

“Lost” Ravioli with Rice, Spinach, and Sausage Filling

“Raieu” (*Ravioli di riso all’Alta Val Trebbia*)

Interpreted and adapted from the original recipe by Julia della Croce

This recipe is based on Alice Benner’s great-grandmother’s lost recipe, which was handed down through oral tradition, imprinted in Alice’s taste memory and told to me. I reconstructed it based on Alice’s recollection of the ingredients her grandmother used, and by researching the historical food of her native Tuscany and its surroundings. A very similar recipe to Alice’s description of the ravioli was a specialty of the Alta Val Trebbia Valley in the Appenines, where Liguria meets Tuscany in Italy’s northwest. To reproduce the “indescribably delicious” ravioli Alice remembers, I stuck close to genuine local ingredients of the Tuscany region: *arborio* rice, Tuscan sheep cheese (called *cacio*, or *caciotta*), pork sausage. The cheese should be semi-aged (3-5 months). If Tuscan *pecorino* (sheep cheese) is unavailable, use a similar semi-soft sheep cheese from Sardinia (*fior di Sardegna*); Campania (*pecorino paglierino* from Eboli); Calabria; or Sicily. Semi-aged Spanish *manchego* or a similar artisanally produced semi-aged American sheep cheese would also be suitable. Above all, avoid *pecorino romano*--it’s too aged (hard) and way too salty; using it here is what contributed to Alice’s poor results with the recipe at first.

In Alice’s ancestors’ native region, *ravioli di riso* were a dish of the summer holidays, served as a first course. When pigs were slaughtered in January, a sausage was made, carefully preserved by smoking and set aside for the summer. The lightly smoked sausage gives a pleasant faint smokiness to the filling, but fresh Italian pork sausage can be substituted. Lard provided a tasty flavor base for the filling, supplemented with fruity local olive oil, or not (I have substituted extra-virgin olive oil with the modern cook in mind).

These ravioli are anointed with a simple home-made tomato sauce (recipe follows), which should be made in advance of the ravioli. Here are three recipes you will need for the the filling, the sauce, and the ravioli dough.

Special equipment needed: hand-cranked pasta machine, dough scraper, sieve, fluted pastry wheel, rolling pin; ample freezer space.

Recommended cheese mongers:

Di Palo Fine Foods (New York City)

Formaggio Kitchen (Boston)

Corti Brothers, Sacramento

The Pasta Shop, Oakland

The Cheese Board, Berkeley

Zingerman’s, Ann Arbor

Whole Foods (national chain)

For the filling:

1/3 cup *arborio*, *carnaroli*, or *vialone nano* rice

1 cup whole or 2% milk

fine sea salt

12 ounces fresh baby spinach, stemmed

extra-virgin olive oil

1 small onion, minced
1 egg yolk
12 ounces smoked luganega, or substitute fresh Italian sweet pork sausage meat
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
4 ounces freshly grated semi-aged (semi-soft) Tuscan sheep cheese (*cacio* or *caciotta*) or substitute one of the other cheeses mentioned in the headnote
freshly ground black pepper to taste

For the ravioli dough:

(makes about 1 pound)

2 ½ cups unbleached all-purpose white flour, plus additional
4 "large" eggs at room temperature
1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt
2 teaspoons olive or vegetable oil

To make the filling:

Bring the milk to a boil. Stir in the rice and 1/4 teaspoon salt. Cover tightly and simmer over low to medium-low heat without stirring. When the milk is entirely absorbed, about 15 minutes, take the pan off the heat and allow the rice to cool, lid on.

To cook the spinach, steam or boil it until it wilts. Alternatively, in a wide skillet, saute it in 2 teaspoons of olive oil until it collapses, about 2 minutes. Drain it well and use your hands to squeeze out excess water. Chop and set it aside.

Wipe out the skillet and put in 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Warm the oil over medium heat until it begins to shimmer being careful not to let it overheat. Add the onion and garlic and saute it over very low heat until it is thoroughly softened but not colored, about 12 minutes. If using pre-cooked, smoked luganega-style sausage, mince it finely by hand or a food processor and set it aside. If using fresh sausage, remove it from its casings and add it to the skillet. Saute gently until it is cooked through. Add the cooked spinach to the pan and toss. Take the skillet off the heat and allow it to cool, lid on.

To assemble the filling, to the cooled rice add the egg yolk, nutmeg, grated sheep cheese, and pepper, using a wooden spoon to blend well. Now mix in the sausage mixture. Taste and adjust for seasoning. Chill the filling aside while you make the pasta.

To make the ravioli dough:

Assemble all the ingredients on an ample work surface. Keep at hand several clean dish towels, a sharp knife, a fluted pastry wheel, and 6 sheet pans lined with clean cloth kitchen towels.

Mound the flour and salt directly onto your work surface. Make a "well" in the center. In a shallow bowl, lightly beat the eggs and oil and pour the mixture into the well.

Using a fork, gradually draw in the flour from the inside of the well, always working the fork in the same direction to prevent air pockets from forming. Use your free hand to protect the outside wall until the wet mixture is integrated. When the mixture becomes too stiff to work with using the fork, scrape the dough from the fork into the well and continue forming the dough with your hands. Continue forming the dough into a very soft ball. It should be firm enough to handle, but soft and very pliable. If there is too much flour to be absorbed, do not use it all. The dough should be soft but not wet or sticky in the least. If the dough is too soft, add flour a little at a time until you get the right consistency. Set the dough aside; scoop up the flour left on the board and sift it. Discard all the dried out bits of dough.

Lightly flour the surface and using the heel of your hand, knead the dough from the middle of the ball outwards, as you would do for bread dough. Do this for about 5 minutes, or until it is smooth, even, and elastic, maintaining its round shape. Well-kneaded dough makes rolling and cutting easy, and produces pasta that is tender but firm. Divide the dough into four equal parts and cover it with an inverted bowl and let it to rest for 15 minutes or up to 3 hours.

Rolling and cutting using the pasta machine:

Set up your pasta machine so that everything on your work surface is within easy reach. Be sure the machine is free of dried dough bits.

Working with one section of the dough at a time, lightly flour your work surface. With a standard rolling pin, flatten the piece you are working with. Dust it lightly with flour. Set the rollers of the machine at the widest possible setting. Feed the dough through the roller without pulling it or stretching it. Drape it over your hand with your thumb up in the air to avoid puncturing it. Take the dough strip and fold it in thirds as you would a letter. (This will keep the piece of dough in a uniform rectangular shape, which is important as you roll it out thinner and longer through the machine.) Press it flat with your hands and fingertips to get all the air out and lightly flour one side only (the other side remains un-floured so that it will adhere to itself when you fold it in thirds again). Pass the dough strip through the rollers at the widest setting for a total of three times, folding it in three each time. Then set the rollers one notch past the previous one. Pass the dough through again, collecting it at the other end. Repeat the process of folding it in thirds and pressing out the air, flouring it lightly on one side, then putting it through a higher notch each time. Continue doing this at each setting, finishing this rolling-out process with the setting at the next to the last numeral on the knob.

Roll out only one strip of dough at a time for the ravioli, as the dough must be porous in order to seal properly. While you roll out each strip and form the ravioli, keep the remaining dough sections under the inverted bowl to prevent them from drying out. Work quickly in order to prevent the dough strip from drying out.

Fresh-filled pasta should not rest longer than fifteen minutes or so at room temperature after they have been filled, or an hour or two (depending on the moistness of the filling) in the refrigerator. The ravioli can stick to the surface, breaking when you try to lift them

if they are left out too long. It is best to refrigerate them if you plan to cook them promptly after making them. If not, freeze them, leaving adequate space between them to prevent them from sticking together. Layer them only if you are going to freeze them, putting waxed paper between each layer. If you plan to cook them right after making them, do not stack them--keep them separate on numerous trays and do not let them touch.

Cutting and filling the dough strips for ravioli:

Cut one strip of dough in half cross-wise and lay it out on an ample work surface. Cover with other half with clean kitchen towels. Working quickly, place a mounded teaspoon of filling at 3-inch intervals in rows along the pasta strip.

Dip a pastry brush into beaten egg, or yolk; paint the area around the filling and just to the edges of the dough strip to completely surround each mound and ensure a secure seal.

Place the second sheet of dough over the filled sheet, matching up the edges and corners. Use your fingers to press out any air pockets and press down firmly around each filling mound to seal well.

Use a fluted pastry wheel or 10-inch chef's knife to cut 4-inch square ravioli. Press down around each filling mound once again to secure the envelope seal. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling.

Cooking the ravioli

Smear an ample, shallow serving dish with a few tablespoons of the tomato sauce. Drop the ravioli a few at a time into plenty of gently boiling salted water. Stir and immediately cover. When the water comes to a second boil, remove the lid. Cook for 3-4 more minutes from the moment the water has returned to a boil. Cook gently--if the boil is too vigorous, the pasta envelopes can break. Using a "spider" or wide mesh spoon, lifting them out as soon as they are cooked, allowing excess cooking water to drip off. Transfer the ravioli to the platter. Total cooking time should not exceed 3-5 minutes.

20-Minute Tomato Sauce for Ravioli

Makes approximately 2 cups

From *Italian Home Cooking: 125 Recipes to Comfort Your Soul*, by Julia della Croce (Kyle Books, 2010)

Here, a classic tomato sauce for the ravioli.

2½ cups canned, peeled plum tomatoes in juice
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 large cloves garlic, smashed
2 tablespoons tomato paste
2 or 3 fresh basil leaves
¼ teaspoon salt, or to taste
freshly milled black pepper

Drain the tomatoes, reserving their juice. Using your hands or a potato masher, crush the tomatoes well. Set aside.

In a cold saucepan over medium-low heat, warm 2 tablespoons of the olive oil and the garlic together, and sauté until the garlic is soft but not colored, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the tomato paste and stir; then add the tomatoes and their strained juice. Simmer over low heat, uncovered, until enough of the liquid evaporates to form a sauce that will coat a spoon, about 25 minutes. Tear the basil into small pieces and stir them into the sauce along with the salt. Simmer for another minute or two. Remove from the heat and stir in the pepper and the remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil.

Variation: Substitute 1 small red, white, or yellow onion, chopped, for the garlic.

Ahead-of-time note: The sauce can be made 4 to 5 days before using and stored tightly covered in the refrigerator, or it can be frozen for up to 3 months. Whether storing it in the refrigerator or freezer, leave out the basil, pepper, and last tablespoon olive oil. Stir them into the sauce after reheating.