

Flavor: Mastering Italian cooking

Emmy-winning television host, cookbook author Lidia Bastianich releases 10th book

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Those who love to cook often keep soon-to-try recipes and ideas in a drawer, notebook or computer file. The same is true of chef Lidia Bastianich, cookbook author, Emmy-winning television host and restaurateur (Lidia's Kansas City). Luckily, she gathered her best advice together in her new book, "Lidia's Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine."

"This is my 10th book," Bastianich said in a recent telephone conversation. "Each of the other books had a specific focus. As I went along the way, I accumulated a lot of knowledge, some of which I kept in a drawer and a folder on the computer. I wanted to share with enthusiasm with people the knowledge I've gained in the past 40 years. This is my life collection, and I'm sharing all that makes me who I am."

Comparisons have been made between this book and "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" by Julia Child, which isn't a coincidence since both were published by Alfred A. Knopf/Penguin Random House. Like the French version, this one is meant to be an instruction manual on Italian cuisine for home cooks.

"I want this to remain a reference book to transcend generations," Bastianich said.

The book goes beyond its 400 recipes to include a large section filled with details about the ingredients and techniques necessary for Italian cooking. For example, pages are dedicated to explaining different pasta shapes and their uses. Descriptions of ingredients, such as cheeses, oils and wines, not only tell their uses, but also their history.

As for the recipes themselves, Bastianich strived to emphasize the simplicity of Italian cooking. She wants readers to feel as though she's holding their hand as she guides them through the basics, with the hope they will want to explore and experiment with different ingredients and techniques as they gain confidence. Also, there are no photographs in the book. Bastianich didn't want readers to feel pressured into making a dish look like its picture. "Whatever comes out, it will be good enough to eat," she said.

Bastianich's daughter, Tanya Bastianich Manuali, is the book's co-author. "Writing the book was a family effort," Bastianich said, and then added, "Not effort. It was a joy."

Perhaps the most compelling portion of the book is the introduction, where Bastianich tells the story of her family's journey to America. She wanted readers to get to know her and to feel like a friend.

"Food is my story," Bastianich said. "The story of my culture and where I came from. It's my history. Food touches a cord in us. Our stories and memories all have food connected to them."

CHOCOLATE- HAZELNUT CAKE

From "Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine" by Lidia Bastianich. Reprinted with permission from Alfred A. Knopf/Penguin Random House.

Serves 8

1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter, plus more for the baking pan

All-purpose flour, for the baking pan

4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped

3/4 cup skinned hazelnuts, lightly toasted

6 large eggs, separated

2 tablespoons sugar

One 13-ounce jar chocolate-hazelnut spread, such as Nutella, at room temperature

Pinch of kosher salt

1 tablespoon brandy

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter and flour a 9-inch springform pan. Melt the chocolate in the top of a double boiler or a metal bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water. Let it cool slightly. Grind the hazelnuts in a food processor until they are fine but not pasty.

In a mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites until they are foamy. Add the sugar, and beat until the whites form stiff peaks, about 2 minutes. In a clean bowl, with the paddle attachment, beat the butter and chocolate-hazelnut spread until light, about 2 minutes. Add the yolks, salt and brandy, and mix until smooth. Add the melted chocolate and ground hazelnuts, and mix until smooth. Remove the bowl from the mixer.

Stir about a quarter of the egg whites into the chocolate mixture to lighten it, and then gently fold in the remaining egg whites. Don't overmix. Pour the mixture into the prepared pan. Bake until a tester comes out clean, about 45 to 50 minutes. Let the cake cool for about 10 minutes, then open the spring and remove the side ring. Let the cake cool thoroughly before serving. Slide a broad metal spatula or two under the cake to separate it from the metal pan bottom, then lift and set the cake on a serving plate.

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