heavier foods so it can regenerate and create new energy. Eating vegetables and fruit fresh from the renewed earth is the best way to do this. They contain a lot of water, and when we eat them, they help flush toxins from our bodies.

Tim: Today, we combine these fresh vegetables with other light ingredients, such as fish.

Tony: My recipes reflect contemporary choices based on classical ideas of healthy living. It's important that every element of the recipe harmonizes with one other and the season. Halibut, for example, matches very well with fennel, cherry tomatoes, and fava beans. The result is a dish where balance, flavor and presentation come together in a pleasant, delicious way.

Tim: Fava beans strike me as a particularly Italian touch.

Tony: In June, fresh fava beans are available in all Italian regions. Harvesting them at the right time is essential, whether you're in Italy or in America. If they're soft, they're not

ready. If they're dark and mushy, they're too old. A fava bean ready for picking should be green and full, yet tender.

Tim: Do they have to be cooked?

Tony: Not the fresh beans. In fact, when I was a kid, one of my favorite meals was raw fava beans, pecorino cheese, and fresh homemade bread. By the way, I don't recommend using dried or frozen fava beans for these seasonal dishes. They're not suitable at all.

Tim: You also require fresh tomatoes for your *crudaiola* recipe.

Tony: They're essential to the dish's character. Canned tomatoes absolutely do not work. I suggest using fresh heirloom tomatoes. They have the added advantage of being available in a variety of colors – purple,

yellow, green, and orange, as well as red.

Tim: You've also included one of my favorite fresh items – mozzarella di bufala. I'm very selective where I purchase it.

Tony: You should be, because it must be fresh and high quality. I recommend you go to a small shop where you get a feeling of care, balance, and harmony, where you get to know the owner, and can trust the quality of what's sold.

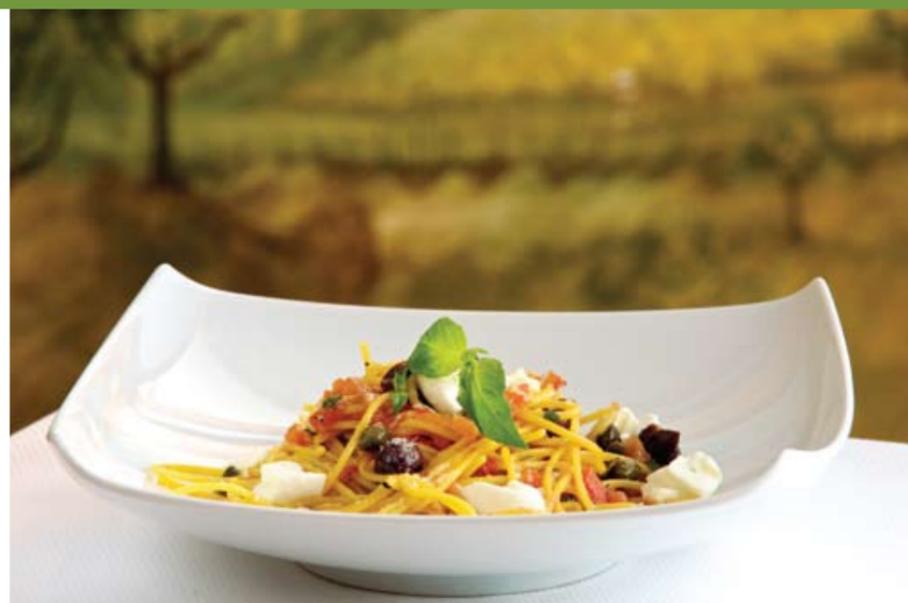
Tim: The one dry ingredient in your recipes is pasta di mais. It's an unusual type of pasta, in that it's made from corn.

Tony: Most people outside Italy are unaware of it. Some choose pasta di mais because they are allergic to wheat. Others prefer using corn pasta because it's less dense than traditional wheat products.

Tim: Is there a preferred brand?

Tony: Rustichella, an organic product from the Abruzzo, is unquestionably the best. We sell it at La Famiglia, our Mendham store.

Tim: We look forward to visiting. Thanks, Tony. ▲



Spaghetti di Mais con Crudaiola e Mozzarella di Bufala

Corn spaghetti with basil and buffalo mozzarella

Serves four

INGREDIENTS:

1 lb. corn spaghetti (4 oz. per serving)	8 whole basil leaves
1 bocconcino of mozzarella di bufala, cut in 1/2" cubes	1 tablespoon red onion
24 oz. chopped fresh tomatoes	1 teaspoon chopped garlic
14-16 pitted Gaeta olives	4 sprigs chopped fresh Italian parsley
1 tablespoon capers, washed and excess water squeezed out	6 oz. extra virgin olive oil
8 chopped basil leaves	2 tablespoons parmesan cheese
	Salt and pepper to taste

PREPARING THE DISH:

Boil water with a touch of salt for the pasta.

Meanwhile, place 4 ounces of 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 the red onion. Stir for one minute, then put in the chopped fresh tomatoes. Then add the capers, olives, salt, and pepper. Mix well, stir for one minute, then take the skillet off the heat.

Put the corn pasta in the boiling water and cook for eight to ten minutes, until the pasta is al dente. Strain pasta to remove the water. After that, return pasta to the skillet, cook for two minutes over medium heat, and mix the ingredients well. Then, add to it the parmesan and the chopped basil. Mix well again. Place a serving on each plate. Add the mozzarella, then drizzle the remaining extra virgin olive oil on each dish. Garnish with the whole basil leaves and serve.

Ipoglosso con Fave, Pomodori, e Finocchio Selvatico

Halibut with fava beans, cherry tomatoes and wild fennel

Serves four

INGREDIENTS:

24 oz./halibut filet (6 oz. per serving)	5 oz. fresh peeled fava beans
4 oz. extra virgin olive oil	1 teaspoon chopped fresh Italian parsley
2 oz. all-purpose flour	4 oz. chicken or vegetable broth
1 teaspoon chopped garlic	2 tablespoons chopped fresh wild fennel
4 oz. white wine	Salt and pepper to taste
10 oz. cherry tomatoes, cut into quarters	

PREPARING THE DISH:

Preheat the oven to 475 degrees.

Place the extra virgin olive oil in a skillet at medium to high heat. While the oil gets hot, dredge the fish in the flour. Shake off any excess flour. Place fish in the skillet, and cook for two to three minutes on each side, until the fish has a golden color. Then add the chopped garlic and cook for one minute. Remove skillet from the stovetop, pour in the white wine, and return to the stovetop. Let the wine evaporate for a couple of minutes, then add the cherry tomatoes. Stir for two minutes, then put in the fava beans, parsley and broth. Stir for two minutes, then add the wild fennel, salt, and pepper.

After that, put the skillet in the oven for six minutes. Then take the skillet out and place one filet in the middle of a serving plate. Reduce the sauce to reach an appropriate consistency. Then place the sauce gently on top of the fish. Serve with a vegetable of your choice.