

Nonna's *sugo*

One of the more enduring memories of my childhood is watching my nonna Teresa prepare *sugo*. Simply the Italian word for sauce, *sugo* was a staple in her cooking repertoire, made on Monday mornings for lunches and dinners throughout the week. It is essentially a Bolognese sauce, but not called by that name because she and my extended family come from Elba, the largest island in the Tuscan archipelago. *Sugo* is enormously versatile. My nonna would spoon it over home-made gnocchi, stir it into risotto and layer it into lasagne (without a trace of béchamel sauce of course). Her grandchildren, armed with the jaffle maker, would spread it on slices of *pane de casa* to create gourmet toasted sandwiches, laced with Parmesan cheese. My nonno Oreste often ate *sugo* on its own with roasted peppers on the side.

Sugo is also a dish that makes a little meat go a long way. Cooking for a large extended family and the men who worked her father's farm in Northern Queensland, *sugo* was an economical source of protein in the diets of people who performed serious manual labour. Later in life, when money was less of an issue, tradition and taste still ensured it was prepared regularly. My nonna would buy very good cuts of lean beef and grind the meat herself to ensure the quality of the sauce. She was famous for returning less than perfect meat to the butcher. 'I gave you good money, you give me good meat', she would demand, handing back the offending parcel. She had a patient and quiet temperament that belied her formidable character.

The uniqueness of my nonna's *sugo* lies in two ingredients. The first is orange peel. My nonno Oreste would peel his home-grown oranges with a small knife, astounding his grandchildren by his capacity to create one seamless, curly strip. Nonna would drape these strips over her spice rack to dry, after which they would be thrown into the liquid mass of simmering *sugo*. At the end of the cooking process they would be fished out, the peel rehydrated, stained brown by the juices. There are some precedents for this. British cooks use orange juice to give sweetness to strong-tasting meat stews, especially those using venison. Likewise orange peel is aromatic enough to soften the taste of meat, especially if it isn't prime cut.

The second unexpected ingredient flavouring *sugo* is cloves, whole rather than ground. A few cloves would be thrown into the sauce along with bay leaves, peel and other dried herbs. At the end of the cooking process, there would be a 'needle in a haystack' type search for the brown cloves in the reddy-brown sauce. Remembering how many cloves you put in there in the first place is important, as biting straight into a clove is a less than edifying experience. Of course we are used to seeing sweeter spices like cloves matched with pork, studding a Christmas ham for

example. But it is equally at home with darker, richer meats. In French cooking, cloves are often added to long-simmering meat stews and broths.

There also seems to be a chemical angle to the inclusion of cloves with this sauce. Attending one of Herbies' Spice Workshops last year, Ian Hemphill was singing the praises of cloves when I piped up and mentioned my nonna's trick of adding them to Bolognese sauce. My fellow class members looked at me as if I was espousing witchcraft but Ian smiled knowingly. He explained that if you crush fresh basil (a herb we naturally associate with tomatoes and Italian cooking), and compare its perfume with that of dried cloves, the similarity is striking. He added that in fact basil and cloves share a common chemical makeup. Perhaps for a sauce that requires long, slow cooking like *sugo*, where the flavour of fresh herbs might otherwise be swamped, the use of cloves actually sustains a basil-type aroma. Revealing this cooking secret to people outside the family for the first time and having part of its mystery explained, I felt the sharp pain of love and loss for my nonna, who died a few years ago. I wish I could have told her that her cooking traditions could be backed up by science.

I have never made *sugo* without cloves so I can't vouch for the fact that they add something that would be obviously lacking if they were omitted. To make *sugo* without cloves would seem to be a terrible disrespect to cooking generations past. Every time I add them to my own *sugo*, I can imagine my nonna saying 'brava bella' from the beyond. However, I have been less vigilant about orange peel, mainly because I forget to peel oranges properly in order to dry them. But I would invite people to try the recipe below with and without these two elements and see if you can spot the difference.

Sugo

It feels strange writing this recipe down, as my nonna always cooked from memory. Cooking *sugo* is a process I know off by heart and thinking about exact quantities is a strain. The sauce is slightly different every time I make it. I have given my own twist to nonna's basic recipe, one that reflects my obsession with mushrooms. Alas ordinary dried mushrooms in large bags seem to have disappeared from deli shelves, even in the reliable supermarkets of Haberfield. I tend to like my *sugo* sweeter and redder than my mother, who would add less canned tomatoes and red wine. My sister adds a little milk or cream at the end of the cooking process, just a tablespoon or two, and prefers to cook with white wine. She has also been known to add a half a cup or so of finely grated carrot and celery in with the onions and garlic. All these variations are proof of the constant evolution of family recipes.

Ingredients

1 medium brown onion, finely chopped

4 cloves of garlic, finely chopped

Olive oil

A good robust wine, decent enough to drink

1 can of chopped tomatoes

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup tomato paste

500 g good quality lean mince beef (alternatively 250 g beef mince and 250 g veal or pork mince)

Salt and pepper to taste

2-3 tablespoons of dried Italian herbs

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup dried porcini mushrooms, re-hydrated (keep the liquid)

1 porcini mushroom stock cube

1-2 bay leaves

3-4 cloves

One strip of dried orange peel

In a heavy based saucepan, add a few tablespoons of olive oil, the chopped onion and garlic. Sauté until soft, adding a little stock or water to ensure the mixture doesn't burn. Once soft, add the mince, stirring it and breaking up lumps until it is grey in colour. Add the canned tomatoes, tomato paste and some red wine, stirring until it resembles a liquidy sauce and is close to boiling point. Then add the crumbled up stock cube, bay leaves, cloves, peel, herbs, salt and pepper. Finally add the porcini mushrooms and liquid (strained of any grit).

At this stage, turn the heat right down, so the sauce remains at a slow simmer. Put a lid on the saucepan and cook the sauce steadily and slowly for at least 90 minutes. I never have the patience of my nonna, who would cook her sugo for at least 2-3 hours at a very low heat. You will need to return to the sauce at 20 minute intervals, adding more red wine or stock of your choice so it remains a sauce rather than a stew. It is not uncommon for me to use an entire bottle of red wine in this process.

Once the cooking process is done to your satisfaction, taste the sauce. Add more salt or pepper as needed (I sometimes added a pinch of chilli flakes earlier on in the cooking process if I want a sauce with some kick to it). Then fish out the bay leaves, peel and cloves.

Particularly good with gnocchi, papparadelle or baked in the oven with maccheroni.