

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Italian Options

by Lydia Lovell

If everyone in your family enjoys having a spaghetti dinner at least once a month, then yours isn't very different from the Lovell family; at least, not when it comes to a preference for spaghetti. Once in a while when I'm in a great hurry, I open a jar of commercial sauce and doctor it up a little, but usually I prepare my own, starting with a pound of ground chuck, a chopped onion, some sliced celery, a bit of diced green pepper, and a little of this and a bit of that when it comes to herbs and spices. Then I pour in three different kinds of canned tomatoes and let the whole thing cook a few hours.

The basic recipe came from Aunt Olivia; it's been refined over the years until I'm of the opinion I've got it down to a science. And I've been so contented with my method that for years I haven't tampered with success. Only recently, however, I've concluded the old stand-by needs changing or I should switch to an entirely new recipe. It's getting monotonous.

Among Aunt Olivia's files for foreign dishes I found a **Sausage Spaghetti Sauce** that sounded really good. And it is. If you're getting tired of using chopped beef for a base, try this.

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| 1 lb. mild Italian sausage | 2 C. water, divided |
| 2 T. olive oil | salt and pepper to taste |
| 1 chopped onion | 1 bay leaf |
| 1 minced garlic clove | dash each: sugar, allspice |
| 1 large can tomatoes | 1-1/2 t. oregano |
| 1 small can tomatoe paste | |

Cut sausage into bit-size chunks. In a heavy saucepan, bring 1 C. water to boil. Add sausage. Simmer 20 minutes. Remove from heat, drain, discarding liquid, and return to heat. Brown meat. Drain on absorbent paper. Pour off all fat and wipe pan with a paper towel. Add oil to pan and saute onion and garlic in oil for five minutes. Drain off oil. Stir in sausage meat. Add spices, the remaining cup of water, and both cans of tomatoes. Cover and simmer gently for two hours. Serve over freshly cooked thin spaghetti or thin linguine. Pass grated Romano cheese.

While we're talking about Italian food, let's consider ways Aunt Olivia used slightly stale breads to turn them into special treats just as her friends of Italian parentage who lived in Sagamore... those who had come there to work at Keith Car during the first decade of this century... have done for generations. They use Italian bread sliced diagonally, about 3/4" thick, and cut into quarters. Each slice is brushed on both sides with melted butter and the finished product (which is usually served with a bowl of fresh salad greens, shredded cheese, and flaked anchovies) is called **Crostini**.

Arrange the bread slices in a baking dish, sprinkle with grated Parmesan cheese, and bake at 350° for 10 minutes until cheese is bubbly and bread is crisp. Allow three pieces per person.

A variant is **Crostini Alla Romana**. Slice and quarter bread as above and brush one side only with melted butter. Top the unbuttered side of each slice with a 1/4" thick slab of mozzarella or gruyere cheese. Arrange, buttered side down, in a round baking pan, overlapping each piece slightly with



another and making at least two circles of bread pieces. Bake at 350° for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, chop 10 anchovy filets and warm in 4 T. butter. As soon as crostini is hot, remove from oven and pour butter-anchovy mixture over cheese. Serve at once accompanied by sliced tomatoes on lettuce cups.

A meal in itself, **Zuppa Quarta** is a hearty lunch that sticks to the ribs until suppertime. Butter a medium casserole. Cut slices of day-old white bread into quarters and top with thick slices of mozzarella cheese. Spoon on a generous quantity of tomato sauce from can or jar. Sprinkle with a teaspoon of crushed oregano leaves and grated peccorino or gruyere cheese. Bake at 350° until bubbling. It's not lasagna, but it's good.

Was it the Italians who first invented French toast? Or was it, in truth, the French? If so, the Italians improved upon it. What really matters now is the simplicity in making **Cheese Sandwiches Como**. Between two slices of bread, place a slab of Swiss or real cheddar cheese; processed American cheese will do if you must. Melt 2 T. butter in a large skillet. Dip both sides of each sandwich into one beaten egg seasoned with 1/2 t. salt, a pinch of pepper, and a t. of prepared mustard. Fry

sandwiches in butter, turning once and adding more butter to brown second side. Serve at once, of course. A dill pickle, quartered, garnishes nicely. For heartier appetites, use a thin slice of turkey and one of ham in addition to the slab of cheese. Or build it that way and serve each person on-half a sandwich and a bowl of hot soup.

Garlic Bread, as frequently served in Italian restaurants, varies from superb to dreadful. If you make your own at home, do it this way and yours will be equal to the best served in any restaurant. Mix 2 T. butter, softened to room temperature, with one clove of crushed garlic plus a tablespoon of another fresh-chopped herb. Try fresh parsley, or marjoram, basil, rosemary, thyme, or chives. Use fresh herbs if possible; should you have none, 1 t. dry herbs will please most palates. Slash French or Italian bread diagonally almost to the bottom crust. Spread herbed butter generously between slices, being careful not to break the base. Wrap the loaf in foil and heat in a 325° oven until soft and fragrant.

Hardly a week passes that an innovative cook can't use bread crumb toppings. Aunt Olivia sprinkled them in salads, on soups... especially green pea soup and onion soup, and topped casseroles with them. She guaranteed they added more than crispness by seasoning the bread cubes and calling them, quite properly, **CROUTONS**.

Cut four slices of day-old sliced white bread into 1/2" cubes. In a large frying pan heat 3 T. olive or salad oil. Chop fresh herbs, or mince a clove of garlic, and saute quickly in oil. Add bread cubes and fry until golden and crisp. Important: Drain well on absorbent paper. Store in a tightly covered plastic container in the refrigerator.

Of all Aunt Olivia's casseroles, the one I liked best was **Seafood Medley** prepared as follows to feed six of us.

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| 1 lb. cod, haddock, or perch | 1/3 lb. sea scallops, coarsely |
| 1/3 lb. crabmeat, flaked | chopped |
| 1/3 lb. small shrimp, whole | |

Cut fish into 1" bite-size pieces; combine with canned or fresh crab, fresh or frozen scallops, and canned, fresh, or frozen shrimp. Set aside. Prepare a white sauce (2 T. flour, 1 t. salt, 1/4 t. pepper, and 2 C. milk cooked over low heat until thickened slightly). Shred a 3" cube of processed American cheese and stir into sauce. Turn fish into a buttered casserole. Pour sauce over fish. Top with chive-flavored croutons. Bake 30 minutes at 375°. Serve with brown rice. Flavors of either broccoli or cauliflower compliment this dish.

Finish the meal with **Ambrosia**, Aunt Olivia style.

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| 3 grapefruit | 3 T. sugar-optional |
| 3 oranges | 1 oz. cream sherry |
| 2 C. sliced strawberries | 1 C. shredded coconut |

Peel and section grapefruit and two oranges. Slice 3rd orange crosswise, 1/4" thick; do not peel. In a crystal bowl, combine sectioned citrus fruits, strawberries, sherry, and taste for sugar. Top with orange slices. Refrigerate until ready to serve. At the table, spoon into individual crystal bowls and sprinkle each helping with a few spoonfuls of coconut.

Bon appetit.