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Patsy's 1954

Patsy's

Since 1944

ITALIAN FAMILY COOKBOOK

SAL J. SCOGNAMILLO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFREY GURWIN

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This book is dedicated to my beloved Aunt Anna—sweet, caring, and always generous. Love
was the main ingredient in every dish she served.

And to my father, Joe Scognamillo—my inspiration and my hero.



Foreword

by Ben Stiller

“What can I make for you tonight?”



Joe Scognamiglio at Patsy’s in the early 1980s.

When I think of growing up in New York, one of the brightest, happiest memories that come to mind is of a warm, loving Scognamiglio asking me what I wanted to eat. “Would you like pasta? Veal Parmigiana?” I was in heaven.

As a kid, I spent a lot of time at Patsy’s. In fact, we were there for so many dinner and family celebrations that I don’t actually remember the first time I stepped through the door of the famed restaurant on West Fifty-sixth Street.

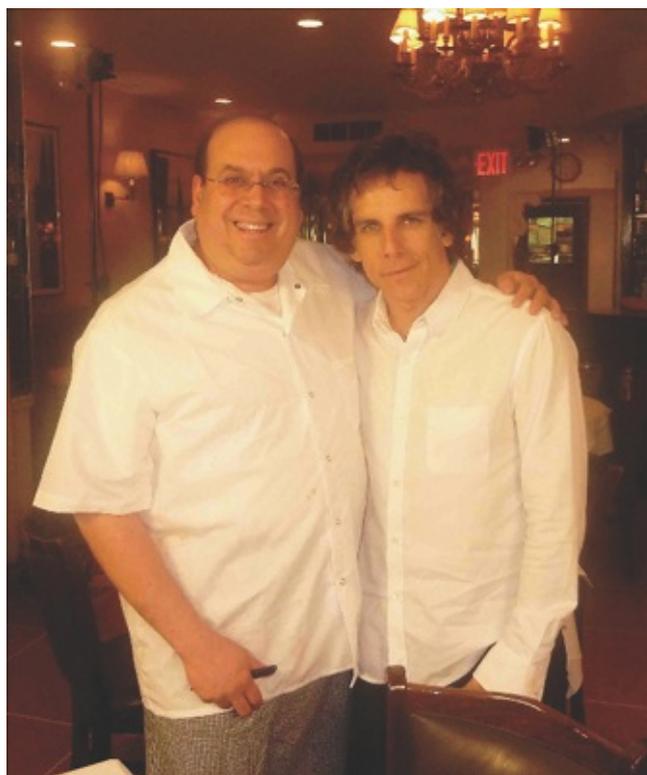
My mom and dad, Anne Meara and Jerry Stiller, introduced my sister Amy and me to Patsy’s, the place where they held court, like scores of other entertainers, after an appearance in a nearby theater, studio, or nightclub. It became a ritual for them after performing live in front of 40 million people on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, whose theater was right around the corner. The waiters were impeccably dressed, moving like locomotives through the dining room, and everyone paid incredible attention to detail. Titans of industry, entertainers, and people on a special first-time trip to New York, all came through, and all, it seemed, felt the same way—*special*. Despite its formality, the overwhelming feeling I got whenever we visited Patsy’s was one of *warmth*. Even as an eight-year-old, I could see that the warmth and gratitude exuded by Patsy, his wife, and their children (Anna and Joe) weren’t reserved exclusively for us. *Everyone* who came to Patsy’s for dinner was treated like family.

In a world where the importance of history and tradition seems to have diminished, I’m delighted that the Patsy’s of my youth endures. For years, my parents and the Scognamiglios have enjoyed a genuine affection for each other, and many important memories from my childhood are rooted in the time we shared at Patsy’s. That personal bond is important to me, especially now as I am able to take my kids there for special occasions. I guess it is no

surprising my kids love the food there as much as we did. And it's comforting to know that Joe, Rose, Sal, Frank, and the staff—many of whom were very young waiters when I was a child—are still there. This remarkable continuity, and our lifelong friendship with the Scognamillo family has created a wonderful bridge of connection that all our families share.

And so, the tradition continues ... and with it, a delightful new cookbook illustrating more recipes from Patsy's extensive menu. And the collection includes dishes from the family's personal recipe file. I hope you'll cherish and enjoy this book as much as I do!

Even as other things in New York City change from day to day, I can rest easy knowing there's a good chance that one thing will always stay the same: the exceptional "family-first" philosophy at Patsy's Italian Restaurant. I look forward to many more years of friendship. I am sure that one day in the future I'll arrive at Patsy's to have Sal greet me at the front counter, and see his son Peter emerge from the kitchen wearing a chef's cap to ask the question I've heard so many times, "*What can I make for you tonight?*"



Joe Scognamillo and Ben Stiller

Introduction



Patsy's has stood on West Fifty-sixth Street near Broadway for over seventy years and counting, owned by the same family for the entire period, which must be some kind of record in the "here today, gone tomorrow" Manhattan restaurant world. Four generations of Scognamillos have worked here: My grandfather, Pasquale (everyone called him Patsy); my dad, Joe; me; my cousin, Frank; his son, Paul; and my sons, Joseph and Peter. (Actually, Peter is still too young to be working, but he spends an awful lot of time hanging out in the kitchen.) You'll find Joe in the front of the house, and my mother Rose answering the phone. Patsy's is about the food, but also family. Of the parade of celebrities who have dined at Patsy's, many have literally become family. And of these, no one was more an honor to a Scognamillo than Frank Sinatra, who my grandfather met in the early forties at the beginning of "Old Blue Eye's" singing career.

When people ask me the secret to our business's longevity, I say that, along with the food, it's because we've stayed small—and that people know they will be treated like welcome friends. Don't be confused by other eating establishments in New York with similar names. Our Patsy's Italian restaurant is and always has been, owned by the Scognamillo family.

Patsy's Italian Family Cookbook expresses that sense of tradition. I share two kinds of recipes, the ones that have made us one of the best "red sauce" restaurants in New York City and our favorite family dishes that we serve at home. You'll find special fare that we make for holiday feasts as well as the simple food that we make on our nights off. Some of these were transcribed from handwritten index cards that have been handed down from a dear relative. These recipes make me smile—when I taste my Aunt Anna's Chicken Gravy, I can see her at the stove.



Postcards of the restaurant, used from the 1950s through the early 1980s.



My dad Joe's first Communion, with his godfather, Uncle Vincent, about 1940.

From the days when my grandfather owned his first restaurant, the Sorrento, on West Forty-ninth Street, we served foods with Old World flavors. At that time Italians were

pigeonholed into certain professions and musicians, florists, and tailors came for the Southern Italian food they couldn't get anywhere else. Patsy and his wife Concetta would make the wonderful food of Naples, and customers meant it when they said it tasted "just like Mamma's." When Easter and Christmas came, specialties of the season (such as pasties, Napolitana and baccalà salad, both recipes that you'll find in this book) were on the menu.

In the Catholic faith, the most enjoyable holidays are called feast days, and my family, like most Italian Americans, took the "feast" part literally. Because the restaurant was open on Sundays but closed on Mondays, we had our celebration dinner on Easter Monday. (We are now open seven days a week, but closed on a few holidays.) We'd gather at my grandparents' home in Forest Hills, Queens. To show you the importance of food in our family, every floor of this house had a kitchen. (Even at Patsy's Restaurant we have an upstairs and a downstairs kitchen, which may be because my grandfather was used to cooking that way!) The dinners were served in the basement because we had so many people we wouldn't fit in the dining room. If we couldn't all fit at the tables, as often happened, we would eat in shifts. Before the meal, my grandfather would take a palm saved from Palm Sunday's service, dip it in hot water, and bless everyone at the table with a shake of the water.

While my memories of holiday parties are vivid, so are my recollections of everyday meals. Then, as now, we didn't have a lot of time to spend over the stove, so we had a lot of delicious meals that were quickly prepared. Because my grandparents were so poor, both in Naples and for the first part of their American life, we were taught to never, ever waste food. My grandmother Concetta showed us all how to turn leftover bread into bread crumbs, add hot milk to last night's coffee for breakfast, or cook leftover pasta with eggs to make frittata for dinner. Some of my favorite dishes have very humble ingredients like cauliflower and Brussels sprouts, stretched with some ingenuity to make a meal.



My dad and me in the kitchen, 1985—when I started my training.

Every day at Patsy's, I sit down with my relatives and extended family and share a meal about 3 p.m., between lunch and dinner services. This is the same kind of meal that I would have if I were at home, spending quality time and catching up. We'll order off the menu, or maybe one of us will make a home-style dish like roast chicken, or a family recipe.

Yes, running a restaurant is hard work, but there's a lot of love and laughter. If you don't think it's fun seeing Billy Joel stand and sing "Happy Birthday" to a surprised guest, try it again. Or staying open so Michael Bublé can have a party after a concert in Sinatra's old hangout, the upstairs dining room. Or watching Frankie Valli tear into a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. Or still, every day, have people ask where Sinatra sat or about his favorite

Italian Cuisine à la Patsy's



Patsy's proudly calls itself a "red sauce" restaurant. This kind of Italian American restaurant features many dishes topped in tomato sauce, but of course, the quality of the place clearly relies on the excellence of the sauce. All of our recipes are rooted in traditional Italian cooking, which is based on seasonal produce (by necessity, because there was no refrigeration) and local products (a cheese made in the next town was considered foreign). You'll find items on the menu that we have been making since the very first day my grandfather opened Patsy's in 1944.

This means that we have been cooking our food the same way for decades. Occasionally we will put a more contemporary item on the menu (we love balsamic vinegar as much as the rest of the world), but for the most part, our customers come to Patsy's for a taste of Old Italy. And we're happy to provide that. My grandfather had a saying, "You aren't born round and die square," which meant that you don't change much from the cradle to the grave. I think he also meant to apply that to Patsy's. Another way of thinking is, as we say in New York, "If it ain't broken, don't fix it." So many of the recipes we serve at the restaurant are based on ones that my family brought from Naples, and are just bigger batches of what Grandma Concetta, Aunt Anna, and others cooked for their families at home.



The party for my grandparents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

My father Joe learned how to cook from his father Patsy, and they passed on what they know to me. I am doing the same with my sons. Here are tips and advice on the cooking techniques and ingredients that we use every day so your home-cooked meals will taste like Scognamiglio cooked it.

Big Family, Big Pans

I am used to cooking for lots of people at the restaurant, and I think in large quantities. B

we have a big family, too, and a holiday meal is usually cooked for at least two dozen people. When you are making a dinner party (or even a weeknight meal) for more than a couple of people, a too-small skillet can defeat your efforts.

Simply put, you need utensils large enough for the job. With a medium, 9-inch-diameter skillet, many recipes would have to be cooked in batches. Every kitchen should have a 12- to 14-inch-diameter, heavy-gauge skillet that can hold four servings (fish fillets, chicken breasts, halves, chops, or what have you) at once. When food is crowded in a small skillet, it creates steam that inhibits browning, and browned food tastes best.

Two other cooking vessels will help cook the recipes in this book. A 6- to 7-quart Dutch oven, preferably enameled cast iron, is another must for braises and stews. (I like an oval one because it holds a chicken more efficiently than the round pot.) Another item that comes in handy is a flameproof 9 by 13-inch baking dish that can go under a broiler. Again, an enameled cast-iron dish will work beautifully. Some of my favorite recipes are finished with a blast of direct heat at the end of cooking to give the food a irresistible crusty surface.

A lot of our customers have small Manhattan kitchens with limited storage space. But even if you have to store these utensils underneath your bed, it is worth the slight inconvenience.

Bread Crumbs

We use plain dried bread crumbs, sold in a box at the market, for many dishes. They are handy and do the trick. To be in control of the recipe's seasoning, don't use the ones that are seasoned with herbs or cheese.

Many of our recipes use the homemade [Seasoned Bread Crumbs](#). These have more texture and flavor than the store-bought version and can be stored in the freezer so you have them ready when you need them.

Olive Oil

One of the essentials in Italian cooking, choose your olive oil carefully. We use two olive oil varieties at Patsy's and at home, too.

Extra-virgin olive oil is mechanically pressed from green olives without heat, and the contact with the skins gives the oil its color. (Truthfully, the "extra" in the name doesn't mean much, only that the oil is very pure.) This first pressing is done without heat, so you will see "cold-pressed" on some labels. The very best and most expensive olive oil is estate bottled, like wine, which means that the olives are grown, processed, and usually bottled from the same location. We use a top-quality olive oil that has a moderately heavy body and a distinct, but not overpowering, olive flavor. This oil is reserved for recipes where the olive flavor should be noticeable, as in a pasta sauce or salad dressing. When choosing olive oil for your own use, taste it before using whenever possible. There are so many characteristics that define olive oil—peppery or grassy flavors, viscosity, and color—that it really boils down to personal taste.

The flavor of olive oil weakens when heated. For that reason, we also use a regular (formerly called pure) olive oil for cooking, or when we want the olive taste to be more

neutral. Processed from the residual first pressing olives, this is the clear yellow olive oil that you see at the market (and for years, the only kind you could buy in America).

Because heat and sunlight adversely affects the keeping qualities of olive oil, store it in a cool, dark place, but not the refrigerator, where it will solidify. Olive oil doesn't last much more than a year, and is really best within a couple of months of bottling. Some produce packs their olive oil in dark glass bottles to block the sunlight, but everyone we know uses olive oil so rapidly that it doesn't really get a chance to go rancid. But keeping it near a hot stove isn't a good idea.

Garlic

The Jekyll and Hyde of Italian cooking, garlic can be very friendly or mean and nasty. Like any person, garlic treated with respect will behave. We are very sensitive about garlic because our dear friend Frank Sinatra didn't like it, so we had to be sure that the flavor was subtle (if used at all) in the food we cooked for him. (Maybe it was because he didn't want his breath to offend someone that he was singing duets with?)

The main problem with garlic is that it burns easily, especially when it is minced, which is the most common way of prepping it. Scorched garlic is dark brown, with a bitter, strong flavor. Too many cooks, even good ones, heat the oil in the cooking utensil, and then add the garlic, which immediately starts to overcook when it hits the hot oil. To help curb this problem, cook the garlic more slowly: Put the oil and garlic in the utensil at the beginning of cooking, and heat them together over medium until the garlic is golden and gives off its aroma, in about 2 minutes. At this point, you can add the other ingredients. Problem solved.

A trick I learned from Grandma Concetta is to use garlic halves instead of minced garlic for a mellower, gentler flavor. Once the garlic halves have infused the food (usually a sauce), retrieve and discard them. We do this in some recipes.

Herbs

When Patsy opened the restaurant in the 1940s, the only fresh herb that you could get with any regularity was parsley. Even then, he didn't like food that was heavily dosed with dried oregano, a flavor that has unfortunately become associated with Italian cooking. That may be true, but it isn't the Italian cooking that I know. I use a very light hand with dried oregano.

I love fresh basil. It has an irresistible spicy aroma and delicate texture that goes beautifully with many of our recipes, especially those with tomato sauce. Basil used to be a summer crop, but now it is available year-round. If your supermarket doesn't have it, check your local Asian market, or look for boxes of basil at Trader Joe's. The basil leaves are very tender, and will turn black in the refrigerator if unprotected. Cut off the ends of the basil stems and stand the bunch in a short glass of water. Cover the leaves with a plastic bag and store in the fridge. Protected in this way, the basil will stay fresh for a few days. If you instinctively pop the bunch into the refrigerator vegetable drawer, it will wilt overnight.

My grandmother never chopped basil, believing that chopping left the herb's precious aroma behind on the board. Instead, she would tear it into small pieces before dropping it into the cooking food. I respect her views, but chopping is a lot quicker. However, use

sharp knife because if the leaves are bruised instead of cleanly cut, they will discolor.

Before chopping, the basil must be cleaned and completely dried. Pick the leaves from the stems, rinse well to remove any sand, and dry in a salad spinner or pat them dry on paper towels.

For most recipes, coarsely chopped basil works fine. However, when I want to use basil as a garnish, I'll cut it into thin shreds called a *chiffonade*. These delicate shreds fall evenly and lightly over the food, and look better than regular chopped basil. **To make basil chiffonade**, stack a few leaves and roll them into a thick cylinder. Cut the cylinder crosswise into very thin shreds, less than 1/16 inch wide. As with chopped basil, be sure your knife is good and sharp to avoid discolored shreds. Now the chiffonade can be scattered over each serving for a very nice visual effect.

Prepared Pork Products

Back in Naples, meat was preserved to use throughout the year until the next slaughter. Pork was easy to raise and maintain, so you will find a lot of processed pork in the old recipes. Just a little of these frankly fatty products add a lot of flavor to a dish.

Sopressata is a firm, narrow, version of salami, and is seasoned either sweet or hot.

Pancetta is the Italian version of bacon, but the pork belly is not smoked, and it is rolled into a cylinder. Be sure to remove the casings from sopressata and pancetta before using.

Prosciutto is an air-cured ham, and while it is a specialty of Parma, there are good domestic versions, too.

The important thing about cooking with pancetta and prosciutto is that it should not be sliced too thin. These meats should retain some texture in the food. Overzealous deli workers are used to carving them into paper-thin sheets. Ask them to cut the meat into slices 1/8 to 1/4 inch thick, and then dice them as needed at home. Some markets also carry precut prosciutto and pancetta specifically for cooking.

Seasoning

We use plain table salt at Patsy's. In my opinion, salt is salt, and I don't fuss with sea or kosher salt. The peppercorns are black and freshly ground.

I usually don't season the meat in a dish because I like it to pick up the seasoning from the sauce. Grilled and roasted meats are an exception. Also, your guests can season the food to taste at the table.

Italian Cheeses

We cook with a trio of cheeses that we cannot do without: Parmigiano-Reggiano, mozzarella, and ricotta.

Parmigiano-Reggiano is simply Parmesan cheese, but the very best, imported kind from the region around Parma, Italy. Other countries make Parmesan-style cheese, which is a poor imitation of the real thing, which has an almost nutty flavor, straw-yellow color, and a firm

but not waxy, texture. Authentic Parmesan has “Parmigiano-Reggiano” stamped all over the rind. It should always be freshly grated so it doesn’t dry out and lose flavor. Wrapped in foil or plastic wrap, Parmigiano can be stored for a few weeks in the refrigerator. My grandparents sometimes used another hard Italian grating cheese, Grana Padano, and it is a good substitute for Parmigiano-Reggiano if you want to economize. And a few dishes use Pecorino Romano, a sheep’s milk cheese, which is sharper than Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Mozzarella is renowned for its melting qualities and creamy texture. Fresh mozzarella simply tastes better than the factory-made processed version, and we only use the fresh kind at Patsy’s. This cheese used to be a rarity, but now you can find it at supermarkets. If you can get freshly made mozzarella at a local Italian delicatessen, so much the better. Fresh mozzarella is much softer than processed mozzarella, and it is easier to chop it than shred it. It will only keep in the refrigerator for a couple of days. If you can only get the firmest processed mozzarella, use it.

Ricotta means “recooked,” as this cheese is traditionally made from heated leftover whey. We use fresh ricotta, which has a very delicate texture and flavor different from the processed variety easily available at the supermarket. Fresh ricotta is sold at Italian delicatessens and cheese stores, but I admit that it isn’t easy to find. (We drive 50 miles to get ours in New Jersey because our favorite producer doesn’t deliver to New York.) You can use supermarket ricotta in these recipes.

Pasta

I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of pasta orders we have served over the years. Here’s what I have learned about the mainstay of Italian (and American) cooking.

There are a lot of good pasta companies out there. You can’t really say that fresh is better than dried, or vice versa. I will say that I have come to prefer delicate fresh pasta when I am making special pasta dishes for holiday dishes like lasagna or manicotti, or when serving light vegetarian sauces. I have provided a recipe for fresh pasta in case you want to make your own for the “stuffed pastas.” But most communities now have a place where you can buy fresh pasta—a natural foods store, Italian delicatessen, or a dedicated pasta shop.

For each pound of pasta, bring at least 3 quarts of salted water to boil in a saucepan over high heat. How much salt? Enough so that the water actually tastes salty, but not as much as ocean water. Stir in the pasta, being sure that the strands or pieces aren’t sticking together. Never add oil to the water because it will slick the pasta during draining and keep the sauce from sticking properly. Cook the pasta according to the package directions until it is al dente. Be sure not to go past this “firm to the bite” stage because, in my recipes, the pasta has one more stage of cooking to go through before serving.

In some cases, a portion of the cooking water, which has picked up some of the starch from the pasta, is scooped out and saved for mixing with the sauce later. Just dip a ladle or a heatproof measuring cup into the water before draining the pasta. When the pasta is mixed with thick pesto-like sauces, the reserved liquid is stirred in to loosen and smooth out the sauce.

Another restaurant trick to use at home is to cook the pasta with the sauce to marry the

flavors. Return the drained pasta to its cooking pot and add the sauce. Heat over low-to-medium heat, stirring often, and adding the reserved cooking water if asked to do so, until the pasta has absorbed some of the sauce, usually only a minute or two. Now you are ready to serve it up.

Antipasti



Meatball-tini

Seasoned Bread Crumbs

Mussels with White Wine and Lemon

Baked Clams

Mussels Marinara

Shrimp Casino

Eggplant Caponata

Eggplant Bruschetta

Eggplant Rollatini

Bruschetta with Baked Figs and Gorgonzola



Meatball-tini

MAKES 6 TO 8 APPETIZER SERVINGS

Our customers love appetizers almost as much as they love martinis, so I combined the two favorites to create the Meatball-tini. These mini meatballs (they are no bigger than a thimble) go down easy, and I can eat them like candy. They are used in both the [Neapolitan Meatball and Rice Pie](#) and [Meatball Lasagna](#).

MEATBALL-TINI

¾ cup fresh bread crumbs
½ cup whole milk
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
3 pounds ground veal
1½ cups freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (about 6 ounces)
3 large eggs
3 large egg yolks, beaten
3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley, plus more for garnish
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh oregano, or 1 teaspoon dried
2½ teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups Seasoned Bread Crumbs or Italian-flavored store-bought dried bread crumbs, for dusting
Olive oil, for deep-frying
3 cups Vodka Sauce (see [here](#)), heated
Pimiento-stuffed green olives, speared onto toothpicks, for garnish

- 1.** To make the mini meatballs: Put the bread crumbs in a small bowl, drizzle with the milk, and let soak and soften for a few minutes.
- 2.** Heat the oil in a large deep skillet over medium-high heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook until they are lightly browned, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer to a plate and let cool.
- 3.** Using your hands, mix the veal, soaked bread crumbs, and the onion mixture in a large bowl. Add the grated cheese, whole eggs, egg yolks, parsley, oregano, salt, and pepper and

mix again until combined.

4. Dust the work surface with about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the seasoned bread crumbs. On the bread crumbs, shape about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the meatball mixture into a 1-inch-wide strip. Sprinkle the top of the strip with more seasoned bread crumbs. Cut the strip into $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch lengths. Transfer the pieces to a large sieve or strainer and sprinkle lightly with bread crumbs to prevent sticking. Rotate the sieve in a circulation motion to toss the strips of meat and form marble-size meatballs. Transfer the meatballs to a baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining meat mixture and bread crumbs.

5. Preheat the oven to 200°F. Line a baking sheet with paper towels and place near the stove.

6. Pour enough oil into a large deep skillet to come 1 inch up the sides. Heat the oil over high heat to 360°F. Working in batches without crowding, and adding more oil as needed, deep-fry the meatballs until browned and cooked through, about 1½ minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to the paper towel-lined baking sheet. Keep the cooked meatballs warm in the oven while frying the rest. (The meatballs can be cooled, packed into 1-gallon plastic storage bags and refrigerated for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 2 months. Reheat in a 350°F oven for about 10 minutes before using.)

7. For each serving, place a portion of the meatballs in a martini glass. Garnish with parsley and green olives on spears. Serve ramekins of the vodka sauce on the side for dipping the meatballs.

◆ Seasoned Bread Crumbs ◆

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

This is one of the “secret ingredients” in Patsy’s kitchens, and a recipe that every Italian grandmother knows by heart. It takes day-old bread and mixes it with a few ingredients to become something special, an all-purpose ingredient that can be used as a coating, binder, and even toasted as a pasta topping. The crumbs keep for a few days in the refrigerator.

8 ounces stale Italian bread (about $\frac{1}{2}$ small loaf), cut into large chunks

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

2 tablespoons freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

1 garlic clove, minced

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried oregano

3 tablespoons olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Process the bread chunks in a food processor until they form fine crumbs. (Or process the bread in a blender in batches.) Transfer to a large bowl. Add the parsley, grated cheese, garlic, and oregano and mix well. Gradually stir in the oil to thoroughly moisten the crumbs. Season to taste with salt and pepper. (The crumbs can be refrigerated in a 1-

gallon zip-top plastic bag for up to 5 days.)

Mussels with White Wine and Lemon

MAKES 4 APPETIZER SERVINGS

A bowl of plump mussels in a fragrant sauce is a great way to start a meal. This sauce is especially good, and you won't want to waste a drop, so be sure to serve the mussels with toasted bread for sopping.

2 pounds cultivated mussels, such as Prince Edward Island (see Note)

2 cups cold water

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

8 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced

¼ cup dry white wine

⅓ cup plus 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

2 scallions (white and green parts), thinly sliced

1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

½ teaspoon dried oregano

Freshly ground black pepper

Sliced Italian bread, toasted in a broiler or on a grill, for serving

1. Put the mussels in a large pot and add the water. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Cook just until the shells open, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the opened mussels to a colander, discarding any unopened mussels. Reserve the cooking liquid.

2. Line a wire strainer with moistened paper towels and set over medium bowl. Strain the cooking liquid through the strainer. Measure and reserve 2 cups of the strained liquid. (You can cool, cover, and freeze the remaining mussel cooking liquid for another use or as a fish stock.) Wash and dry the pot.

3. Heat the oil and garlic together in pot over medium heat, stirring often, until the garlic is golden. Add the reserved cooking liquid along with the wine, lemon juice, scallions, parsley, and oregano. Bring to a boil over high heat and cook until the sauce has thickened lightly, about 3 minutes. Season to taste with pepper. Add the mussels, cover, and cook until reheated, about 3 minutes more.

4. Using tongs, divide the mussels evenly among four soup bowls, and ladle in the sauce. Serve hot, with the toasted bread.

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