

Call It Sugu or Sauce, but NEVER GRAVY

By Sal Martoche

For as many pastas as there are, when we think about it there are really very few basic pasta sauces. But, luckily for us, they serve as the foundation for unlimited variations. Today, more than ever, the Italian chef's repertoire is limited only by imagination, skill, and ingredients on hand. Of course, we all know the most common base is a tomato sauce such as meat sauce or marinara sauce.

There are also cream-based sauces such as *alfredo*, which is not really common in Italy except in places frequented by American tourists. It was invented by Alfredo Di Lelio when he worked in his mother's restaurant in Rome. Alfredo's wife was not eating very well after giving birth to one of their children and was losing weight as a result. He concocted something with lots of cream, butter and *parmigiano* cheese to help her regain her health.



Alfredo Di Lelio

Created Alfredo Sauce in 1914

It tasted really good and one day, when Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, two major American movie stars, came to the restaurant for dinner, Alfredo made it for them. They loved it and even had a photograph taken with Alfredo that hung proudly in the restaurant for years and led to a gallery of photographs of famous personalities posing with his now famous pasta. It reminds me of Chef's Restaurant, which has the same tradition and whose late, great owner, Louis Billitier, and his friend, David Boreanaz (you may remember him at WKBW TV as Dave Thomas,) invented Spaghetti Parmesan.

And, of course, there are oil-based sauces such as *pesto* or *aglio e olio*. There are also fresh sauces such as *sugu di pomodoro crudo*, the fast and easy no-cook pasta sauce, which is often used as a topping on fresh bread. Think *bruschetta*. I had never heard of this kind of sauce and one summer night, with an abundance of home-grown tomatoes and basil, I used them to make fresh pasta sauce, thinking I had made history. Alas, I soon learned better. Somebody beat me to it a couple hundred years earlier.

Truthfully, it is the red sauces that dominate both the hearts and stomachs of Italians and Italian-Americans. *Bolognese*, with wonderful ground pork and beef and sometimes veal; *salsa di pomodoro*, thick and smooth with hints of garlic and oregano; marinara, which is thinner and typically served without meat; vodka sauce; *puttanesca*, the angry one; *sugu alla arrabiatta*, which is one of my favorites, though not one of my wife's; and *cioppino*, made with clams, squid, shrimp, white fish, which we both love. These are but a few of the toothsome creations based on Italian tomato sauce.

Italian creativity takes credit for the creation of squid-ink pasta with shrimp and sometimes *calamari* in a wine-based sauce that is absolutely irresistible. This is an example of today's healthier eating, which translates into a



Author's favorite: Penne in *arrabbiata* sauce

whole new category of sauces — light, with white wine or broth, often with pasta water added to extend, thicken and lighten the sauce. These sauces often include chicken, vegetables or seafood. Think Joe Jerge at Mulberry or Henry Gorino at JT's when you're in the mood.

A key to all Italian sauces is the liberal use of fresh herbs - basil, oregano, mint, thyme, as well as chopped shallots, garlic and other fresh vegetables. And, oh yes, of course the liberal use of cheese, like *parmigiana reggiano*, *pecorino romano*, *asiago* and *ricotta*.

Through the years, I have found that, in traditional Italian restaurants, particularly in Italy, you won't find spaghetti and meatballs served together. They are separate. Meatballs are often referred to as *polpette*. I grew up with what we now call Sunday sauce—meatballs, pork, usually spareribs, and small pieces of beef. And, if we were really lucky, there was *brasciole*. I'm sure I'm not the only one who remembers chicken in the sauce.

Mmm. Delicious.

I also discovered that pizza, the great gift to the world from Naples, was originally a flatbread with any Italian red sauce on hand and whatever toppings were available. It was delicious and inexpensive and became an instant success, especially with working people. Ever the entrepreneurs, the Neopolitans prepared and marketed a pizza named for Queen Margherita, which topped that wonderful red sauce with *mozzarella*, tomato and basil, the colors of the Italian flag.

While researching this article, I also learned that caesar salad doesn't come from Italy and isn't named after

Julius Caesar. It's named after its creator, an Italian immigrant restaurateur named Cesare Cardini who opened a restaurant in California. And Italian wedding soup was a humble dish, not a festive one. The name was probably derived from a bad translation of "*minestra maritata*," which married chicken broth and vegetables, such as escarole and endive, with a little bit of meat, such as sausage or meatballs. After all is said and done, it all points to the creativity and diversity that makes Italian cooking so special.

No one, and I mean no one, in my recollection ever called these creations anything but sauce or *sugie*, gravy was something that was served with mashed potatoes the "Americani" made.

Once I started going to New York City, I realized people from "the city" don't always get it right! But we here in Western New York do get it right, and are blessed with an abundance of fine sauces to top our pasta, whatever its shape. *Buona mangiare*.



Cesare Cardini
Created Caesar Salad in 1924