Pasta Making
Traditions of Basilicata and Calabria

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“Amicizie e maccheroni, sono meglio caldi.”
“Friendships and macaroni are better warm.”

Everyone knows that pasta is one of Italy’s most beloved ingredients. What some people might be surprised to learn, however, is just how intricately woven into the fabric of Italian society pasta really is. In our ancestral southern Italian regions of Basilicata and Calabria, many types of pastas (and the grains used to prepare them) are on the verge of being forgotten. We feel that these important pieces of our culinary patrimony must be carried forward in order to maintain our cultural identities and protect a traditional way of life that has been a perfect integration of humans and nature for millennia.

The first written accounts of pasta were in the Shang Dynasty in China from 1700-1100 BCE. In approximately 1000 BCE, accounts of laganon, strips of pasta which were mortuary offerings surfaced as did something called “pasta” which was actually a variety of barley porridge. In antiquity, the regions of Basilicata and Calabria were actually unified under “Magna Grecia” or “Greater Greece” – colonies which were established by the Greeks in southern Italy. By the 8th century BCE, four centuries before it was seen by the Etruscans, pasta was enjoyed in Magna Grecia. Due to its Greek heritage, it was called Lagane, from the Greek name Laganon. Lagane pasta, flat, thin, and irregularly shaped, is traditionally served for important holidays and occasions, just as it was in ancient Greece. In modern day Calabria and Basilicata, it is often paired with beans and eaten at harvest times, and also on St. Joseph’s day.

Often dismissed as “cucina povera”, pasta and beans are much more dignified than one might think. It’s important to remember that both wheat and legumes were forms of currency in antiquity. Unlike the inexpensive, go-to pantry items that they are today, not everyone could afford to eat them on a daily basis, due to the heavy taxes that were imposed on them. Wheat itself was taxed heavily in many areas of Italy in antiquity. Milling the wheat was taxed until the 20th century in some areas. What this meant for communities was that average people, mostly farmers and fishermen in southern Italy, could not afford the finely milled flour that is used in making today’s pasta, nor could they always afford the wheat to make it. As a result, many types of whole grains and grasses were combined to make traditional pasta.

One of the most common methods of making flour was with grano arso or “burnt grain.” Burnt grain refers to remnants of threshed grain that was collected by field workers along with stubble that remained on the ground after the fields were burned to fertilize the land. The peasants would then mill the grains and mix them with whatever other types of flour they could afford to make pasta and bread. The result was black, char-flavored flour that gave unique flavor.
and texture to recipes. Because each family mixed the *grano arso* with the other flours they had on hand, the products made from the flour varied from household to household, creating a very personal and economic relationship to bread and pasta.

While “burnt grain” is enjoying a renaissance in Italy thanks to creative southern Italian chefs interested in promoting recipes from the past, it is *grano duro*, (hard, winter wheat flour) which really takes center stage in pasta making and has never fallen prey to fashions or fads. The second most commonly used wheat in the world, *Triticum Durum* (as it is known in Latin), offers a higher amount of protein (16%), Vitamins B, folic Acid, and phosphorous than other varieties, and contains no cholesterol. It also contains 6 of the 9 essential amino acids, making it an excellent choice for vegetarians. Semolina is made from *grano duro* flour. The semolina itself is known as “the heart of wheat,” whereas semolina flour is often made from mixing the leftover bran and germ layers of the wheat. Unfortunately, the genetic modification of wheat has turned it into an “off-limits” food for many people. For this reason, many organic, heirloom varieties are now being researched and rediscovered.

Senatore Capelli, named after Rafaelle Capelli from the Abruzzo region who first classified wheat varieties and was responsible for pre 20th century agricultural reform, is high in vitamins, minerals, lipids, and protein. Often growing to 1.8 meters in height, Senetore Capelli wheat has also been found to be safe for many people with gluten intolerances. Many modern *pastifici*, or pasta makers, have been offering traditionally made pastas using this type of flour, and it is becoming very fashionable among home consumers and restaurants.

Buckwheat, called *saraceno* in Italy has been used since the 9th century in its native Siberia. High in protein (19%), selenium, iron, zinc, mineral salts, and antioxidants, this powerful grain has also been proven to balance blood sugar levels, making it a popular choice with diabetes. While Tuscan cooks use it to make *pizzoccheri* pasta and *crespelle* (crepes). In Calabria, a buckwheat pasta similar to linguine, called *struncatura*, has been enjoyed for centuries.

Passed down from generation to generation, many pasta recipes are on the verge of being forgotten as modern women no longer have time to prepare them and restaurant chefs never learn how to make them in culinary school. Fortunately, initiatives like Pasta Lab 2013, which was held in Tursi, Basilicata in January, 2013 are being conducted to preserve these rich traditions. The event’s organizers paired professional chefs with local housewives who shared their skills at making pasta shapes such as *fusilli al ferro* (corkscrew pasta shaped with an iron rod) *manate* (long ropes stretched by hand), *cavatelli* (little quarries), *orecchiete* (little
ears), capunti (medium size open pod-like shape), foglie d’olive (olive leaves), and many more.

Traditionally, pasta was served every day at lunch time in Southern Italy. The various pasta shapes which pair perfectly with their various sauces and condiments became important rituals in family life. More than just a delicious flavor, they were a means of connecting our past, present, and future. To an Italian, nothing is more synonymous of home and family than a specific pasta prepared by a loving mother, aunt, or grandmother. Guarding their recipes, and promoting them overseas is our way of spreading amore, good taste, and la dolce vita.

Recipe:
From: The Al Tiramisu Restaurant Cookbook: An Elevated Approach to Authentic Italian Cuisine by Luigi Diotaiuti

**THE AL TIRAMISU RESTAURANT COOKBOOK**

**Pasta e fagioli con pistiddi e lagane** / Lagane

Pasta with Beans and Chestnuts

My earliest and most powerful culinary memories are represented in this dish, my mother’s version of the southern classic *pasta e fagioli*, to which she added fresh chestnuts. As I walked home from school on fall days and approached our farmhouse, I was pulled in by the comforting aroma of the beans and chestnuts simmering in a huge pot over the open fire. I couldn’t wait to take a chunk of my mother’s homemade bread, dip it into the pot, and scoop out the rich, heartening mixture.

We picked our chestnuts in a nearby grove that we called a *felecedda* in dialect. The word comes from the Italian word *felce*, or ferns, which proliferated in the well-drained soil under the chestnut trees. As farmers, we let nothing go to waste, even those ferns. We gathered them and used them for a variety of purposes such as lining the goat stalls in winter or turning them into brooms.

There are a number of steps in this recipe but that also makes it a fun dish to prepare and enjoy with family and friends.

Note that the dried borlotti (cranberry) beans must be soaked overnight before making this recipe.

**Serves 6**

1/2 pound (8 ounces) dried borlotti (cranberry) beans, placed in heat-proof bowl and soaked in boiling water overnight
1 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste
1 sprig fresh sage
10 ounces shelled roasted and peeled chestnuts (or frozen)
1 cup durum flour, plus extra for work surface
1 large egg
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 garlic clove, chopped
1 sprig fresh rosemary, finely chopped
1 ounce prosciutto, diced
1 tablespoon sundried sweet peppers from Senise or sweet paprika
3 cups vegetable stock
Drain soaked beans and place them in a large saucepan and cover with almost double the amount of water.

Add 1 teaspoon of salt and the sprig of sage and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium low, cover, and simmer 30 minutes.

Add chestnuts, stir, and cover. Simmer until beans and chestnuts are tender, another 30 minutes.

While soup is cooking, begin preparing the pasta. In a large bowl, mix the flour and egg until a smooth dough forms. Cover and refrigerate for 10 minutes.

Roll out dough onto a lightly floured surface making it into an oblong shape about 12-inches long. Feed the dough through the pasta machine set on the widest setting. Repeat 3 times.

Fold the dough in half and coat with flour on each side. Feed the dough through the pasta machine about 7 times or until it reaches a thickness of 1/20 inch.

Place the dough on a lightly floured work surface. Fold the dough over itself in equally spaced quarter folds.

With a knife, cut large strips the width of fettucine, or about 1/4-inch wide. Then cut those pieces into about 4-inch lengths.

Lagane pasta is intended to be irregular in length in this recipe so there’s no need to make the strips uniform. (If you intend to serve them with a sauce, however, make them a uniform 8 inches long.) Set aside.

Place a food mill over a large, heat-proof bowl.

Add one-third of the bean and chestnut soup and puree until smooth. (You can also use a blender but be sure to remove the center of the lid and cover the opening with a clean kitchen towel to prevent splashing.)

In a small saucepan, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add garlic and rosemary.

When the garlic releases its aroma, add proscuitto and sundried sweet peppers or sweet paprika.

Cook for about 1 minute. Place the mixture into the saucepan with the soup. Add in the pureed mixture and stir well.

Over medium heat, slowly stir in the stock, a little at a time to thin out the mixture.

As soon as the mixture boils, add the lagane and cook until al dente, or about 4 minutes.

Let the dish sit for a few minutes before serving.

**Italian Cooking Primer**

Lagane (or laganelle) is a type of homemade pasta often paired with beans, and used primarily in Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, and Puglia. Until recently few cooks outside of the regions knew how to prepare it. At first glance it resembles tagliatelle or fettuccine, but lagane are flatter, thinner, and of varying lengths.

**Sommelier’s Pick**

Montepulciano