

Cooking with Tony

By Tim Hoey, Photos by David Verdini

Pesce Spada STYLE

Fresh, natural ingredients and a simple approach create ideal harmony

Swordfish, one of the Italian Mediterranean's prized catches, has never gone out of style. Sport fishermen still relish the challenge of its sheer size and formidable fighting character. Some coastal villages continue to send fathers and sons to catch commercially viable quantities of the fish. For the rest of us, what the Italians call pesce spada provides a delicious way to explore the culinary dance of the sea and the land.

Over the centuries, swordfish recipes were refined to harmonize with locally grown ingredients. That useful knowledge has been passed down within Italian families to the present day. For contemporary home cooks, these traditional techniques give them tools to create marvelous dishes celebrating the sea's bounty.

During a recent visit to Il Capriccio, I spoke with its chef/owner, Tony Grande, as he reflected on swordfish, its culinary heritage, and how local home cooks can prepare an entirely authentic Italian meal featuring this legendary fish.



Tim: When I lived in Rome, swordfish would be quite fresh and relatively plentiful during certain times of the year. Along the coast, where some Romans had second homes, people would make it a point to order pesce spada. To my foreigner's eyes, it seemed the fish's popularity was unconnected to tourist preferences or trends, but was instead something deeply rooted in the Italian way of living.

Tony: In Sicily and Calabria, swordfish is very well known, more so than in Rome. In southern Italy, pesce spada is especially popular to eat in the summer and in September. There are some reasons for this. The summer lasts longer in Calabria than in northern Italy because of Calabria's geographic location. And September is the best month to be on a Calabrian beach. The temperature ranges between the low 80s during the day to the mid 60s at night.

Tim: Did you grow up in a fishing village?

Tony: No. However, we could see the Ionian Sea from our town. I lived about five hundred feet above sea level.

Tim: How did you get the fish?

Tony: When I was a young boy, I went down the hill on a bus around five in the morning. We had to take the bus, because my town was too far away from the sea for me to go on horseback or donkey. The fresh catch would be sold by fishermen driving a three-wheeled utility vehicle that's quite common in Italy. They would shout "pesce freschi" into a megaphone to attract customers' attention. And there was no doubt the fish was fresh!

Tim: Most of us don't have that advantage today. What should we look for when we buy swordfish?

Tony: Look for fish that is white to light pink, and smells like the ocean. Above all, make certain the flesh is firm.

Tim: How did your family cook the fish?

Tony: We used ingredients that we grew in our garden, or that grew wild, or were made by people we knew. I went into the countryside to pick the wild oregano. Either my family or our neighbors grew the parsley, garlic and lemons. The wine and olive oil were locally produced. The breadcrumbs came from handmade loaves.

Tim: Everything was natural, in the best sense of the word.

Tony: Yes, we were in harmony with the world around us. To share that harmonious feeling, home cooks should try to get these natural ingredients whenever possible.

Tim: Your insistence on natural ingredients strongly influences the recipe's straightforward approach.

Tony: I like to keep things simple, because, in this case, I want to taste the most important element—the fish. The other ingredients are accents of harmony. They add to the dish, rather than take away from it.

Tim: Sometimes, less is more.

Tony: That's right: don't make food that's too complicated. My pesce spada recipe uses simple means and techniques to create a delicate harmony. This is an example of the art of eating. It's a way to discover and enjoy what I call the "quality of life." It's a feeling I want to share with people now through these recipes. And it's my hope they pass along this knowledge to the next generation.

Tim: It's our hope, as well. Thank you, Tony. ▲

PESCE SPADA CON MOLLICA DI PANE (swordfish with breadcrumbs)

Serves four

INGREDIENTS

4 slices fresh swordfish, 6-8 oz. per slice	1 teaspoon chopped fresh Italian parsley
4 cloves chopped garlic	1 tablespoon butter
3 oz. all-purpose flour	4 oz. fresh breadcrumbs
6 oz. extra virgin olive oil	1 espresso spoonful wild oregano
Juice from 1 ½ fresh lemons	1 espresso spoonful Worcestershire sauce
2 oz. dry white wine	Salt and pepper to taste
4 oz. water	

Preheat oven to 475°F. Meanwhile, prepare the breadcrumbs. Place in bowl, then add half of the chopped garlic, half of the chopped parsley, all the oregano, 3 oz. of extra virgin olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix well until the ingredients are combined and moist. Set aside.

To cook the fish, first put the remaining extra virgin olive oil in an ovenproof skillet. On a stovetop, heat oil until hot. Dredge fish in flour; pound fish gently to remove excess flour. Place floured slices in skillet. Cook for two minutes on each side, until fish is golden.

Remove skillet from heat. Add remaining garlic. When garlic looks golden, add white wine and lemon juice. Allow one minute for the liquid to evaporate. Then add salt and pepper to taste. Add the water and mix well. Then, place the breadcrumbs evenly on top of swordfish. Place the skillet in the preheated oven and cook for nine minutes.

Remove skillet from oven. Place fish on dinner plates. Add butter to the pan liquids, along with Worcestershire sauce and the remaining parsley. Reduce sauce to desired consistency, then pour sauce over the slices. Serve with a zucchini and tomato gratinati or vegetables of your choice.