

Lucca Summer Solstice 2011:



21 giugno 2011
The first day of summer

Greetings to all from Lucchesia (Luccaland) after what has been the most beautiful spring that we can remember here in Tuscany since, well, decades ago! It has felt truly impossible for either of us to spend time in the office with what nature was providing us with outside ~ we have been especially appreciative of our gorgeous cool and sunny spring weather when hearing the news of all of the heatwaves and violent weather the States have suffered this spring. Carpe diem has been the rule of the day for us here.

We've been fully immersed in our relaxed Tuscan rhythm of life that somehow continues, after all of these years, to have us feeling like we are living inside of a beautiful poem where all of one's senses are happy and alive at once. Lucca still inspires.

John has been busy, as always, with his queue of portrait projects ~ but we have both also been out cycling most days with some plein air landscaping worked in while the weather has been so agreeable. Thoroughly enjoyable ~ which isn't to say that the bugs, people, and weather variations, along with all things unpredictable as to plein air painting, are not always factors! I've included several shots above and below of just how John accomplishes landscape painting with only his bike for transportation most days. How to paint "by cycle" is a topic in itself!



Lucca Italy, June 2011

POLPO IN GALERA ~OR~ “OCTOPUS IN JAIL”:

Did I lose you already? This is a comment I have heard many times when speaking of recipes for rabbit, tripe, octopus, etc.... Proceed only if you have no such prohibitions and enjoy the taste of the sea that this light delicacy provides. If you like octopus and/or squid, you will find this simple recipe superb! This recipe serves 4 as a seafood course.

Start with a 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pound (800 gram) whole octopus. Here in Italy, I often use several moscardini bianco for this recipe totaling 800 grams (moscardini, as best I can translate, are a variety of small octopus species). Rinse the octopus or moscardini well in cold water. Cut the head (body) off from all the tentacles (removing the eyes) and clean the head (body) well by inverting it and removing all the intestines, ink sack, and any inner stuff. Then rinse it all again and peel the outer skin from the head (body) and you are ready to cut the white flesh into rings. Now remove the beaklike mouth from the center of all of the tentacles half of the octopus and be sure that all of the tentacle suction cups are cleaned out well. Now cut the tentacles into bite-size pieces. O.k ~ now I've lost you, right? All of this cleaning is most likely not even necessary in the States, because what you will find there (frozen, or even fresh) will most likely have had all or most of this cleaning done to it already!

In a heavy bottomed large pot, warm 6 Tbsp of extra virgin olive oil. Add in 2 cloves of minced garlic. Saute on low heat for 2 minutes (always be careful not to brown the garlic).

Now add in the octopus (polpi) or moscardini and season with salt and pepper to taste. Deglaze with 1/2 cup of white wine. Cover and lightly simmer over low to medium heat for about 40 minutes.

Next stir in the juice of one freshly squeezed lemon and a large handful of freshly minced Italian parsley. Simmer for another 5 minutes w/o the lid on and serve the octopus in a bowl along with slices of good European style bread to soak up the broth. Or serve it over a bit of capellini pasta cooked al dente.

Buon appetito il cuoco intrepido!

k~

Potato and Fresh Anchovy (or Mussel or Swordfish) Casserole (Acciughe al Forno)

This is a traditional Italian dish you can prepare ahead, then bake later to finish. You can take it from the frig, ready to go, and then place in the oven to be cooked at the proper time during any Italian multicourse dinner. I make this all the time over here in the summer and everyone always loves it (unless they really don't like seafood at all). The Italians (and I) also make this type of baked dish frequently with cooked shelled fresh mussels or a layer of 1/2 thick raw swordfish steaks as the fish layer and it is equally delicious ~ so those might be the logical switches in the States where fresh anchovies are difficult to find. It will be using the anchovies or swordfish that will give you all of the lovely and healthy Omega 3's in this recipe ~ it all sounds more complicated and time consuming than it really is! I make this according to "feel" with proportions, but here is my attempt to put this wonderful Italian combining of seafood and potatoes, as is so often done here, into a written recipe. Serves 6.

Preheat the oven to 375 F and coat a deep 9" - 10" round or oval casserole dish (Le Creuset would be perfect) with plenty of extra virgin olive oil.*

Boil or briefly microwave about 1 1/2 lbs of thin skinned Bolognese (or Yukon Gold) potatoes until they are almost cooked through. Then slice them into 1/4 inch slices and set them aside.

You will need about 800 grams or 28 ounces of cleaned fresh anchovy fillets that have been rinsed and blotted dry for this recipe. In case you are buying them whole (or only cleaned partially to any stage along the way) here is how to deal with a whole fresh anchovy: wash them thoroughly and, under lightly running water pinch the head off and then slide your thumb nail down the belly to clean out the gut and split the fish in two lengthwise where you can easily pull out the whole length of the spine. Then try to keep the back (top) side of the fish attached as you pinch off the dorsal fin. Rinse again and blot dry. That's it ~ I can clean a couple pounds of fresh anchovies over here at the sink in less than 1/2 hour. If using mussels instead of anchovies, you will need to steam open about 3 to 4 pounds of them in a big pot (stirring them occasionally) and then pick out all of their meats to use as the fish layer in this recipe.

Prepare the following and place in separate little glass bowls to await their later use:

- 1. Mince 5 large cloves of very fresh garlic (removing any green cores of each clove first)*
- 2. Thinly slice half a small fresh sweet red (or Videlia) onion.*
- 3. Mince 5 Tbsp of Italian flat leaf parsley*
- 4. Mince some fresh oregano (about 3 level Tbsp)*
- 5. Finely mince some fresh rosemary (about 2 level Tbsp)*
- 6. Thinly slice about 200 grams (7 oz) of fresh tomatoes*
- 7. Cut some nice fresh bread into small cubes for a single layer of bread crumb topping for the casserole and toss the cubes in some olive oil to coat (or spray with olive oil spray).*

Now you are ready to build the casserole layer by layer:

First layer all of the potatoes at the bottom of the deep casserole dish and drizzle with at least 1/4 cup of extra virgin olive oil. Top with half of 1. through 5. above. Salt and pepper heavily. Now top with whatever fish or seafood you are using for your fish layer and top with the other half of 1. - 5. Then add the layer of tomatoes. Cover everything with about 1/3 to 1/2 cup dry white wine and then 1/4 cup olive oil. Now top with the oiled bread crumb topping and salt and pepper everything again.*

Bake uncovered for about 25 minutes for using mussels, 30 minutes for anchovies and 45+ minutes for using swordfish.

Come sempre, buon appetito!

** You can omit using the dry white wine as the final liquid and then use lots of freshly squeezed lemon juice diluted with some water instead (important: omit tomato layer if doing this). For me, it just depends on what mood I am in ~ both are equally delicious!*