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NEWS RELEASE

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GREAT ITALIAN FOOD

No wonder American cooks are enjoying an Italian renaissance. After decades of indulging in a narrow range of Italian-inspired foods, we're discovering the real secret to the Italian cooking style: There isn't one!

Italian cuisine features infinite variations beyond lasagna, spaghetti with meatballs, and pizza. It all depends on who's cooking and what region of Italy they call home. In the north, where dairy and beef cattle graze, dining focuses on butter, meat, and flat noodles. In the south, where fruits and vegetables thrive, tomato sauces and tube-shaped pastas make the menu.

There are literally hundreds of variations in-between. Whatever the tradition-Venetian, Roman, Tuscan, Sicilian, or Neapolitan-Italy's best cooks share one vital practice: they start with the freshest, ripest, best-tasting ingredients and then let them "sing" in uncomplicated flavor combinations.

One of the backbone ingredients is the pomodoro, which is Italian for tomato. Spanish explorers discovered the delicious food right here in the New World and took it back to Europe. The rest is Italian cooking history.

When you think about stocking your own pantry with pomodoro, think Roma. Also known as plum tomatoes, their thicker skin, meaty flesh, and minimal juice make them ideal for hearty Italian sauces and other canning recipes. Botanists call Romas a "determinate" variety. That simply means they produce lots of fruits at one time, leaving plenty for home canning.

Whatever variety you like to have on hand, time your preserving ventures for the moment of vine-ripened readiness. Then, stock several variations to create the gourmet spirit of hearty and elegant Italian meals. Here are a few must haves:

Quartered Tomatoes

You'll use them often in your exploration of the Italian culinary style. They substitute for fresh when vine-ripened aren't available, and by canning them with seasonings like garlic or basil, you're one step ahead. Dice your canned, quartered tomatoes and add them to Italian sauces for garden-fresh texture. Or simply drain the juice and toss them with croutons and herbs for a refreshing side dish.

Tomatoes with Basil & Garlic

With the seasonings already simmered in, they're perfect atop crostini, the crispy and delicious Italian appetizer. Drain, dice, and cook a quart until most of the moisture is evaporated. Sprinkle in fresh-grated Parmesan to taste, a dash of red wine vinegar, and spread on lightly toasted slices of Italian-style bread. Heat under the broiler until bubbly for a piping hot conversation-starter.

Stewed Italian Tomatoes

Stewing brings out the sugary character of the tomatoes, and light seasonings make these tomatoes ready-to-go. Use them as a foundation for a fresh, quick side dish: Cook a quart of stewed tomatoes until they begin to thicken. Add blanched green beans, spinach or Swiss chard, and simmer until the vegetables are just tender. It's an unusual, and unusually healthy, way to serve vegetables.

Italian Seasoned Tomato Sauce

Stock plenty of sauces, because pasta topping is only the beginning. For a rustic Italian adventure, spoon hot tomato sauce over polenta, the cooked corn meal that many regions of Italy use like pasta. Don't let the long cooking time in traditional polenta recipes discourage you; many supermarkets now stock quick-cook polenta that's as easy as boiling pasta.

Your own fresh-canned stock of tomatoes creates the ideal cuisine. In all its forms, Italian cooking is undemanding, adaptable, and inexpensive. With on-hand ingredients, it's also simple to prepare. What could be more deliciously simple than that?

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