ForeWord Reviews

COOKING

La Cucina: The Regional Cooking of Italy
The Italian Academy of Cuisine
Rizzoli
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In New Jersey, where the Turnpike vertically dissects the state, one asks "Which exit?" to pinpoint where someone lives; in Italy, knowing if one puts raisins or pignoli nuts in meatballs will do the same. In Italy, it's all about the regions-and no two cook alike.

Since the 1950s, the Italian Academy of Cuisine has sent hundreds of helpers to Italy's twenty regions, from abundant Abruzzi to bite-size Elba. Their job? To record, often for the first time, how home cooks produce traditional meals.

The result is La Cucina: The Regional Cooking of Italy, a 980-page, 2,000+ recipe, 4.2 pound tome; a comprehensive "bible," as well as mid-century Italian rural travel narrative, kitchen companion, and guide to how history and cultural shifts shape cuisine. It's in English, but La Cucina has a strong accent. Come along, it seems to say: see how it's done, though producing exact replicas is improbable-ingredients, water sources, Americans' desire for quick results, all conspiring against us.

It's probably unfair to compare La Cucina to modern cookbooks, with recipes not tested in a professional kitchen, nor tweaked by a celebrity. There are no photographs or illustrations. Recipes though, drip with unexpected details-the city or village in which a dish originated, how it was named, why it's served on certain days. The words microwave, frozen, and margarine are absent; a per-meal dose of olive oil is assumed. Calorie counts? Fuggedaboutit. But none of that matters, really, because it's all here, from ludicrously simple (Ricotta and Egg Soup) to intricately complex (Seafood and Vegetable Platter).

The Preface, Introduction, and Editor's Notes are essential reading, with a glossary, substitutions, and useful caveats, such as, "some recipes delve into greater detail than others regarding technique." Indeed, many insist on common sense: "boil and slice the potatoes," "bake until cooked through." Others clasp so tightly to tradition (no shortcuts, lengthy and complicated methods), cooks are clearly meant to interpret and improvise. Otherwise, anyone outside Italy (or even inside Italy, in 2009) would be unlikely to try them.

Recipes fill eight chapters: Antipasti/Pizza/Sauces, Cheese, Soups, Vegetables, Fish,

Meat and Poultry, Pasta, and Desserts. While expected dishes appear, more fall in the category of didn't-know-that-was-Italian, and, sometimes distressingly, didn't-know-anyone-ate-that. One finds uses for pork cheeks, calf snout, pig pancreas, lamb brains; and while these may seem ick-inducing (substitutions are sporadically offered), without them, the book would be less interesting.

The book is most useful as a means to understanding the regions' uses of flavors, methods, and ingredients, and then-factoring in one's ability to, say, obtain fresh cardoons or willingness to clean eel-doing what feels right. And blessedly, for every Oven Roasted Deer Haunch, La Cucina serves up hundreds of more cookable dishes, such as Pork Cutlets, Celery Soup, Rice Balls, Braised Catfish, Ugly But Good Macaroons.

La Cucina points up Italians' historic practicality, often borne of hardship. When dead horses filled farmers' fields after battles, horsemeat stew filled stomachs. Follow this thought, and one finds in La Cucina, uses for stale bread, "undesirable" meat cuts, weeds. Leftover pasta makes a fine breakfast with two eggs and a hot broiler.

The bounteous Fish section is a reminder of how much of Italy borders the sea. Pasta is the longest chapter (224 pages), and includes rice and risotto dishes. The Antipasti and Cheese chapters also feature breakfast, lunch and snacks. In Desserts, expected items appear, but are outshined by luscious if lesser known lights, like Chestnut Fudge, Hazelnut Trifle, Wine Doughnuts, and Baked Amaretto Peaches.

Slightly baffling is the alphabetizing of recipes by Italian names (eggplant under m, melanzane), though English names appear as recipe titles. Unimaginatively (but perhaps logically), dishes with multiple variations are given numbers: Aquacotta Soup 1, 2. Excellent indexes help, one sorting recipes by region, subdivided by chapter; others by main ingredient, title, and simplicity.

Sidebars slugged "Local Tradition" offer more options, history and lore, and the skinny on confusing terms: salame is not the same as salami, lard isn't lardo. Some are unintentionally funny: "A typical dish of Sienna, it can also be made without the spleen." Priest-Choker pasta got its name for a reason.

Cooks wanting recipes from chefs in Italy's sophisticated modern cities may be disappointed, but as an editor notes, when published in Italy, comparisons of La Cucina to a phone book were apt because, "each recipe leads back to a province, a city, a street, ultimately a kitchen table." The book reads that way, familial and familiar, idiosyncratic yet organized, and feels at times like spending a year in Italian kitchens, circa 1950. Nonni would approve.

(November) Lisa Romeo

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