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Ciao Bella! -- Reinventing Italian -- Modern cuisine relieves chefs of heavy kitchen duty

January 14, 2004
 Stephanie Holmes
The Monitor

It's your turn to host a dinner party on Friday night. What to do? Simply Sauté author Silvia Bianco's seemingly-endless, symbiotic menu unfolds, offering advice on everything from what basics should be stocked in the cupboards to create dishes in a pinch to advice on the art of sautéing properly.

Recipes call for lots of cheese, a little spice, and use spinach, fresh tomatoes, arugula, white wine and pesto sauce often. There is also a host of dishes for carnivores, vegetarians and seafood lovers alike. Chefs who plug themselves into this book will find that there is excess everything, plenty for seconds and should break out the Tupperware and plan on leftovers (the calling card of many good chefs.)

The thrust of Simply Sauté is a pared-down, one-pan preparation of everything Italian, from main dishes to desserts (think sautéed ice cream and crepes). Bianco's meals showcase taste, but they don't take hours or the hands of multiple cooks to perfect in front of a stove.

It's evident that Bianco loves Italian food, and she makes it clear that dishes found in her book are not formed within the traditional paradigm of cooking from any specific region of Italy.

She's birthed a more modern Italian cuisine by drawing from tastes, smells and the country's cooking composition, and basing food preparation around the act of sautéing.

Sautéing differs from frying because the cook browns or cooks ingredients in a small amount of hot oil in a sauté or frying pan (along with some spice, typically garlic), usually only for a few minutes. Frying requires more oil and is usually a little more time intensive (also with frying the food often absorbs more oil).

Bianco's book was formulated by inviting readers to learn how menu items from her restaurant, Biscotti, in Ridgefield, Conn. are prepared and served.

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Tastes created from the pages of this book are worth the trouble of raiding cupboards to prepare. For starters, there is Linguine with Chicken, Asparagus, Bacon and Sun-dried Tomatoes, Chicken-Pear Arugula Salad that's paired with a perfect poppy seed dressing and Breaded Smoked Mozzarella in a White Wine Sauce with Arugula.

Preparing the mozzarella appetizer is surprisingly easy and can be done with grace without leaning on warmed-up, frozen varieties at the last minute or creating a melted mess in the bottom of the sauté pan.

When prepared, the mozzarella is smoked, breaded and very rich tasting. The salad is crisp and sweet, though if you are not a fan of arugula, your favorite greens will do. The linguine comes together with ease, but a note to all chefs: cut the proportions of the sauce recipe in half (at least) because a full recipe is far too much for this spread unless you plan to scout the book for other dishes that incorporate the sauce (such as the breaded mozzarella.)

Chefs who end up with a glut of white-wine sauce can freeze it up to six months in a sealed container or set it in an ice cube tray to add to future culinary excursions at will.

The breaded, smoked mozzarella recipe calls for accompaniment of arugula and white-wine sauce. The greens and sauce may play well into the world of food presentation, but the mozzarella appetizer stands alone with flavorful gusto.

Quite possibly the simplest way to delve into Bianco's book is to make the Bruschetta with Tomatoes, Fresh mozzarella, Basil and Kalamata Olives.

Bruschetta adds a flourish to a dining experience and is more economical to prepare at home than the \$8 version found in many snazzy bistros.

Bianco's recipe calls for four pieces of crusty bread toasted and smeared with roasted garlic. Buying a loaf of your favorite baguette or specialty bread (and serving it at room temperature) works just as well if you are in the midst of a time crunch.

The recipe also calls for one clove garlic (minced), two tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, two plum tomatoes, ¼ cup of Kalamata olives, six basil leaves (dry basil can be a substitute) and ½ pound of mozzarella either diced or shredded will do.

If your guests don't have a taste for olives, separate them serve them on the side or leave them out all together. They don't make or break the dish.

Bianco's best advice is "that recipes are not static." Cooks experiment and recipes evolve. Regardless of whether you are a chef that goes "by the book" or another who likes to get creative Simply Sauté is a great baseline for easily prepared Italian fare.

Get the book: Simply Sauté, published by Marlowe & Company, retails for \$16.95 at most major book outlets.

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