

TASTES^{of} ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SUMMER 2021

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ITALIAN FOOD EXPERT
MICOL NEGRIN AND HER
HUSBAND LAUNCH A NEW
WAY TO MASTER ITALIAN
COOKING.

Known for her cookbooks, their culinary tours, and a New York City cooking school, Micol Negrin and her husband, Dino De Angelis, have launched a new way to help home cooks hone their skills. Through rusticocooking.com, they offer a video membership that opens the door to a treasure trove of recipes, tips, history and how-to videos.

“Teaching people to cook for almost two decades at our New York City cooking school has given us a unique understanding of what home cooks need to fully grasp a technique, a recipe, a way of cooking. It has also highlighted what mistakes most people make in the kitchen, which are the pitfalls of most easy-on-the-surface recipes for many home cooks, and why people often think cooking is more complicated than it really is,” Negrin says.

The membership site is packed with recipes—from appetizers to desserts—as well as segments on basic recipes and techniques, and essential ingredients of the Italian kitchen, among other highlights.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DINO DE ANGELIS





"We designed each of the videos in our online course with one goal: to share our best, tried-and-true, non-fussy recipes so that you can easily replicate them at home, with perfect results every time. Our recipes are the distillation of 20 years of teaching thousands of students Italian cuisine, and the result of even more years of traveling across Italy in search of memorable food," says Negrin.

Each video features Negrin in the kitchen providing ingredients and instructions in an inviting, conversational style. Each video is succinct, yet informative. Memberships are \$168 a year, sometimes less, depending on special offers.

Graduates of Montreal's McGill University, neither Negrin nor De Angelis majored in culinary arts. Negrin earned a psychology degree, while De Angelis focused on biochemistry. After college, Negrin went to cooking school at L'Institut du Tourisme et de l'Hotellerie du Quebec, and later opened her own catering company.

In 1995, De Angelis was offered a postdoctoral position at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center to do cutting edge biomedical research, so the couple moved to New York City.

Negrin wrote and edited for *The Magazine of La Cucina Italiana* before leaving to focus on teaching Italian cooking and on writing three cookbooks: James Beard-nominated *Rustico: Regional Italian Country Cooking* and *The Italian Grill*, both published by Clarkson Potter, and *The Best Pasta Sauces: Favorite Regional Italian Recipes*, released by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House.

In 2004, the couple opened a state-of-the-art cooking school in New York City, where they cooked with more than 10,000 people.

"We loved meeting so many enthusiastic home cooks, helping them hone their skills and widen their culinary repertoire," Negrin says.

But running such an endeavor is never-ending.

"We could not have any time off—even when we were on holiday, we were always on email, on the phone with staff and clients, dealing with crises large and small. We made a decision to close in January 2020 when our lease was up for renewal. We had planned on focusing on our cooking tours to Italy and on creating a



Branzino in Artichoke-Olive Sauce

The inspiration for this dish is Ligurian, and in true Ligurian fashion, the flavors are delicate, with no one ingredient overshadowing the others. Marinated artichokes can be used in a pinch, but need to be thoroughly rinsed and blotted dry before incorporating them into the sauce.

- 30 milliliters (2 tablespoons) extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts
- 1 bay leaf
- 115 grams (4 ounces) canned artichoke hearts, drained and chopped (this is the drained weight)
- 12 pitted black oil-cured olives, chopped
- 125 milliliters (½ cup) water, plus extra as needed
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 boneless Mediterranean sea bass (branzino) fillets (about 115 grams or 4 ounces each)
- 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped Italian parsley

Place 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) of the olive oil in a wide skillet over a medium flame. Add the garlic and pine nuts, and cook just until the nuts take on a golden color.

Add the bay leaf, artichokes, and olives, and cook 5 minutes.

Add the water. Season with ½ teaspoon of the salt and ⅛ teaspoon of the pepper, and cover.

Cook 15 minutes, or until the artichokes soften, adding water as needed to keep the artichokes well moistened throughout the cooking process. This can be done up to 2 hours ahead and held at room temperature; return to a gentle simmer before proceeding.

Season the sea bass on both sides with the remaining ¼ teaspoon of salt and ⅛ teaspoon of the pepper.

Gently drop the sea bass into the bubbling sauce, skin side down. Spoon some sauce over the fillets and add a touch of water as needed. The sea bass should be nestled on top of the sauce, not touching the bottom of the skillet. Cover with a lid.

Cook until the sea bass is cooked all the way through; it should be opaque rather than translucent, and feel firm to the touch. It should take about 5 minutes depending on its thickness.

Serve the sea bass hot, drizzled with the lemon juice and the remaining 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) of olive oil, sprinkled with the parsley.

Makes 2 servings.

— Recipe courtesy of Micol Negrin, rusticcooking.com



Chicken Cacciatora with Tomatoes and Rosemary

Pollo alla cacciatora (hunter's style chicken) is a favorite across Italy. This version from Umbria features a touch of anchovies melted into the sauce; you won't taste them, but they give the dish additional depth of flavor. Any leftover sauce (with or without chunks of tender chicken) makes an excellent pasta sauce or topping for soft polenta.

For the chicken:

- 4 boneless and skinless chicken thighs (350 grams or 12 ounces), halved
- 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon chili flakes
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons minced rosemary
- 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) lemon juice

For the sauce:

- 30 milliliters (2 tablespoons) extra-virgin olive oil
- 45 grams (1.5 ounces) yellow onion, minced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons minced rosemary
- ⅛ teaspoon chili flakes
- 1 tablespoon capers, chopped
- 1 anchovy filet
- 250 milliliters (1 cup) water or dry white wine
- 375 milliliters (1½ cups) diced canned tomatoes
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Marinate the chicken with the olive oil, chili, pepper, garlic, rosemary, and lemon juice at least 1 hour (up to 48 hours) in the refrigerator.

Place the olive oil, onion, garlic, rosemary, chili flakes, capers, and anchovy in a medium skillet that has a tight fitting lid, but do not

put on the lid. Cook gently until aromatic, 2 minutes. Cover with the lid and cook 5 minutes over gentle heat. The onion should be soft and you should be able to cut it with the tip of a spoon; cook longer if it is not soft.

Add the water or wine, then the tomatoes, salt, and pepper, and bring to a boil. If using wine, allow it to evaporate almost fully before adding the tomatoes.

Cook, uncovered, 3 minutes, or until the sauce thickens enough to almost (but not quite) coat the back of a spoon. The sauce can be made up to 2 days ahead and refrigerated.

Add the chicken and its marinade to the bubbling sauce. Cook, covered, for 20 minutes, or until the chicken is cooked through, turning once. If the sauce reduces too much, add a splash more water. The chicken should be tender and the sauce rich. Serve hot.

Makes 2 servings.

— Recipe courtesy of Micol Negrin,
rusticocooking.com

video membership site after we closed the school,” says Negrin.

Then the pandemic hit. Culinary tours were on hold, but as luck would have it, the couple was poised for the next adventure: a video membership site that allows them to still reach home cooks. Eventually, culinary tours will resume. In the meantime, Negrin answers a few questions:

What inspired your interest in Italian cooking?

I was born in Italy and lived in Milan until I was almost nine. My family also had homes in Liguria and Piedmont, so I was exposed to a lot of delicious food from various regions early on. My mother was a very good cook. So was my paternal grandmother Nonna Eva, but she cooked mostly Turkish-Jewish food as that was her background. My mom made every meal, always bought the best ingredients, and had a *buona mano* (good hand) in the kitchen.

Why did you go to cooking school after college?

I was always thinking about food and planning meals and researching recipes. It occupied my mind most of my waking hours—even though I did very well in school, my heart just wasn’t in it. The training was classic French cooking, it lasted 18 months, and it helped me figure out what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to own my own business, write about food, and teach.

Why was regional Italian food the focus of your first cookbook, *Rustico: Regional Italian Cooking*?

Regionality is everything with Italian food; it is at its core and it is the reason there is always something new to discover.

And your culinary tours were born from that book?

In order to research *Rustico*, Dino and I traveled to every Italian region, unearthing its most characteristic recipes, talking to home cooks, restaurant chefs, food producers, really delving into the regional aspect of Italian food. All that culinary research and travel gave us the idea to launch culinary tours to Italy with a regional focus.

Have you seen an increase in interest for your website with more people cooking from home in the past year?

We added the virtual classes because clients started requesting them: past clients wanted virtual corporate parties and virtual family celebrations and so on, and we developed a calendar of virtual



Amaretto and Chocolate Semifreddo

Semifreddo means “semi-cold,” which is an odd name considering it is frozen before serving. It is a streamlined version of gelato in a very loose sense, without any machine needed. I use whipped cream rather than an egg-based sabayon as the base for my semifreddo and prefer the cleaner flavor this way. Allow at least 4 hours for the semifreddo to harden in the freezer, and remember to take it out to room temperature about 15 to 30 minutes before serving for the creamiest texture.

For the ladyfingers:

- 45 grams (1.6 ounces) sugar
- 60 milliliters (¼ cup) water
- 30 milliliters (2 tablespoons) Amaretto di Saronno or other liqueur
- 4 crisp ladyfingers

For the ganache:

- 60 milliliters (¼ cup) heavy cream
- 45 grams (1.6 ounces) bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

For the semifreddo:

- 180 milliliters (¾ cup) heavy cream
- 30 grams (1 ounce) sugar
- ½ teaspoon almond extract
- 30 grams (1 ounce) bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped
- 30 grams (1 ounce) coarsely crushed amaretto cookies (amaretto di Saronno)

To serve:

Fresh raspberries

Make the ladyfingers:

Bring the sugar and water to a boil in a small pot until the sugar is dissolved; pour into a bowl and add the Amaretto. Cool to room temperature, then dip the ladyfingers in the mixture and line the bottom of 4 goblets with the ladyfingers, breaking them as needed to fit. Don’t soak the ladyfingers so long that they fall apart; you want a little crunch left.

Make the ganache:

In the small pot in which you made the syrup, warm the cream until bubbling. Remove from the heat; stir in the chocolate until smooth. Spoon over the ladyfingers in the goblets (you can reserve half for the top if you like).

Make the semifreddo:

Beat the cream until very soft peaks form; gradually beat in the sugar and almond extract, and beat again until just firm; do not overbeat or the cream will turn stiff.

Gently fold the chocolate and crushed amaretto cookies into the whipped cream using a rubber spatula, being careful not to deflate the whipped cream.

Spoon the mixture over the ganache and freeze until firm, at least 4 hours. If desired, garnish with berries when serving. Remove from the freezer about 15 to 30 minutes prior to serving for the best texture and flavor.

Makes 4 servings.

— Recipe courtesy of Micol Negrin, rusticocooking.com

Crispy Polenta Fries with Calabrese Chili Dip

These crispy-on-the-outside, creamy-on-the-inside polenta fries aren't really fried, they're baked, and it's hard to stop eating them. We love them so much that we usually double the amount of polenta we make just so we have leftover to repurpose for this addictive finger food. You can opt for full fat Greek yogurt instead of the mayonnaise for a lighter dip. And if you aren't fond of spicy flavors, omit the Calabrese chili in the dip and substitute a spoonful of chopped fresh herbs or basil pesto.

- 1 liter (4 cups) water
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 170 grams (6 ounces or 1 cup) Italian polenta
- Extra-virgin olive oil for brushing
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 30 grams (1 ounce) mayonnaise
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon minced Calabrese chili in oil
- 1 small garlic clove, grated

Bring the water to a boil in a covered, heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of the salt.

Slowly pour in the polenta in a steady stream, all the while beating with a wire whisk to prevent lumps; it should take you about

15 seconds to pour in the polenta.

When the polenta begins to thicken and gurgle, lower the heat to medium-low and switch to a wooden spoon.

Cook, stirring often to prevent sticking, until the polenta is no longer granular and shiny; the grains should be swollen and opaque. This will take about 40 minutes but will depend on how coarse or fine your polenta is, as well as how high the heat is, how much liquid you use, and how vigorously or often you stir. You don't need to stir constantly but you should stir most of the time; this not only prevents sticking but renders the polenta creamy in texture. If the polenta thickens too much as it cooks, add a bit more water to loosen it. It should have the texture of oatmeal when cooked.

Taste the polenta and add more salt if needed. While it is still hot, spread it out onto a baking sheet lined with oiled parchment paper.

Brush the top with olive oil and press down with a large piece of plastic wrap to protect your hands from the heat and flatten the polenta evenly; it should be about $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch (1-centimeter) thick.

Make sure you get all the air pockets out and try to keep the polenta in a nice, even shape, so that you will have less waste when cutting into rectangles.

Cover with plastic wrap and cool a few hours (or overnight in the refrigerator).

When you are ready to serve, preheat the oven to 425°F convection or 450°F regular.

Brush the top of the cooled polenta with olive oil and season with $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon of the salt and $\frac{1}{16}$ teaspoon of the pepper.

Using a pastry wheel or sharp knife, cut into rectangles measuring about 1 inch x 3 inches (2.5 centimeters x 7.5 centimeters).

Place onto a baking sheet lined with oiled parchment paper. Spread the polenta rectangles apart so there is room for them to crisp and brown nicely at the edges; they shouldn't be crowded.

Bake in the preheated oven for 25 minutes, or until golden at the edges and just starting to crisp up a bit; they should still be creamy inside, not dried out. The contrast between the crisp outside and creamy inside is key to the success of this dish; if your oven runs hot, you may want to bake the polenta at a lower temperature or watch it carefully.

Meanwhile, make the dip: Combine the mayonnaise, chili, grated garlic, the remaining $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon of the salt, and the remaining $\frac{1}{16}$ teaspoon of the pepper in a bowl; refrigerate until needed.

Serve the polenta fries hot or at room temperature, with the dip.

Serves 2 as an appetizer or 4 as finger food.

—Recipe courtesy of Micol Negrin, rusticocooking.com

classes which also became a way to keep in touch with many of our best, long-time clients. We are having a lot of fun with that!

Tell us about the video membership site?

Each recipe is tested and written in extreme detail, then filmed with great attention to each key step; teaching people to cook hands-on for nearly 20 years taught me a lot about teaching on video, what steps are the usual pitfalls, what steps need to be shown close-up, and so on. Dino is an amazing videographer. He set up several cameras so we have multiple angles on every shot. Plus I was an editor for years, so every video is edited with a very sharp eye. Each recipe is filmed so a home cook can easily recreate it; it's like I am in the kitchen with them.

Can video members ask questions?

There is also an interactive aspect to the site, where members suggest recipes for us to produce, where we answer questions about specific techniques, ingredient substitutions and so on. Many of our long-time clients have become members so we keep in touch; they email us with questions and comments, and it fosters a real sense of community.

What's next for you?

We will be running our culinary tours to Italy again as soon as the borders open up. We have trips planned (fingers crossed) to Puglia and Basilicata from Sept. 12-28, 2021, and to Tuscany, Umbria, the Marches, and Emilia-Romagna from Sept. 26 to Oct. 2, 2021. Each tour is unique because we stay in one place—a villa or a family-run hotel—and we have exclusive use of their kitchen so we cook together in the mornings, then after lunch we head out and visit the beautiful nearby towns, the olive mills, the wineries, we have private gelato classes, we meet with local food producers, we have incredible dinners at trattorie, Michelin-star restaurants, and everything in between so people really come away with a true taste of Italy. We avoid the big tourist attractions, focusing instead on the small gems that people usually miss on their own. It is a unique experience and one we cannot wait to return to.

For more, see rusticocooking.com.

Video Membership Raffle

Micol and Dino are offering *Tastes of Italia* readers a unique opportunity to sign up for a free membership which includes three video recipes and four free eBooks. In addition, they will randomly select 10 people among those who register for the free membership to receive a Free Premium Video Member-

ship which is good for 1 year and gives them full access to the 115+ recipe videos on the membership site—a value of \$120 for free for 10 lucky *Tastes of Italia* readers. To register on the free site and for a chance to win one of the 10 free Premium Memberships, visit rusticocooking.com/tastes.