



Tavola d'Italia

The Soothing Power of Comfort Food

by **Chef Silvia Bianco**

Every winter there is a slew of articles on comfort food featuring an array of dishes that warm our bodies and our hearts. Food editors know that when the weather outside is blustery and temperatures plummet below freezing people crave comfort food more than ever. But what exactly is comfort food?

Ask a dozen people what comfort food is for them, and chances are you'll get as many different answers: meatloaf, roast beef and mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, chicken soup, chicken pot pie, apple pie, pizza and linguini with meatballs, to name a few.

As different as these are from one another they are each simple, homey dishes often linked to a fond childhood memory. In essence, in order to be considered a comfort food, the dish must evoke a feeling of well being. It is this feeling that we crave. It has the power to allow us to put aside the stresses of the day and to nourish our soul and our body. As we take a bite of our mother's lasagna, for a few moments, all is right with the world and we have nothing to fear. Maybe we should have some comfort food every day.

My favorite comfort food is Rigatoni Bolognese. On Sundays, my father would always make the pasta sauce. He would

brown the spare ribs, the meatballs, and the sausage and add them to the marinara sauce. This sauce was simply called the "gravy." My brothers and I would wake up to these wonderful aromas and know that my father was in the kitchen. We immediately felt the love along with the anticipation. We may not have known then that it was love that made the food taste so good. We just thought it was my father's insistence on hand picking the finest ingredients that made it delicious. To this day, this aroma has the power to bring the memory of my father back to me.

Here is one of my favorite recipes that includes my father's "gravy." This is quick and easy to make on a cold winter day.

Rigatoni Bolognese

Makes 4 servings

3 to 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil (or enough to cover the pan's bottom)
pinch of red pepper flakes
1 small onion, finely chopped
1/2 medium clove garlic, minced
1/2 pound ground pork
1/2 pound ground turkey
3 to 4 tablespoons sherry
4 cups marinara sauce
1/4 cup heavy cream
salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 pound rigatoni

1 tablespoon Italian (flat-leaf) parsley, stems removed and chopped, for garnish

Put the oil and red pepper flakes in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat for about 1 minute and heat until the oil is hot but not smoking. Sauté the chopped onion until soft, about 1 minute, then sauté the garlic for a few seconds, or just until the garlic begins to brown.

Add the ground meat, and use a wooden spoon to break it into pieces and brown it on all sides, about 3 to 4 minutes. (Be careful not to over stir or the meat chunks will be too small and the meat will not brown properly.) Add the sherry and stir. Add the marinara sauce (see recipe below), and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce begins to boil. Finish the sauce by adding the cream. Stir, reduce the heat to low, simmer for 1 more minute, and remove from the heat. Season with salt and pepper.

While the sauce is cooking, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the pasta to the water and cook according to package directions. Drain the cooked pasta and toss it in a serving bowl with about half the liquid part of the sauce. Transfer the pasta to individual serving plates, top it with the remaining sauce, and sprinkle the parsley over each portion.

Marinara Sauce

Makes 7 cups

3 to 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 small yellow onion, diced
2 anchovy fillets, chopped
1 medium clove garlic, minced
3 cans (28 ounces each) whole peeled plum tomatoes (or crushed or diced tomatoes)



CHEF SILVIA BIANCO will appear occasionally in the *Italian Tribune* as a guest food columnist.

in their own juice, coarsely chopped or broken up by hand (do not put through a food processor, which will affect taste and color), hard cores removed and discarded
2 or 3 whole basil leaves
1 cup water
salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Heat the olive oil in a 4- to 5-quart saucepan over medium heat for about 30 seconds. Cook the onion and anchovies in the hot oil for about 2 minutes, until they are soft. Sauté the garlic for about 30 seconds, or until it begins to brown. Remove the pan from the heat and add the tomatoes and basil leaves. Bring to a boil, pour in the water (the sauce will lose much of its liquid during cooking), and reduce the heat to low.

Partially cover the pan to allow steam to escape, and cook for approximately 1 1/2 to 2 hours, until you have a thick, rich sauce. Stir occasionally to prevent bits of the tomatoes

from sinking to the bottom of the pan and burning. Season with salt and pepper.

Quick Sauce Variation: For a quick tomato sauce that is still delicious, buy canned tomatoes that are labeled "recipe ready" or "kitchen ready." This sauce will take about 25 to 35 minutes to prepare.

Chef Silvia Bianco is the author of SIMPLY SAUTÉ: Fast, Easy and Healthy Italian Cooking — All in One Pan (Marlowe & Company; December 2003; \$16.95). She is familiar to lovers of Italian cuisine in the Northeast where she was the co-owner and executive chef of Biscotti in Ridgefield, Connecticut. She teaches highly attended and extremely popular cooking classes, runs a catering business, and has her own line of frozen foods called "Silvia's Super Mom Meals. Chef Silvia appears regularly in newspapers and magazines and appears often on TV and radio programs. You can contact her at chefsilvia@earthlink.net.

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