

The perception of Italian food has changed dramatically in the last 15 years. Gone are the days of Spaghetti Bolognese, Lasagne and Pollo Sorprese of the 70's and 80's; now Italian food is associated with fine seasonal ingredients, handled with passion and care.

But there is more.....

The food of the Italian regions carries over 3000 years' legacy of its diverse culture like a genetic fingerprint of its history. Tastes that go back to the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations include pork with apple and duck with orange; the Venetian trade with the East brought in spices, rice and the use of pine nuts and raisins; North African influence in Sicily sees the use of couscous, and the Austro-Hungarian culture brought sweet-savoury flavours to the northern regions of Trentino and Alto Adige as well as veal schnitzel, known as cotoletta Milanese.

Regional dishes have evolved in the home, handed down from generation to generation, each social class making the most of the produce; the wealthy and clergy using the finest cuts of fish and meat, accompanied by local vegetable garnishes; the poorer classes relying on ingenuity to make tasty varied dishes out of the limited seasonal ingredients available. Each region's local specialities and wonderful food traditions are there to be discovered.....

The following is a versatile Sicilian dish – Caponata/Caponatina – which can be eaten as a snack with ciabatta bread, or used as a garnish with fish or meat. The peasant version – Caponata – is more coarsely cut; the aristocratic version – Caponatina – uses precisely diced vegetables with the addition of pine nuts and raisins, a legacy of the eastern and Arab influence.

Caponatina (Sicily) – Sweet and Sour Aubergine Salad Serves 4

600g Purple Sicilian aubergine – diced 1.5 cm

200g plum tomatoes – diced and deseeded

50g green olives – pitted and chopped

2 tbsp capers

50g pine nuts – roasted

50g raisins – soaked

Large white onion – 1cm cubed

1 celery heart (5 sticks) – 1cm cubed

Olive oil

Fresh basil – chopped

50ml white wine vinegar

50g caster sugar

Salt cubed aubergine and let drain for 1 hour. Rinse and then dry

Fry in non-stick pan with a little olive oil until brown and soft. Set aside to cool

Blanch celery. Fry onion in a little olive oil until soft; add blanched celery

When golden, add diced tomato, pine nuts and raisins, olives and capers

Let cook for 1 minute and then take off heat. Add cooled aubergine, salt and pepper

Boil vinegar and sugar until syrupy. Add to the salad and mix

Add chopped basil and mix well. Can be served warm or cold

This dish will last up to 5 days if kept refrigerated

Giuseppe Turi is the owner of Enoteca Turi Restaurant, 28 Putney High Street, London SW15 1SQ (0208 785 4449) Nominated for Best Italian and Winner of Most Exceptional Wine List, ITV Restaurant Awards 2005.