

Marcella Hazan's Cuisine & the Mediterranean Diet

Italian Ingredients for Well-Rounded Nutrition

While our area does have its share of "celebrities," one you are unlikely to see around town at black-tie galas or dining at Sarasota's most elegant restaurants is the noted "godmother of Italian cooking in America," Marcella Hazan. A resident of Longboat Key, she and her husband Victor dine most often at home, with ingredients purchased anywhere from Fruitville Grove to Publix – sometimes Whole Foods, or Morton's for their "wonder-

ful steak." Also, as Marcella told me, they enjoy their largest meal of the day at lunch, of course prepared by Marcella herself: "Lunch is our biggest meal of the day. At dinner we eat very little." On the rare occasion that they do eat out in this area, they look for unpretentious, authentic cuisine, such as the truly Bolognese sauce that they can find at Bologna Café (5770 S. Tamiami Trail, 941-927-9262, reservations almost essential).

Marcella honors food prepared fresh with care, and she stays loyal to Italian cooking, not the "Italian" fare that can be found at many restaurants and has been strongly influenced by American and British tastes and ingredients. According to Chefshop.com, Marcella "introduced Americans to regional Italian cooking, pure flavors, fresh and varied ingredients, and the world of Italian cooking beyond spaghetti." After spending only an hour at their Longboat Key condo, I can say that Marcella has a knowledge of and passion for food that is unparalleled. She is clearly disheartened by the lack of flavor in the local availability for produce and herbs; for example, she noted that the basil "has always a slight taste of mint here" (doesn't it?), which it never does from Italian soil, and that the large artichokes "have more of a taste of potatoes than artichokes." However, her message can speak to anyone, regardless of where they live and what they have in their backyard: Prepare fresh food, and honor the ingredients you are using.

She appeared earnestly hurt when discussing the errors many chefs, restaurants, and individuals make on a daily basis – burning garlic, using unmatched pasta and sauce, choosing out-of-season produce for convenience, and cooking with low-quality olive oil and cheese (read: not extra virgin or Parmigiano-Reggiano). This kind of passion for Italian cooking is contagiously inspiring, and through her unapologetic, commanding style, she conveys the importance of understanding the basics. From the release in 1973 of her first cookbook, *The Classic Italian Cook Book*, she has brought unadulterated Italian cuisine to the American masses. And, best of all, not all of her dishes are complicated, and most are quite healthy! As she observed, "Italian food is healthy without thinking to be healthy."

Marcella's cuisine is very similar to the theory behind the Mediterranean diet, which was introduced by an American doctor stationed in Italy by the name of Ancel Keys (Wikipedia.org). Much of Marcella's inspiration and nutritional perspective is seen in the Mediterranean diet: Eat heart-healthy dishes, cooked with flavorful extra-virgin olive oil and paired with red wine, enjoy an abundance of in-season fruits and vegetables, consume fish on a regular basis and not much red meat, and prepare pasta and rice dishes made with



photo by Ellie Parnes

flavorful vegetables and sauces. Although not necessarily low in fat, the cuisine highlights the importance of good fats, providing the omega-3 fatty acids we need, and does not include unhealthy saturated fats and hydrogenated oils. Marcella seems to have unintentionally discovered a delightfully tasty way to eat healthfully, without the hassle and ineffectiveness of strict, flavorless diets and restrictions.

Here's her Eggplant Sauce with Bell Pepper, Tomato, and Basil from *Marcella Cucina*. This sauce is packed with flavor and makes for a delightful summer pasta dish. This recipe makes enough sauce for one pound of pasta, about four large or six small servings. Marcella recommends boxed dried, short tubular pasta, such as penne or fusilli. The wording is a bit condensed, but the recipe is hers and unaltered.

Eggplant Sauce with Bell Pepper, Tomato, and Basil

1 1/4 lbs medium eggplants
Salt
1 yellow bell pepper
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil plus 1 for tossing the pasta
3 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced very, very thin
Chopped red chili pepper, 1/8 tsp or to taste
2 tbsp Italian flat-leaf parsley leaves, not chopped
1/3 cup thinly sliced onion
1 cup ripe, firm fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeds scooped away, and cut up (or canned imported Italian plum tomatoes, cut up with their juice)
1/3 cup dry white wine
6 small basil leaves (or 3 to 4 large ones), hand torn into smaller pieces
6 green olives in brine, pitted and quartered
1 1/2 tbsp capers

Cut away the eggplants' green tops, wash the eggplants in cold water, and split them lengthwise in half. If there is a large quantity of dark seeds, cut the eggplant in half lengthwise again and scoop out the seeds. Otherwise, leave them. Cut into 3-inch lengths, about 1 to 1 1/2 inches thick. Place the eggplant pieces in a pasta colander over a shallow bowl, toss with a sprinkle of salt, and let steep about 45 minutes to discharge bitter liquid.

Split the pepper in half, scoop out the pith-like core and seeds, and skin the pepper. Cut lengthwise into thin strips.

Put 3 tbsp olive oil, garlic, and chili pepper in a 10-inch skillet and turn on medium heat. Cook, stirring frequently, until the garlic's scent begins to rise, but don't let it become colored. Add the parsley, stir, and add the onion. Turn the heat to low, turning onion occasionally, until it becomes very soft. Add the pepper, and sprinkle with

salt. Cook, turning occasionally, until the pepper is somewhat tender.

Add the eggplant, tomatoes, wine, basil, olives, and capers. Turn a couple of times. Cover pan, and cook at gentle but steady simmer for about 40 minutes. If the vegetables are starting to show signs of sticking, add 1/3 cup water. No water should remain at the end.

Cook and drain the pasta. Toss immediately and thoroughly with the sauce, swirling into it 1 tbsp olive oil. Serve promptly.

Another delicious, healthy, and summer-friendly of Marcella's dishes is Victor's Capri-Style Tomato and Mozzarella Salad. Slightly altered from the traditional *caprese*, this is a take on the classic inspired by Marcella's husband.

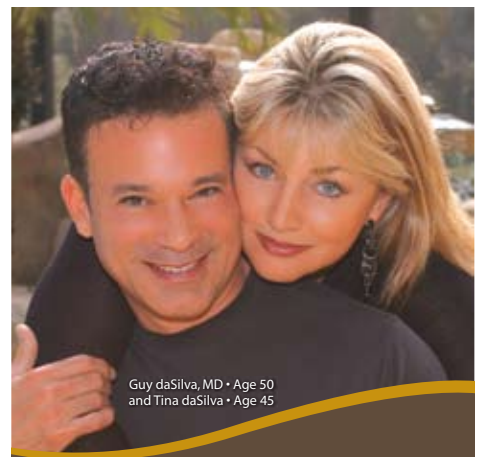
Tomato & Mozzarella Salad

Makes 4 to 6 servings
1 lb ripe, sweet cherry tomatoes
10-oz. ball of imported fresh buffalo-milk mozzarella
15 to 20 basil leaves
Salt
Black pepper, ground fresh
2 tsp red wine vinegar
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
Good crusty bread

Wash the tomatoes and slice them in half horizontally. Cut the mozzarella into half-inch dice. Tear the basil leaves into smaller pieces by hand. Put into ample salad bowl. Add salt, toss; add the pepper and vinegar, toss again; add olive oil, toss several times. Let rest for 20 minutes but no more than 30 minutes. Serve with bread.

Marcella Hazan's cuisine effectively passes on the essence of Italy to our dining tables. Her passion for quality and her naturally nutritious outlook – that of respecting the ingredients, honoring the cooking process, and cultivating satisfying foods with flavor and texture – lends itself to a healthful way of eating that makes us feel sated, not overstuffed as often comes with eating traditional American-Italian fare. With Marcella's recipes and the mentality behind the Mediterranean diet, we can be full, happy, and healthy without the need to compromise.

Ellie Parnes is the managing editor for Positive Change. Her passion for writing and editing grew when she moved from Boston to Sarasota in 2003 and obtained a bachelor's degree in Professional and Technical Writing. Email thoughts to editor@pcmflorida.com.



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