

Ingredients for Spaghetti alla Norma

1 large or 2 medium eggplant, about 1½ lb. total

Salt for eggplant, plus more, to taste

Vegetable oil for frying

1 yellow onion, finely chopped

⅓ cup olive oil

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

2 to 2½ lb. fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped, or 1 can (28 oz.) plum tomatoes, seeded and chopped, with juices

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

½ cup fresh basil leaves, torn into small pieces

1 lb. spaghetti

½ cup coarsely grated ricotta salata cheese, plus more for garnish

½ cup grated pecorino romano cheese

Spaghetti alla Norma

Sicilians are masters of cooking eggplant, and their island home is the source of countless delicious and interesting ways to prepare it. In the past when meat was scarce, eggplant, with its meaty look and flavor, was often substituted. This recipe, named for the opera Norma, by Catania-born Vincenzo Bellini, is typical of Sicilian cooking.

Salting the eggplant slices draws out their bitter juices. If the eggplant is very fresh, this step is not essential, but if you are unsure about their provenance, it is good insurance against a disappointing dish. Ricotta salata is a salted, pressed form of ricotta. If unavailable, use a mild feta cheese.

Cut the eggplant crosswise into slices ½ inch thick. Make a layer of slices in a colander and sprinkle with salt. Continue layering and sprinkling with salt until all of the slices are used. Top with a plate and a heavy weight, such as a pot. Place the colander over a bowl or in the sink. Let stand for 1 hour to drain off the bitter juices. Rinse off the salt and dry the eggplant slices with paper towels.

In a large fry pan over medium heat, pour in vegetable oil to a depth of ½ inch. Add enough of the eggplant slices to make a single layer in the pan. Fry the slices, turning once, until tender and lightly browned on both sides, about 8 minutes total. Transfer to paper towels to drain. Repeat with the remaining slices.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, sauté the onion in the olive oil until tender, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté for 30 seconds more. Add the tomatoes and their juices, and season with salt and pepper. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, until thickened, about 20 minutes.

Remove the tomato sauce from the heat. Cut the eggplant into strips and stir them into the sauce along with the basil.

Meanwhile, bring a large pot three-fourths full of water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and salt and cook, stirring frequently, until al dente (tender but firm to the bite).

Drain the pasta and pour it into a warmed serving bowl. Add the sauce and the ½ cup *each* ricotta salata and pecorino cheeses, and stir and toss well. Top with grated ricotta salata cheese and serve immediately. Serves 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Savoring Series, *Savoring Italy*, by Michele Scicolone (Time-Life Books, 1999).

Braised Turkey Meatballs with Quick Tomato Sauce

Spoon these meatballs and their flavorful sauce over cooked spaghetti. Add a tossed green salad and crusty bread, and dinner is served.

In a large sauté pan over medium-high heat, warm 1 Tbs. of the olive oil. Add the onion, carrot and a few pinches of salt and cook, stirring, until soft, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a large bowl and let cool.

Add the ground turkey, bread crumbs, egg, sage, the 1 tsp. salt and the ½ tsp. pepper to the bowl and mix gently but thoroughly with your hands. Form the mixture into 12 meatballs, each about 3 Tbs.

In the same pan over medium-high heat, warm 2 Tbs. of the olive oil. Add the meatballs and cook until browned, about 1 minute per side. Transfer to a plate.

Put the tomatoes and their juices in a food processor. While pulsing, slowly stream in the ¼ cup olive oil through the feed tube until the tomatoes are pureed but still a bit chunky. Stir in the garlic and oregano, and season with salt and pepper.

Pour the tomato sauce into the same pan, place over medium heat and heat until the sauce is warm. Add the meatballs, cover and reduce the heat to low. Simmer, stirring once or twice, until the meatballs are cooked through, about 30 minutes.

Divide the meatballs and sauce among individual pasta bowls. Sprinkle with cheese and serve immediately. Serves 4.

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Orecchiette with Cauliflower and Leeks

In this recipe, leeks and garlic are roasted until nicely browned and sweet, and then tossed with small cauliflower florets and tangy goat cheese to make an unctuous cheese sauce. Small, sturdy cap-shaped “little ears,” orecchiette are the perfect pasta to carry the chunky sauce.

Preheat an oven to 400°F. Select a large, shallow serving bowl for the pasta, place the cheese in the bowl and set aside.

Cut off and discard the dark green tops from each leek, leaving the pale green portion intact, and trim away the root end. Cut each leek in half lengthwise and clean thoroughly under cold running water. Oil a rimmed baking sheet with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil. Brush the leeks and garlic cloves all over with the remaining 4 Tbs. olive oil and arrange in a single layer on the prepared baking sheet. Season with sea salt.

Roast until the vegetables are nicely browned and thoroughly softened, about 20 minutes. When cool enough to hand, chop the leeks into ½-inch pieces and cut the garlic cloves into quarters. Set aside.

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Ingredients for Braised Turkey Meatballs with Quick Tomato Sauce

3 Tbs. plus ¼ cup olive oil

½ yellow onion, grated

½ large carrot, peeled and grated

Kosher salt, to taste, plus 1 tsp.

1 lb. ground turkey

1½ cups fine fresh bread crumbs

1 egg, whisked

2 tsp. chopped fresh sage

½ tsp. freshly ground pepper, plus more, to taste

2 cans (each 28 oz.) whole San Marzano tomatoes, with juices

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 tsp. dried oregano

Grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese for serving

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4 leeks

5 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

12 large garlic cloves, peeled but left whole

Fine sea salt, to taste

2 Tbs. kosher salt

¾ lb. orecchiette

1 small head cauliflower, trimmed and cut into small florets to measure 4 cups

¼ cup Gaeta or Niçoise olives, pitted and cut in half lengthwise

Freshly ground pepper, to taste