

Eataly and Me

Adventures in teaching a no-recipe recipe

A few months ago, I was invited by Karrie Leung's PR team to participate in Eataly's Guest Chef series, Quattro Mani: From Chicago For Chicago.

"Really? I'm known as a food journalist, dining critic, and dining editor. How do you know I can cook? In fact, I'm a very good cook, I'm so flattered, and I would love to do it," I prattled on excitedly. "What do you need from me?"

An original pizza or pasta recipe that the chef at Eataly could replicate using ingredients stocked by Eataly. I would be Guest Chef for a night at Eataly's La Pizza & La Pasta restaurant, and my recipe would be featured on the menu.

"I'm in. I'll make my mother's spaghetti sauce."

"Great. Send us the recipe and the chef will start playing around with it."

As Hamlet said, "Ay, there's the rub."

Despite owning dozens of cookbooks and keeping folders of recipes clipped from newspapers and magazines—unless we're talking the dreaded Thanksgiving turkey—I'm not really a recipe person. Some scant notes here and there and a good sense of taste doesn't hurt. But I just know how to make what I make, and I learned it all at my 1950s stay-at-home mother's knee. Saccharine, I know, but it's the truth.

Aren't I cool and smug? Yeah, but I still needed a recipe. So I threw a spaghetti-dinner party, recording ingredients and instructions while I was cooking and tasting.

What follows is a recipe for My Mother's Spaghetti. I listed the ingredients and what to do with them. Measurements? Not so much. And you know what? On his third try, the chef, Will Serafini, got it right. First the sauce needed more seasoning, next the pasta needed a bigger ratio of sauce to noodle. And then, chef taught *me* something. Pasta matters. All these years, I've been using any old brand of pasta found at any old grocery store. That's where chef drew the line: He used the most amazing pasta, straight from *la madrepatria*, and my mother's old spaghetti sauce was new again!

Try it. Wing it. Season the sauce to *your* taste. Use great pasta. One more thing: Grate fresh Parmesan over the top.

MY MOTHER'S SPAGHETTI SAUCE

In one large frying pan, sauté diced vegetables: fresh yellow and red peppers, raw onions, sliced mushrooms (any generic brand that comes in a jar).

Season liberally with salt, pepper, fresh garlic (minced), basil, and oregano.

In a large pot, brown 1½ pounds ground round until brown and crumbly. Drain the pan.

Add one small can tomato paste and 1 one-pound can whole tomatoes (do not drain) to the meat. Break up the tomatoes as you stir. Repeat seasonings (as above).

Add sautéed vegetables to meat sauce and simmer at least one hour.

This sauce freezes well.

THE PASTA

16 oz. Premiata Pastificio Afeltra (available at Eataly)

Cook in salted boiling water for 10-to-12 minutes, according to directions on the package. For best *al dente* results, check noodles at the 8-to-9-minute mark.