Cooking

The Italian-American Cookbook: A Feast of Food from a Great American Cooking Tradition

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With this cookbook the Marianis put Americans on notice that Italian-American food is no longer the homey red-checkered-tablecloth-with-wax-dripped-Chianti-bottle and red sauce. What began in this country as the cuisine of poor southern Italian immigrants has reinvented itself. The reader learns about the reverence with which Italian Americans treat food and the quality that they demand.

The Marianis are tired of stereotypes. They, and many other Italian Americans, want their cuisine to be recognized and respected. This cookbook that is full of great wine, prosciutto, cheeses, balsamic vinegar, porcini mushrooms, farro, and lots of fresh vegetables make respect a sure thing.

The Marianis divide their book into sixteen sections, making the purchase of this book a major commitment. Just the sections on history, ingredients, and wines are detailed enough to keep readers taking the book to bed with them for a month. If these sections aren't enough to convince Americans of how serious Italian Americans are about their food, then the next twelve chapters on antipasti; soup; salad; pasta (with fifty-six recipes); risotto and polenta; seafood; meats; poultry; vegetables; breads, pizza and sandwiches; desserts and confections; and drinks will.

Although substantial, this book is accessible to its American public. The Mariani's offering hovers somewhere between the reigning queen of Italian cooking, Marcella Hazan, and red-checkered tablecloth cooks. Its clearly laid-out pages and exhaustive information will accompany readers to the market armed with self-confidence. The recipes are not only distilled favorites like Veal Scallopine with Marsala, but also innovative dishes that the Marianis create with American foods like Rock Shrimp Cannelloni.

If there is a weak area in the Marianis work it would be in recipe writing. True, the recipes are well-written and very clear, yet they sometimes lack the feeling that the Marianis are at your elbow while you cook. When they tell you to saute shrimp in the recipe for Shrimp Scampi there is no motherly admonition about overcooking them. Any Italian worth her pasta will tell you that shrimp can easily turn to rubber.

If they don't handhold much, the Marianis do entertain readers with information in the form of sidebars. Four pages regale readers with How to Tell an Italian Restaurant from an Italian-American Restaurant. Sidebars give one tidbits like First Rule of Italian Cookery: "If the pasta is overcooked, throw it out! There is no method of saving or restoring overcooked pasta."

The Marianis pull the Italian-American cooking revolution together in this book. It's not just another pretty face. Much like Italian-Americans themselves, this cookbook is adaptable, beautiful, food-serious and hard working.

Nancy K. Allen