

Introduction

What Makes Cooking Good?

I like to begin my cooking classes with the question, “What makes cooking good?”. At first it might seem like a foolish question. After all, isn’t taste famously subjective? Who could say definitively what is good when opinions and taste vary so widely? But while the question, perhaps, cannot be answered in any sort of universal sense, different cultures certainly have clear and strong opinions about what makes for delicious food. A Frenchman might answer very differently from an Italian. What a Frenchman thinks is delicious an Italian might find quite mediocre, and vice versa. Certainly what makes Chinese cooking good might be very different from what makes Indian cooking good.

But what about Italian cooking? What characterizes good Italian cooking? Unfortunately this question immediately becomes even more complicated because there really is no such thing as *Italian* cooking, properly speaking. The modern country of Italy, in fact, is only 150 years old, unified at the same time as the American Civil War. Between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the mid-19th century, Italy consisted of autonomous regions, often in conflict with each other. Certainly there is Roman cooking and Venetian cooking, Sicilian cooking and Tuscan cooking. But Italian cooking? There really is no such thing, and the differences between the regions can be extreme. Even cities as close together as Bologna (in Emilia) and Florence (in Tuscany) practice rather very approaches to cooking.

But despite the differences, there are some things that all regions have in common, which makes it reasonable and convenient, if inexact, to use the term *Italian cooking*. One is the structure of the meal. Throughout Italy, the meal has a predictable and standard structure, with Italians working their way through a number of smaller courses rather than serving a single main course. Just as important, throughout Italy there is a certain sensibility about cooking which transcends regional differences. This sensibility might be hard to articulate, but I think the word which captures it best is *clarity*.

Clarity

If you think for a moment not of Italian but of *Indian* cooking (at least the kind we know of in America), you think of a cuisine characterized by the rich amalgamation of spices. As in a symphony orchestra, where the individuality of particular instruments often becomes subsumed in the overall sound of the orchestra, so in Indian cooking ingredients and spices become engaged in a drama in which they lose their individual identity for the sake of the whole. French restaurant cooking, to take a different example, highly prizes artifice, which is why technique is so important in such kitchens. A French restaurant might take a lovely piece of salmon and transform it into an exquisite mousse, delicious to be sure, but far removed from the ingredient in its natural state — amplified and reimagined by a creative and skilled chef into something rarified and ethereal.

An Italian would take that same fish and grill it whole, not even deigning to fillet it. He or she would season it carefully with salt and give it a final benediction with olive oil before bringing it to the table. Such a preparation might puzzle the French chef or bore the Indian one. As Julia Child once quipped about Italian cooking, “I don’t see the point... because you don’t do anything.”

But what Julia meant as a gentle insult, I take as the highest form of praise. To be sure, both Indian cooking and French cooking as described above are delicious and rightly considered to be culinary treasures. The point isn’t that Italian cooking is *superior* to other ways of cooking. The point is that it is *different*, and the unique genius of Italian cooking is for the cook to become invisible, allowing the ingredients speak for themselves in all their natural beauty. Although it’s not true that the Italian cook does “nothing”, it *is* true that the appearance of doing nothing is frequently the goal.

I try to sum up this sensibility under the term *clarity*. Other words would do the concept justice too: freshness, transparency, simplicity, nakedness. If an Indian dish is a symphony orchestra, an Italian dish is a string quartet or jazz trio. The components are immediately evident to the senses. Nothing is obscured. As a result, no flaw can be hidden. Everything is exposed. Italian cooking can be exhilarating and riveting to both cook and eat, but it can also be unforgiving. There is no place to hide.

Every cuisine is a sort of language, and like every language, every cuisine has its own unified character. But languages also have dialects. In the case of Italian cooking, the regional dialects vary in pronounced and clear ways. But in the end, Italian cooks do speak the same language throughout the country: the language of simplicity, freshness, and clarity.

The Italian art of eating

“To make time to eat as the Italians still do is to take part in their inexhaustible gift of making art out of life.” Marcella Hazan

When I first began to cook, one thing that appealed to me about Italian cooking was the idea of preparing several courses of modest proportion rather than one main course. It was a bit more work to be sure, but the benefits were immense. A proper Italian meal is not a one-act play but a drama with multiple episodes in which elements play off of and enhance each other. For me it is the most civilized way of eating.

Eating in the traditional multi-course Italian manner brings the joy of variety and diversity to our tables. A simple plate of spaghetti with garlic, oil, and hot pepper might be perfectly delicious on its own, but it takes on a slightly enhanced meaning when followed by a dish of grilled chicken with rosemary, for example. The courses speak to and influence each other like the movements in a musical work. Each might be delicious taken individually, but a complete meal is greater than

the sum of its parts. A multi-course Italian meal allows the physical necessity of eating to become something approaching an art.

This is not to say that every time we sit down to eat we should expect such a meal any more than we would expect to listen to a Beethoven symphony every day. There are many times when our cooking and eating will be less ambitious, and when a single dish will do. Still, there is much joy to be derived from eating in the Italian manner regularly, not just for rare or special occasions.

The recipes in this book are all meant to serve six people as part of a multi-course meal.