

Good, good, gnocchi

By Sandra Phinney

We recently had the good fortune of having Lisa Pasolli visit. One night, she rounded up our entire family to make an Italian dish called gnocchi. As some made potato dumplings, others boiled them. I can still hear her say, “More butter!” to my husband, who was assigned the job of making the tomato-onion sauce. A few minutes went by; then Lisa piped up one more time, “More butter!” To be sure, this was a dish like no other.

Lisa grew up on a farm in southern Alberta, completed her Masters in Canadian history at UNB and is now polishing off her PhD in Victoria, BC. In Lisa’s family, the Italian cooking expert is her Great Auntie Agnese who married her Great Uncle Tino. “When my sisters and I were young we spent lots of time at their farm, helping to collect eggs and feed the pigs, four of whom I remember being named after my sisters and me – so it was quite traumatic when it came time to butcher them in the fall!”

Secret’s in the lard

If there’s one thing Lisa learned from cooking her Auntie’s dishes, it’s to embrace lard (and butter, and oil, and probably more butter too). When Lisa finally got around to writing down the instructions for her Auntie’s spaghetti sauce (Ragu Alla Bolognese) she was sure that it would contain some mysterious concoction of garlic, herbs, and maybe wine. “Not a chance,” says Lisa. “The secret was in the lard. And the butter and the oil and the milk.”

Gnocchi is definitely the “special occasion” dish in the Pasolli household. “Making gnocchi is a group effort though, so if it doesn’t turn out you can always blame one of your assistants. But between the potato peeling, dumpling-boiling, and sauce-making, preparing the meal is as much fun as eating it,” she says.

The first recipe on the following page is the family meat sauce recipe that Lisa uses for lasagna (and I’ve since used for spaghetti). It’s the best meat sauce I’ve had in my lifetime, bar none. The second recipe is for gnocchi. Enjoy!



Cutting rolled ropes

Boiling the gnocchi



Ragu Alla Bolognese (Meat sauce)

1 pound hamburger
2 oz. butter
1 oz. lard
1 oz. vegetable oil
1 small onion, diced
pinch of pepper
1 tsp salt
1/2 cup milk
1/2 small tin tomato paste
1/2 small tin tomatoes
1/2 cup water

In a saucepan, sauté the onion in the butter and lard. Add hamburger and cook until brown. Add milk, and simmer until the milk evaporates. Add tomato paste and tomatoes, and stir in salt and pepper. Cook on low heat for at least one hour.

Lisa Pasolli



Gnocchi

Potato Dumplings

About 4-5 pounds of potatoes,
the older the better
1 egg
2-3 cups of flour

Sauce

About 1/2 pound of butter
Tin of tomato paste
One diced onion

Peel and boil the potatoes. Drain, mash and cool. (At this point, put on a large pot of water to boil, which will be used to cook the dumplings). Dump the mashed potatoes onto a large floured surface and form into a mound with a well in the centre. Add an egg to the well and work into the potato, using your hands. Start adding flour and continue to knead and add flour but the less you work the dough, the better. The dough will be slightly sticky (not too dry) and you should be able to roll it into ropes.

Once you're done adding the flour, take small portions of the dough with floured hands and begin to roll it out into ropes, about 1 inch thick. Cut the ropes into small pieces, about 1 inch wide. Make an indentation in each "dumpling" by pressing with a fork. This will help the sauce stick to the dumplings.

While one person rolls the ropes and cuts the dumplings, another can be boiling them. Place about 6 -10 gnocchi in a mesh strainer, and dunk into the pot of boiling water. Let them boil until they float to the top (around 1 minute). Remove from strainer and place in a 9 x 13 pan.

Meanwhile, another person can be making the sauce. It's best to make the sauce in small batches, and spoon over the gnocchi as they're added to the pan. To make the sauce, sauté a handful of diced onions in a few tablespoons of butter. Add about a tablespoon of tomato paste and stir, cooking for a few minutes. The sauce shouldn't be too runny, or too thick. Pour it over a small section of the boiled gnocchi, and continue making the sauce and adding to the gnocchi until all they're all covered. Now sprinkle parmesan cheese over the top. Add more layers of gnocchi, sauce and parmesan cheese until dumplings are gone. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for about 15 minutes, just to make sure that the dish is nice and warm.

Gnocchi is even better the next day—if you have any leftovers!