

*Preserving the
Italian Way*

A collection of old-style *casalinga* Italian recipes
assembled by

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Forward

Preserving Culture

Peter Demaio has been collecting traditional Italian recipes for a very long time. And sharing them with his friends for just as long. But when he shares a recipe with you, he just does not give you a scrap of paper with some instructions on it. He serves out lashings of culture and stories about it all, and, if you're just a little bit lucky, he goes to his pantry and he lets you taste what you are going to make in the recipe. Then the wine comes out, and then the bread, then more, different wine, and variations on the original recipe and before you know it, the night's gone. And you've gone home happy.

If you ask him for a recipe for something he doesn't know how to make— no problema— before you know it, he will have sourced two or three recipes from his wide contacts both here and in Italy. And he may even make the stuff with you, as in my case when I asked him how to make "*Tonno sott'olio*" (tuna in oil).

Before I knew it, I found myself with him at Footscray Fish Market at 4am one chilly morning buying a 50Kg yellowfin tuna. That very same night, the two of us were chopping this magnificent fish into cutlets, and simmering it in salty water for hours in a pot on his BBQ in his backyard. Next morning, we were hard at it again, bottling the tuna with aromatic and colourful additions and olive oil, sterilizing it and stashing it away in the cellar.

Peter is obsessed with preserving traditional Italian foods. He is equally obsessed with preserving a tradition of eating, friendship and culture that's fast disappearing: Slow Food. Peter's thesis is that good food, family and friends all go in one big pot to help lubricate companionship, friendship, happiness and long life.

I'll drink to that! Cin Cin!

Mimmo Cozzolino

Heidelberg Vic

2006

Introduction

INTRODUZIONE

How

How often have you tasted something and it reminded you of your grandmother, or mother, or of a special friend, or of time on a visit to your village of origin? How often have you remembered a special occasion or ceremony that revolved around food or the preparation of food? Maybe you have wondered about the origins of some delicacy that becomes part of each of our 'dreaming': the origins of our character and beliefs that go back to another time, when all was simple and precious and forever constant. To me, these memories are part of our being, and are essential if we are to continue with an identity or acceptance of our background. As an expatriate Italian, part of my 'dreaming' is through certain foods that are special to an era that was the source of what we are today.

I fear that with the passage of another generation, irreplaceable links with our culture will be lost; not only here in Australia but even at 'home' where, because of the progress in the villages, nobody prepares the preserves as our mothers did. The evenings sitting around the table, tasting a fine cheese or sampling a crusty piece of bread with a tangy salty sardine and a glass of home made wine, will be a memory, and with it, a bond that ties all Italians together will be lost forever.

I want to give something to my children. I think that a love for the food, and in particular the tradition that is handed down from mother to daughter and from father to son, needs to be recorded. The recipe for a preserve or a particular salami will maintain our links with a very courageous and inspired generation that left their homeland to give us, their children and our children, an opportunity to live in a land of equality, justice, relative safety and where all is still possible to anyone who wants to take on a challenge.

Even though I truly love this country, I still have a passion and a connection with the land of my forefathers. Whenever I go back to Varapodio (provincia di Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy), "*l'ombelico della civilizzazione*" (the umbilicus of civilisation), I recall the hundreds of stories that I have heard over and over again from my grandmother, my mother and father. They talked about a time when there was another level of respect for each other, and in particular for the *Compare*¹ or the feast of San Giovanni, or when the folks would set out on foot to attend a *Festa della Madonna*, (feast of the Virgin), a two to three day walk from the village.

Everyone would set out in merriment together. Groups in pilgrimage telling stories, sharing scarce food and bonding together to create the thousands

of stories that our elders told us as children, and endlessly repeated to us as adults. So many times in fact have I heard the stories, that I know the place names and people that were in the Village 50 years ago... long before we were born, when the men played a "*pizzotta*"² shared "*nu pezzu i pizzata e na cipuia*" (a piece of bread and onion), when the first young pigeons were offered to the *Barone*³ (landlord) or the *Signurino*, together with the choicest oranges or cherries, in the hope to get work for the season. Every step through the village, every corner, every clump of cane or rocky river bed is full of history and tales that my parents told me. This is my 'dreaming', to which I will always go back, even if only in spirit.

Each time I have gone back to Italy, and whenever I still do, I keep being amazed at how food is a medium for familiarity with people I barely know. We are able to share the same passion for the *rosamarina* (see fish 93) in Calabria, or to savour a good *pecorino* cheese in Toscana, or a sip of *Lemoncino* liqueur together in Ischia, or a great slice of speck in Treviso or Pordenone. The food is the common language. How wonderful it is to share that language and sample new experiences and tastes together. Even more exciting, my children now equate being Italian with that hospitable, intense, so patient, caring and yet so firm, and in some parts still poor but yet so rich ambiance that is Italy.

When they are asked "What are you?" my children respond, "I am Italian but I am an Australian." They carry their heritage with pride, rather than as a burden. They understand and respect the heartbreaking choice my parents had to make in choosing to leave their home and settle in a far land. At the same time, my children understand that Italy was not a place to flee, but that there are, and were many wonderful people and places that were left behind in search of a 'better place'.

If you have any special recipes that you would like to add to this first edition, please email it (including a list of ingredients and their quantities, and a little information about the recipe ie: 'Where it originated, who passed it down to you, how long it has been in your family...etc.', or anymore information that you believe is relevant to your recipe) to the address below:

preservingtheitalianway@hotmail.com

Photograph by Chris Marks



Preserves

LE CONSERVE

I remember when I went to Catholic school as a child in the 60s, my mother would make my lunch; two slabs of homemade bread, one and a half centimetres thick, with a generous loading of *melanzane* and peperoni sott'olio. As I ate, the area would reek of garlic and the oil would drip down my arm to my elbow. All of my friends had vegemite or jam sandwiches. I was literally a social outcast.

When my son went to a public school in the 90s, I used to send him off with a salad, oil and vinegar dressing and some sott'olio and crusty bread. All the children would beg him for a taste of the interesting food because their vegemite or jam sandwiches were boring!

Moral of the story: If you think that you are weird or an outcast, just wait a while and you will be the centre of attention.

The origin of many preserves is from a time long before refrigerators and supermarkets, when the mother needed to stock up a larder with food for winter. Over years, a number of delicious and particular ways have been developed to maintain the nutritional value as well as enhance the flavour of a number of different foods, as they became abundant. Each region, and each family within each region, developed slight variations that made their particular method superior or of particular pride for that family. When I was researching for this book, I was often directed to an aunt or a cousin who did a particular preserve or salami in a specific and often 'secret' way. Often the recipes were a basic standard recipe with variations that were particular to a family or region, each family then claiming that their variation was the only authentic or best way to make a certain recipe.

All these variations are each a part of the fabric that makes us belong and yet be different. Each to have our own 'dreaming', that mystical connection between who we are and where we have come from, and what we hold precious and essential to our identity.

The most common way to preserve produce is to pickle them under salt then vinegar and then seal them with oil or vinegar. However, there are also the processes of sun drying, oven drying and preserving in flavoured or simple light brines.⁴ When a friend serves us a slice of Salami, or a sample of a preserve prepared in the traditional way, it is the centre of long discussions about its region of origin. We speak with pride of our families and their memories, and debate the delicate but specific beauty of the tastes that are only attainable when food is prepared in the traditional way.

This discussion is the healthy rivalry and ownership of our heritage, and the unique quality of modern Italy – rich and diverse ancient backgrounds with a mingling of numerous cultures and people over the millennia, each making up part of our genetic and cultural identity. This, to me, is worth preserving in as many ways as possible, and food is always, and always will be, the central feature bonding our culture together. If we lose this, we lose the most essential ingredient of our identity.

My passion has been to collect as many of the traditional, often ancient and sometimes forgotten recipes, and also to collect the day to day recipes that are typical of a region. That way we can share them with our friends, and hand them on to our children as a legacy of our background. To involve our next generation into our 'dreaming'. Interestingly, this loss of traditional preserving

techniques has recently been accelerated. The inclusion of Italy in the EEC has spelt the demise of cottage food products sold locally, as they do not comply with strict EEC standards of food preparation.

Preserving

There are many ways that food can be preserved, as you will see.

It is essential that you

- use a good quality olive oil,
- use the best and freshest fish or vegetables, etc. Always use herbs from your own garden that you know are fresh.
- make sure the products that you are preserving are at peak season. Don't try and make tomato sauce during the winter when the tomatoes are artificially reddened and taste like poor quality grass.
- make sure you follow the sterilisation instructions as closely as possible.

It takes the same amount of work to use good quality products as to use poor quality ones, but the results are totally different. Also, remember that the original recipes were developed at a time when there were no watches or trains to catch, or children to ferry to scouts, school, parties, etc.

It takes time. So give yourself plenty of time and invite friends around to help. A large part of the pleasure and success of preserving the Italian way, is to spend the time with your friend, your *Compare*, relatives, all creating this cultural medium together. This also allows your children to experience the pleasure of learning, creating, teasing, laughing, eating and building a bank of memories that they in turn will associate, at a later time, with food created to share .

PRESERVES IN OIL. *SOTT' OLIO*

If one goes back to the village, mother would have to use every resource possible to prepare for the winter months. At her disposal were the current produce, salt, olive oil and the sun. *Sott'olio* (under oil) is a common and versatile method to preserve almost anything including vegetables, fish and meat. There are basically two parts to the process. The first part is cooking, which can be done with heat, or with salt and vinegar, which essentially cooks the produce chemically. The second is sealing the preserved products from air and bacteria. Putting the preserve under oil or in vinegar or brine does this. However, using brine, or when sterilising fish, the product has to be sterilised in vacuum jars. Re-cycled jam jars that have a metal lid with a rubber seal are ideal. If you are really serious, you can also buy yourself a Vacola outfit that allows you to preserve literally anything from fruit to meats or fish. The proper sterilisation is an essential process that needs to be followed meticulously. Poorly sterilised food will ferment and explode or, worse still, can be poisonous and extremely dangerous.

STERILISATION

The process is to place the produce in the sealable jars, cover the contents of the jar with the brine or vinegar or oil, and seal with the rubber lined lid. Screw the lid on firmly or place the Vacola clips on. Place the jars in the sterilising pot with the water level till just under the lid. Slowly bring the water temperature to between 80°C and 100°C (boiling point.). This should be over a period of ½ hour and at no time should the water boil hard. Leave it at this temperature for at least 20 minutes and then allow the bottles to cool in the water. After 36 hours check to ensure that the seals are not loose. If they are, you will need to re-sterilise the jars.

VEGETABLES

All vegetables can be preserved but need to be very fresh and clean. Different vegetables are often mixed together for their appearance rather than for the taste e.g. *peperoni rossi* (red capsicum) with *melanzane* (eggplant), or *pomodori verdi* (green tomatoes) with *carote* (carrots). This achieves a variation in texture as well as colour, which is patriotic, displaying the traditional red, white and green colours. You will notice that this trilogy of colours representing the Italian national flag is a common feature in food.

PRESERVING IN OIL. *CONSERVARE SOTT' OLIO*

The basic technique described below is common to a number of vegetables:

Eggplants

MELANZANE

STANDARD RECIPE

The best *melanzane* are large, firm without a lot of seed, and a nice deep purple with a shiny taught skin. When they are not fresh, they become wrinkly and soft. Something that no self-respecting Italian stud would tolerate!

Ingredients

6 Eggplants

½ kg of table salt

500 mls of white wine vinegar

4 tablespoons of home dried Oregano,

2 teaspoon of ground dried Chilli

5-6 cloves of Garlic

Olive oil to cover

Some bricks (about 4 or 5)

8-9 cleaned jam jars ⁶ of 360 grams

- 1: Firstly peel the eggplants. And then slice them lengthwise into 3-4 mm slices.
- 2: Further slice these into 5mm strips. (Alternatively you can just slice the eggplant lengthwise into 1-2 mm slices. If they are sliced this way you may not want to peel them.)
- 3: Place the slices/strips in layers, in a plastic tub with vertical sides.
- 4: Cover each layer liberally with the cooking salt.
- 5: Once the *melanzane* strips are well covered and mixed with the salt, place a plate over them and place a weight of about 10 kg (or four bricks) on the plate.
- 6: Leave the *melanzane* under the weight for 24 hours.
They will produce a salty dark liquid. Drain and discard the liquid.
- 7: Remove the bricks and loosen the slightly dry *melanzane* strips with your hands.

- 8: Pour on the good quality white wine vinegar and mix thoroughly. Allow to stand for 1 hour. The *melanzane* will seem to absorb the vinegar.
- 9: Replace the plate and weight for a further 12 hours.
- 10: Again drain the excess vinegar.
- 11: Lastly, squeeze the strips by hand and place into a bowl.⁷
- 12: Mix the pickled and dry *melanzane* with chopped fresh garlic, home dried oregano and hot chilli to taste, either whole or finely chopped (this can be dried or fresh).

The last step is bottling the pickled *melanzane*.

- 13: Pour 2-3 tablespoon of olive oil into the prepared glass jars.
- 14: Press the vegetables, garlic and herbs into glass jars adding a small amount of olive oil as you press down, to ensure that the oil is evenly distributed throughout the jar.
- 15: Finally, press firmly and cover with olive oil, ensuring that you have no *melanzane* above the oil level.
- 16: Check after 2-3 days to ensure that you do not have to top up with oil, as the vegetables will absorb some of the oil and you may need to top up the jars .
- 17: Seal and store.

*These are best eaten after 3 months as they are still sharp and crunchy. They will last for up to 12 months but will not be at their peak.*⁸

There are almost limitless variations to the above recipe, depending on what is available in your garden at the time

These include mixing the melanzane with any or all of the following: green tomatoes, green or red capsicums, zucchini, celery, carrots, French beans, chocos or onions.

The extra vegetables are sliced and mixed with the melanzane at the beginning and therefore are salted and pickled in the same way as the melanzane.