

Cooking Up an Italian Life: Simple Pleasures of Italy in Recipes and Stories

Sharon Sanders

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There's a great wave of enchantment for things Italian washing over America. Immersed deeply in it are Sanders and her husband, Walter. Sanders, an American cook and food writer lovesick for Italy, has found that "I don't need to live in Italy to live like an Italian." With this cookbook she shares how.

This book is a chronicle of Sanders' life-long affair with Italy through recipes and essays by both the author and her husband. Despite the dreamy essays, homecooks in particular will find this book smart and kitchen friendly. The uncomplicated recipes come paired to make a meal.

Sanders does a good job of guidance with constant cooking tips, creative substitutions, and wine suggestions. Most recipes probably can be on the table in under an hour. She lists the recipe-menus under eight meal categories: Soup and Egg; Bread and Pizza; Pasta; Vegetables, Bean, and Grain; Fish and Shellfish; Chicken and Turkey; Pork and Beef; and Appetizers and Desserts.

Interspersed between the usual pizza, pasta, and polenta are some truly fetching menus like Scallop-Tomato-Bacon Kabobs on Romaine with Pesto Dressing; Pork Roast Salad with Crunchy Vegetables and Green Olives; and Vegetable Ricotta Gratin with Corn on the Cob, Garlic Butter and Rustic Bread.

Sanders presents readers with a cookbook that is based on the essentials of Italian cooking, but uses an American pantry. Spaghetti in Bacon and Egg Sauce paired with Stir-Sauteed Spinach is an example. Instead of the usual pancetta (unsmoked cured bacon) that Italians classically use for Spaghetti Carbonara, Sanders had been preparing the dish for her family (but not food cognoscente friends) with the more readily available American smoked bacon. It wasn't until a trip to northern Lombardy near Swizerland that she came upon smoked pancetta. In an essay she describes the moment of freedom that brought this recipe out of the closet to one of the top ten dishes in her repertoire. Sanders realized that Italian cooking is about being true to its spirit, not its ingredients.

At first glance this books feels like a passionate homecook's dinner-making diary interspersed with scribbled family memories. As readers begin to use it they will find a cookbook that bypasses "kick it up a notch" notoriety for quiet competence. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, this book is one cook's passionate love letter to Italians.

NANCY K. ALLEN (May / June 2001)

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