

Agnolotti Del Plin

I really enjoy making fresh pasta and gnocchi and over the years I have become pretty good at whipping these up without any fuss but filled pasta, like ravioli, I've been less successful with. My attempts at ravioli have been plagued with filling leakages and size variations that would make most Nonnas weep. Invited to take a class at Enoteca Sileno recently I discovered that with a little professional instruction I was able to master it. In particular, I was thrilled to come away with a fool-proof and fast technique for one particular style of filled pasta. Usually making very petite anything is fiddly and time consuming but agnolotti del plin from the Piedmont region of Italy is anything but. While we mostly know agnolotti as large pockets, plin, meaning pinched, are tiny rectangular pillows. Essentially once you roll out the pasta sheets you simply squeeze the filling out as a long, thin sausage (less than the width of your little finger) using a piping bag, moistening your little finger in water run it along the pasta next to the filling and then fold over the dough, pressing down the edge. Next, using the thumb and forefinger of each hand, pinch the long sausage starting at one end to create a little puffed up pillow and continue doing this at thumb nail intervals. The pinched length of pasta is then cut swiftly with a crinkle cut roller cutter into tiny rectangular shapes that look as beautiful as any made by a veteran of the Italian kitchen. The little pinched pasta pockets don't leak, are quick to make and look so dainty. To speed up any filled pasta making process it is a good idea to make your filling in advance, especially if it is a slow cooked meat filling. It will need time to cook and cool down, so the day before is ideal. Advanced preparation will make the filling process more pleasurable as you won't have already been on your feet for hours. Fillings can be meat or vegetable based. Sautéed silverbeet mixed with ricotta cheese and an egg is a good mix but remember to dry the leaves before

cooking to reduce the water content. For my agnolotti del plin I cooked and puréed some sweet potato (red-skinned kumara) and added a little Béchamel to give a creamy texture and then flavoured it with chopped parsley and a little truffle and porcini mushroom paste. Slow cooked ox tail meat can be blended similarly to a consistency for piping through a piping bag. To cook the agnolotti del plin, toss them in a large pot of boiling water and remove them once they have risen to the surface. Toss the drained pasta with butter and fried sage leaves and/or sauteed wild mushrooms (pines and slippery jacks). Finish with some grated Parmesan cheese. □



[Enoteca Sileno](#) run a variety of cooking classes throughout the year. Run by professional chefs imparting their extensive knowledge in a small group setting, it is a great way to get some hands-on experience in a relaxed, social environment. Classes conclude with a pleasant lunch of food prepared.



making the pinch



cutting the filled length of pasta



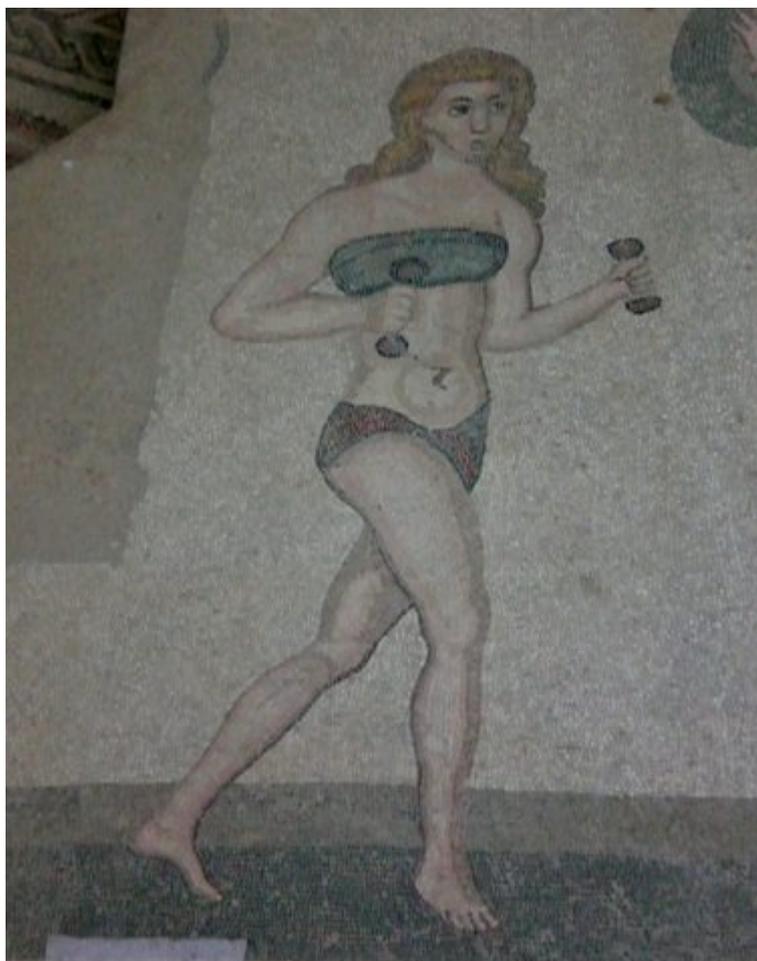
cutting between the pinches

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.

Ramen Chilled To Perfection

The ever popular Japanese ramen soup is a great cool weather meal but when the temperature is up the last thing you want to do is sweat over a steaming bowl of soup. Also if you are not too adept at using chopsticks and fear being seen with soupy blotches on your light coloured clothing then opt for one of the non-soup versions of ramen noodles. Abura soba, a “dry” ramen is served warm with the intensely flavoured, tare, or salty seasoning but no soup component. One version I tried in

Nagoya just came with some seaweed flavoured salt to mix through the ramen before eating while others use the chef's secret combination of soy, soybean paste, pepper and concentrated stock to season the dish. I find a cold ramen even better; not only for a perfect hot summers meal but also any leftovers make a great lunchbox meal to take to work. My version is based on the recipe from Adam Liaw's new book, *The Zen Kitchen*. I used 100% buckwheat soba noodles, a few vegetables and a shredded poached chicken thigh. I have even made a very tasty cold ramen with left over roast pork belly. It might be something to think about next Christmas when you wonder what to do with the leftover turkey. I think the secret to this cold ramen is the deliciously nutty sesame seed dressing, made by pounding half a cup of toasted seeds in a mortar and pestle with sugar, soy, sake, sesame oil and mirin. It is really worth making it from scratch and keeping a jar in the fridge ready to dilute with rice vinegar and water to dress your ramen dish. The sauce is also lovely for dressing vegetables, such as green beans, so any extra won't go to waste.

Four Serves

Ramen

- 2 bundles of buckwheat soba noodles (approx 180 g)
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 small carrot, cut into matchsticks
- 4 spring onions, cut finely lengthwise
- 1 Lebanese cucumber, cut into matchsticks
- 1-2 chicken thighs (approx. 170 g)
- 1 tbs pickled ginger, finely sliced
- 2 tsp black sesame seeds (for garnish, optional)

Boil the soba noodles in a pot of boiling water for the time suggested on the packet (usually around 6-8 minutes). Drain and plunge the noodles into iced water to cool and stop cooking. Drain well and set aside.

Place the chicken in a pot of water brought just to simmering point. Poach for 2 minutes and then cover the pot and turn the heat off and leave it for 10 minutes. Remove the chicken, let it cool and then shred it into little pieces with your fingers. Add the shredded chicken to the soba noodles and refrigerate.

Prepare the egg noodles. Heat a frypan with a little vegetable oil and pour over the beaten eggs and allow them to spread over the surface of the pan. Cook until just set and turn off the heat. Once a little cooled remove to a chopping board, roll it up and slice the egg pancake finely with a knife. Add this to the soba noodles and refrigerate while you prepare the vegetables and the dressing.

Sesame Sauce Dressing

- 1/2 cup sesame seeds
- 1 tbs caster sugar
- 2 tbs sake
- 2 tbs mirin
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 sesame oil
- 1 tbs rice vinegar, extra for diluting the dressing

Lightly toast the sesame seeds in a dry saucepan, stirring continuously. Remove from the heat. Add the sugar and pound in batches with a mortar and pestle to make a paste. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix to a smooth sauce. It will look a bit like a satay sauce. Mix the sauce with rice vinegar and water at a 3:1:1 ratio for dressing the ramen. Store any remaining sauce in a glass jar in the fridge.

Place the egg noodles, soba, vegetables and sliced pickled ginger in a large mixing bowl. Mix the dressing using 6 tablespoons of the sauce, 2 of vinegar and 2 of water. Pour the dressing over the ramen and mix thoroughly with your hands or salad servers and distribute to each serving plate. Garnish

with black sesame seeds or snipped chives.



Tarragon Ricotta Gnocchi

This year my tub of tarragon did very well and is still looking great with soft fronds one would expect at the start of spring. This delicious aniseed flavoured herb is wonderful paired with chicken, fish, eggs, tomatoes and spring vegetables but I did begin to wonder how I could use more of it and decided on mixing it through ricotta gnocchi instead of

the more usual addition of cooked spinach. Ricotta gnocchi are an easy gnocchi to make there being no need to cook potatoes or semolina as with other gnocchi versions. It is simply a matter of buying some ricotta and drying it out a little, either by draining in a sieve over a bowl for a few hours in the fridge or if you have no time blotting it well with some paper towel to extract as much liquid as possible. The reason for doing this is so you don't need to add too much flour to the mix to absorb that moisture; just enough to bind the mix and keep it very light in texture. Adding cooked spinach that is too wet similarly adds moisture but adding lots of chopped tarragon is perfect as it is dry and so much more flavoursome. I opted for a confit eggplant sauce; small dice of eggplant cooked slowly with olive oil over a smear of puréed fresh tomato but these tarragon gnocchi would also be perfect with a fresh or smoked salmon creamy sauce.

For Two

Tarragon Ricotta Gnocchi



- 375 g tub ricotta
- 1 whole egg
- approximately 100 g plain flour
- 100 g Parmesan, grated
- 4 tbs chopped tarragon leaves
- pinch salt

Confit Eggplant Sauce

- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 red banana capsicum, sliced (optional)
- 1 medium eggplant
- olive oil
- salt
- pepper

To Prepare The Gnocchi: Drain the ricotta by placing it in a sieve over a bowl and leaving it in the fridge for a couple of hours or alternatively blot it dry with several layers of paper towel. Place the flour in a large bowl and mix through the salt and chopped tarragon. Add the ricotta, Parmesan and the egg and mix the egg into the ricotta with a fork and then gradually mix the egg and cheeses through the flour. Don't over mix, just bring it all together and tip it out onto a clean bench and gently roll into a large 5 cm thick sausage. Dust with flour. Cut off 2 cm slices, rolling each into a smaller sausage the thickness of gnocchi and then cut up into gnocchi sized little pillows. Do this with a pastry scraper if you have one, otherwise use a knife. Place on a floured tray, covered with a tea towel until ready to use.

To make the confit eggplant sauce: If you have a sauté pan that has a lid and can go in the oven then use it to make this sauce. Otherwise use a heavy based baking dish. Heat a tablespoon of olive in the pan and sauté the onion until soft but not browned. Add the chopped tomato and the sliced capsicum and cook for 5-10 minutes, until softened. Scrape the cooked vegetables into a deep bowl and blitz with a stick blender. Dice the eggplant into small 1 cm dice. Scrape the puréed vegetables back into the pan and spread it to cover the base. Place the diced eggplant over the top, drizzle well with olive oil and season. Place the lid on the pan or cover and seal a baking dish with foil and bake at 160°C for 1 hour.

Bringing it all together: Bring a large pasta pot of water to the boil with a pinch of salt. Add the gnocchi to the water and when they rise to the surface scoop them out and put them straight into the pan with the eggplant and gently stir to coat the gnocchi. Serve immediately with some grated Parmesan cheese.

Lessons In Simplicity – Smoked Trout Pasta

My smoked trout pasta has been part of my kitchen repertoire since the day I devised it when living solo overseas and finding nothing more than a couple of capsicums, leeks and a smoked trout fillet in the fridge. While I never doubted the combination would work, I was pleasantly surprised at just how good it tasted. The leeks and capsicums were sliced thinly and sauteed slowly in olive oil to bring out their natural sweetness and the smoked trout flaked and added to the cooked down vegetables with a few capers and the zest of a lemon. Tossed through the linguini it was finally dressed with nothing more than a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil; no Parmesan cheese needed.



I think we can sometimes be too bound by our love of a tomato based sauce and lots of Parmesan cheese or the addition of cream to make a creamy sauce to coat pasta. I love pasta dishes that don't dictate the need of a sauce and instead rely

on the brilliant seasonal taste of a vegetable and good quality extra virgin olive oil. Broccoli orecchietti, a classic pasta from Southern Italy, relies on nothing more than broccoli, anchovies, garlic, chilli and olive oil, with Parmesan a great but optional extra. Pasta with double peeled broad beans, garlic and pecorino cheese and olive oil is another simple unsauced pasta but probably the simplest of all is spaghetti *aglio e olio*, spaghetti with garlic and oil. I wonder how many Italians rely on that dish when the fridge is empty. One memorable pasta dish I had in Sicily actually had a dry, crunchy topping of fried breadcrumbs flavoured with onion and saffron and this was a restaurant meal, not a late night boozy need for carbs. What confidence it takes to chalk that up on the blackboard. Flavour is everything in these types of dishes, so rather than swamping an *el cheapo* pasta with a thick, cheesy sauce think about using a good quality dried pasta that actually has a nice, discernible flavour and then match it with one or two key ingredients. Keep it simple and don't be afraid to pour a good glug of extra virgin olive oil on top of your plated pasta; it's the perfect lubricant for pasta and your arteries.

I use [Mrs Payes](#) or [Harris Smokehouse](#) brands of smoked trout fillets; available at selected supermarkets, delis and fish mongers.