

A Roman Villa And Cucina Povera

Cucina povera, Italian for poor kitchen, is not so much poor as imaginative as it involves creating something really tasty out of a few simple ingredients. The ability to conjure something out of foraged or left over ingredients that is thoughtful and heartwarming always inspires me and it was on a trip to Sicily that I found an example of cucina povera that was truly inspirational.

While aimlessly roaming around by car we happened on a Roman villa, a UNESCO world heritage site, off the main road that traverses the hilly centre of the island of Sicily. The remains of the 4th century AD [Villa Romana del Casale](#) turned out to be fascinating, with magnificently preserved floor mosaics in each room, one depicting hunting scenes and another showing women in bikinis exercising with dumbbells. An early Roman aerobic class perhaps.



Before we knew it, it was closing time, and being the last to leave we found ourselves driving out into the darkness, not entirely sure where we were and without accommodation planned. This was pre-GPS days. Seeing a sign for the town of Piazza Armerina, we headed there and once we secured a sparsely furnished room in the local convent we ventured out in search of dinner. We walked for what seemed like an hour, not finding a single place open, virtually no one on the street and a bitterly cold wind blowing. One can never be sure in Italy if one is too early or too late for dinner; it depends on the region and the climate. We eventually stumbled on a friendly, warmly lit place that seemed to have just opened (obviously we were too early). It was here that I had the most delicious pasta simply flavoured with sautéed onion, breadcrumbs, anchovy and just a touch of saffron. In regions of Southern Italy breadcrumbs can substitute for expensive grated Parmesan and, while this pasta may seem simple, it was cooked with such care to bring out the sweet onion flavour and the lovely

crunch of breadcrumbs that it needed nothing else. This was a great example of cucina povera and I told the waitress how much I loved it. An elegant woman on a neighboring table seemed to be complaining of something and later our waitress told us she didn't like that pasta specialty and being from Rome perhaps she didn't understand the nature of the dish, at which point the waitress and I gave each other a knowing nod. Romans, what did they ever do for us? I know, the list is long, not to mention 4th century villas with hot running water and the food of the capital is regarded by some as the best in Italy. But there is a lot to love about the food of the poor South and a lot it can teach us about how to cook, how to interpret flavour, how to build on it or not. In deference to both I have taken the essence of that Sicilian pasta and added a touch of Roman excess by adding chopped green prawns, fresh peas and a little more saffron. I think you will really like this dish for its simplicity, exotic flavour and enjoyable crunch.

Spaghettoni with Prawns, Peas, Saffron and Breadcrumbs

For Two

- 3 tbs olive oil
- 2 brown shallots, finely diced
- pinch of salt
- generous pinch of saffron
- 1/3 cup dried breadcrumbs
- 300 g spaghettoni (slightly thicker than normal spaghetti) or any other quality dried pasta
- generous pinch of salt for the pasta water
- a handful fresh peas
- 6 green prawns, cleaned and sliced into 3 or 4 pieces

Saute the shallots in the olive oil very gently until translucent. Meanwhile place a large pot of water on the stove for the pasta and bring to the boil. Slightly grind the saffron in a mortar and pestle, leaving some threads intact

for effect. Add 1 tbs warm water from the kettle to the saffron to dissolve it and add it immediately to the shallots. Cook on low heat for a minute. Do not cook on high heat for or for a long time as the saffron will become bitter. Add the breadcrumbs and stir until they absorb all the oil and become a little toasted. Turn off the heat. Add the salt to the rapidly boiling water, then the pasta and the peas and cook until *al dente*. When the pasta is nearly ready return the saffron flavoured shallots and crumbs to the heat and add the sliced prawns, stir until they just turn opaque. Drain the pasta well, toss with the prawns, onions and crumbs, and enjoy.

Chirashi In Autumn



As the autumn leaves begin to scatter in the wind, I am reminded of a November visit to Japan where I not only enjoyed the changing colours of the trees but a visit to the famous Tokyo fish market where I encountered chirashi. Chirashi means *scattered*, a descriptive name for unassembled sushi served in a rice bowl. Raw or cooked pieces of fish, shellfish and vegetables are put on top of sweet, vinegared Japanese rice. The freshness of the fish at the Tsukiji market was amazing and although the concept of eating a raw prawn was a little daunting at first, it tasted just fine. Putting pieces of salmon, tuna, avocado, cucumber, fish roe on top the cooled rice can be done by fanning out the slices in little clusters according to type or by a random placement of everything. As with anything in Japan both approaches are done artfully. However, it is not meant to be a fussy dish but one easily and quickly prepared at home without the skill of a sushi master. Contrasts of colour and texture are key to an attractive chirashi and freshness of ingredients is a given. Sushi grade fish is getting easier to buy at Japanese grocers and fishmongers around Melbourne but if you are out of luck a lightly poached and flaked salmon works well too. Another ingredient that is delicious to add to chirashi is roasted nori (seaweed sheets used for nori rolls). It can be bought in packets as small roasted strips or you can briefly pass a nori sheet over the gas flame and cut it with scissors yourself. I find the texture and taste of crispy nori is fabulous and can understand why Japanese stores also sell hand rolls with the nori sheet separated from the rice roll by cellophane, allowing you to assemble it just before eating.



chirashi from Tokyo fish market

Some suggested ingredients for chirashi

- tuna
- salmon
- kingfish
- cooked prawns
- Yarra Valley caviar
- pickled ginger
- wasabi
- avocado
- cucumber
- daikon
- pickled lotus root
- enoki mushrooms, raw
- plain Japanese egg omelette, sliced

- blanched green beans, sugar snap peas, snow peas or asparagus
- shiso (perilla) leaf
- chives
- roasted nori strips

Simple vinegared rice for chirashi

For Two

- 180 g Japanese rice
- 220 ml water
- 50 ml rice bran vinegar
- 1 1/2 tbs caster sugar
- 1/2 tsp salt

Wash the rice well under running water and then place it in a small, enamel cooking pot with the water and leave to soak for 15-30 minutes. Heat the rice until it starts to boil, then turn down to a very low simmer and cook with a tight fitting lid for 13 minutes. This is the best method for cooking small amounts of rice. Gently warm the vinegar, sugar and salt until dissolved. Using a wooden paddle moistened with water, spread the warm rice out on a tray and then sprinkle the seasoned vinegar over the paddle to help spread it over the rice. Gently mix through by moving the paddle up under and then over the rice a few times. Fan the rice as you do this to rapidly cool it and stop it becoming mushy. When the rice is completely cool divide it into two rice bowls and scatter your chosen ingredients on top.

Stuffed Calamari

Stuffed calamari is one of my all time favorites, so whenever I see smaller calamari, about the size of my hand, I buy them for this dish; big ones are not quite as tender and are too much for one person to eat. Calamari are a very Melbourne thing, they are plentiful in the bay and a staple in every fish and chip shop, Greek eatery and a majority of pubs and bistros around town. Popular crumbed or dusted in flour and fried, they are affectionately known as rubber bands, mostly for the few times we have all encounter chewy little overcooked numbers.

Growing up in Melbourne with an enthusiastic fisherman father, I spent a lot of my childhood fishing on piers around the bay and was always fascinated by the extremely long poles used by, the mostly Greek, men jigging for calamari. Jigging means you make the jig or lure dance erratically, a little like a drunken sailor's jig, to attract the squid. Cephalopods are extremely elusive and tricky to catch, so on the rare occasion one was nabbed there would be much excitement in the little pier community which otherwise kept pretty quiet, all eyes fixed on the middle distance. I don't know the reasons why we never fished for them; maybe it ran along ethnic lines but I don't recall ever eating calamari at home. While I never got to try out jigging, I did try my hand in the kitchen and after some early attempts at creating rubber bands I have since learned to cook calamari successfully, including marinated and barbecued, coated and fried, in risotto and slowly stewed with tomato and peas or a spicy chorizo. The trick is you either cook them quickly or stew gently for a long time but nothing in between. A few years ago I tried cooking Guy Grossi's recipe for stuffed calamari and was amazed how easy and wonderful cooking calamari this way was. The stuffing is simple; the tentacles are sautéed with a chopped shallot, garlic, parsley, cooked peas and lemon zest and bound together with breadcrumbs. Grossi makes the unusual addition of a small

amount of grated ginger which really lifts the flavour and gives it a very gentle heat. Browned and then cooked in white wine for no more than 10 minutes, it is a quick and delicious meal, guaranteed to attract attention.



Stuffed Calamari

For Two

- 2 medium calamari, complete with wings and tentacles
- 1 shallot, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- olive oil
- a handful of peas, blanched
- 1/2 tsp grated ginger
- 2 tbs chopped parsley
- zest of a small lemon
- 1/3 cup dried breadcrumbs or panko
- 1 glass of white wine

Ask the fishmonger to clean the calamari for you but make you say you want the flaps on the side and the tentacles. They are easy to clean yourself if you don't mind getting your fingers inside to gently pull out the inside bits and the transparent, plastic-like comb. Rinse the empty tubes under the tap and pat dry with paper towel. Chop the flaps and tentacles into small pieces. You will need a heavy based frying pan with a lid to cook these on the stove or you can use the stove top and finish cooking them in a 180°C oven if you have a pan that can go from stove to oven.

Gently saute the chopped shallot and ginger in olive oil with a little salt. Add the chopped calamari pieces, garlic and parsley and stir for a minute. Turn the heat off and add the zest, peas and breadcrumbs, adding enough crumbs to bring the ingredients together for a stuffing. Using a teaspoon stuff the calamari, securing the end with a toothpick. Return to the pan and brown the stuffed calamari on all sides. Add the wine, scrapping any bits from the surface with a wooden spoon. Turn down the heat, cover with the lid and cook for 10 minutes. Remove the stuffed calamari to a serving plate and further reduce the wine to syrupy consistency and spoon it over the calamari.

Mouna Buns For Easter

Instead of hot cross buns this Easter bake mouna buns, an orange flavoured brioche bun from Oran, Algeria instead. An Easter bun in Algeria might sound a little strange but mouna buns are thought to have been introduced by the Spanish after the establishment of a fort in Oran in the 15th century or sometime in the centuries of Spanish sovereignty that followed. Oran was an important coastal trading town with

Spanish, Jewish, Ottoman and French influence at various times, so while originally an Easter bun, mouna have been eaten by all faiths and at all times of the year. I don't know whether the original iteration of The French Lettuce cake shop in Carlton had an Algerian baker back in the eighties but I have very fond memories of enjoying their ever so soft orange mouna buns. I made sure to arrive when they were fresh from the oven and their yeasty orange scent was strongest. I have not found them anywhere since. While tucking into my first hot cross bun of the season and lamenting the usual lack of citrus peel and, in this case, a total lack of citrus flavour, I was reminded of the delightful orange of those buns. I thought I would try making them and after a little experimenting with short and long proving times for the dough, the 24 hour prove resulted in a lovely soft brioche texture. If you can't eat all the buns on the day of baking just bake half and keep the other half of the dough in the fridge for baking the following day. Mouna are best eaten soon after baking. It may not be authentic but try my version with fresh orange as well as added citrus peel for a fragrant Easter treat.

Mouna Buns

makes 16 muffin sized buns

- 500 g bread flour
- 1 tbs freeze-dried yeast
- 4 eggs, plus one egg for brushing the tops
- 240 ml milk
- 115 g melted butter
- 200 g caster sugar
- juice and zest of a large orange
- 1/2 tsp salt
- handful of sultanas (optional)
- handful mixed peel (optional)
- sesame seeds

In a large bowl mix together all the liquid ingredients,

except for the butter, with a whisk until the sugar is dissolved. Add the melted butter and dried fruit and mix through. Mix the flour with salt and yeast and then add to the wet ingredients and stir to form a thick porridge. Cover the bowl and leave to prove until double in size and then leave overnight in the fridge. Remove the dough from the fridge the following day and leave it at room temperature for several hours, knocking it down with a spoon once risen. A long proving period will give you a very light brioche bun all without having to knead the dough vigorously as you usually do for bread.

When ready to bake preheat the oven to 200°C and grease a muffin pan well with butter. Spoon the dough into the muffin moulds, lightly cover with plastic wrap and leave the dough to rise over the top of the tin. Brush the tops with egg wash and sprinkle with sesame seeds and bake for 15-20 minutes.

Small Bites Make A Big Impression

I like serving interesting small bites with drinks. I guess I have been influenced by my Austrian mother who always made little open sandwiches with pretty garnishes no matter what the occasion and for whoever dropped in unexpectedly. Somehow she always managed to rustle up something that looked appetizing and that's what an appetizer should be after all. While there are a myriad of good quality dips and pates available at the supermarket there is something special about expressing a little style and individuality by making appetizers yourself. You can take inspiration from the tapas

bars of Spain, the appetitive hour offerings of Italy or the open sandwich bars that are so much a part of Vienna and middle Europe. And if dips are more your thing, try making them from scratch; a baba ganoush is simply a matter of grilling a whole eggplant on the Weber at high heat for 30 minutes, removing the softened centre and blitzing it with lemon juice, tahini, salt and garlic. For extra smokiness hold the whole eggplant over the open gas flame of your cooker for a few seconds after grilling. It will taste amazing. Make stunning guacamole with ripe avocados mashed with one chipolte pepper from a can of La Morena peppers in adobo sauce for some real Mexican flavour.



Other ways to make wonderful flavoursome small bites is to take advantage of seasonal produce like really ripe tomatoes. You can make bruschetta with toasted slices of sourdough baguette rubbed with a piece of garlic and topped with chopped tomatoes and generously drizzled with extra virgin olive oil

or top bread with crushed broad beans and mint in springtime. Take advantage of our wonderful local cheeses, like Meredith marinated goats cheese or the silky goat cheeses or fromage frais from Holy Goat. The latter goes so well with a little lemon zest, extra virgin olive oil and fresh herbs sprinkled on top.



A small bite can be a meal in miniature when you top a slice of dark rye bread with a smokey ham or poached tongue and tiny diced potato or Russian salad. Essentially meat and potatoes in a couple of mouthfuls. For fishy bites you can't go past Tassie smoked salmon or trout fillets and, when in season, a handful of school prawns are just the right size for a small bite. Adding a little creamed horseradish to sour cream is a quick and tasty glue for your fishy bites.



A few condiments such as capers, cornichons and horse radish that kept for ages are worth stocking in the fridge and a little pot of chives on the porch is very handy for a few snips of green to highlight your gems. Failing that, a bit of lemon zest also works wonders. None of these little open sandwiches I mentioned need baking and any cooking of components, such as potato salad, can easily be done the day before, just leave 20 to 30 minutes for plating before the first doorbell rings.