

THERE WILL BE BASIL

Ireland has its own Little Italy, and it's just off the Naas Road. **Aileen Power** meets the chefs behind the Flavour of Italy cooking school, bringing authentic Mediterranean cuisine to Ireland's kitchens, one recipe at a time. Photography by **Mandy Mortimer**

Giuseppe Crupi has a beef with the Irish.

"Too much. They eat too much meat."

The Sicilian shakes his head. He tells how appalled he was discovering that in Ireland, an aubergine is less important than meat.

"They ask 'Where is my meat?' and I think 'But there is an aubergine on your plate looking at you'. I want to defend the owner of the aubergine."

As he darts around the kitchen, adding olive oil and herbs to students' efforts at parmigiana, his t-shirt reads "if you don't like aubergine you have no soul".

As the director of the Flavour of Italy cooking school, Giuseppe has been bringing mozzarella to the masses for eight years. He delights in his role of ambassador-chef, scolding students for not using enough olive oil ("what the hell was that? This is Italy!") and appropriate dough kneading ("like you're playing a piano... no, more like Chopin"). Many of the students slinking into the school have been trying to adjust to a vegetarian diet. The Mediterranean diet is effortlessly meat-free, explains Giuseppe, citing Caprese and bruschetta as examples.

"So many dishes are vegetarian," chimes in the co-

owner of the school, Maurizio Mastrangelo. "I think the best vegetarian sauce is the pesto, especially if you do it fresh."

If your vision of Italian food is Hawaiian pizzas, penne with chicken, and creamy carbonara, then you're not alone – but you are wrong. These are American 'twists' (though Giuseppe would use a harsher word) on classic Italian cuisine, and they're on the menu in most of Ireland's 'Italian' eateries. When Maurizio first came to Ireland from his native Molise, he reckons about 40% of the Italian restaurants were authentic. He wanted to see a real taste of Italy in Ireland, and felt the Irish did too after travelling so much – call it the Ryanair effect. Sensing this demand for authenticity, Maurizio and his business partner Marco Giannantonio set up the school in 2005.

They gave the Irish the real Calzone, and guess what? It's heavily vegetable-based. The school offers a variety of half-day courses, and while some are specifically vegetarian, the others, from pasta sauces to pizzas to seasonal dinners, are often unconsciously meat-free. In their sister restaurant, Pinocchio in Ranelagh, over half



the dishes on the menu are vegetarian – and not a goat's cheese risotto in sight.

Pinocchio got a glowing review from Irish Independent food critic Paulo Tullio for its "pure Italian" taste. "Everything that you can eat there is authentic Italian, we can do nothing different", shrugs Maurizio.

Tullio commended the dishes for their balance of flavours and "extraordinary simplicity". This, in fact, is the main lesson for students at the school, and may well be the secret of Italian cooking. "The golden rule", Giuseppe tells me solemnly, "is not to put too many ingredients together". Most of the pastas, breads, salads and desserts on the courses have only three or four ingredients. However, this concept of simplicity is a bit of



The Wizards of Oil

The Italian passion for fine ingredients includes one demand for the finest: extra virgin olive oil. "It is the most important ingredient" Maurizio told me, before citing various studies proving the health benefits of the oil in the Mediterranean region. Both Maurizio and Giuseppe spoke wistfully of olive trees in their family gardens in Italy. "My grandpa used to think that you could cure everything with olive oil," says Giuseppe, "and if you were sick you would just put a spoon of raw extra virgin olive oil on whatever you were eating. I still do that."

Extra virgin is the highest standard in olive oil classification. To qualify it must be produced by mechanical means, without the use of solvents, and under temperatures of less than 30°C.

The best producers are in Spain and Italy according to Maurizio. Olive oil in the north of Italy has a different flavour, "it's like the wine", he says. "In the past the farmer used to mix all of the olives. Now like the wine they are separating the different cultivations of the olives. So now you taste the different flavours like you taste the wine." He admits Irish people aren't quite at that level yet, but he has hope. "10 years ago or 15 years ago the culture for the wine was very low in Ireland. But now I see that Irish people understand the wines and know their wines. It will be the same with the extra virgin olive oil."

Giuseppe admits it can be very heavy. "Now of course it wouldn't be a good idea to fry with olive oil. When I am making the pasta dish, I always drizzle some olive oil on top, because it brightens the colours and gives a shine. Also because I think that is the exact heat that you should use; the heat of the pasta warms it up but it's not frying it." Before you come out of the supermarket with boxes of it, be warned that olive oil crime is a lucrative business. It is a big problem in the EU, as good olive oil is time-consuming and expensive to make, but it is quick and cheap to fake. Tom Mueller, author of *Extra Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil*, estimates that 70% of extra virgin oil sold is a fraud. If you want to hone your Italian cooking with different varieties of extra virgin olive oil, start by being a discerning consumer. Buy your oil somewhere you can taste it first. It should taste fruity, bitter and peppery – you should feel it in the back of your throat. Extra virgin olive oil is simply pressed fruit juice without additives, so buy it as fresh as possible. Check the bottle for a harvest date, or at least a 'best by' date which should be two years after the oil was bottled. Go for bottles or containers that protect against light, and choose a quantity that you'll use up quickly. The key words you're looking for are "extra virgin", accept no alternatives.



a struggle for the Irish.

Apparently we have a tendency to throw everything into a pot, committing culinary murder by mixing mushrooms and peppers in the same dish. Giuseppe thinks it might have been a habit of the boom years; we were putting aged Parmesan, sun-dried tomato pesto and onion marmalade all in the same dish just because we could afford it. Post-recession, however, Giuseppe has seen a big change.

"Before there was this idea, the more complicated, the better. When I came they were making these sauces where they were putting in onions and mushroom and meat; the more, the merrier. Now, they are moving to the real recipe where there are just a few ingredients. People are trying to simplify things".

The next commandment of Italian cuisine is quality: if you're only using a handful of ingredients, they must be the best. Their reverence of extra virgin olive oil is a perfect example (Maurizio spent 15 minutes explaining the importance to me), but it extends to every ingredient. They source organic ingredients when possible, and often if they are not happy with the quality of the product from their suppliers, they send it back. Maurizio explains:

"Italian cuisine is based on the freshest ingredients. If you have the right ingredients your recipe and dish will be great. If you don't have good ingredients, you cannot cover the flavour by adding something."

Giuseppe says that when you're working with as many vegetables as we do, the key is finding a way to enhance the flavour without covering it.

"The taste of vegetables is quite subtle; it's not as





Giuseppe on:

Aubergines

"I feel there is something truly rotten inside people who do not like aubergines. They simply have no soul".

Basil

"As a kid, I'd go to my grandpa's field to pick the basil and with the heat the smell became so strong, it was like a drug"

Garlic and onion

"You actually cannot put them together because they are too strong. My granny used to say that they punch each other like boxers. Here in Ireland it is easier because there are mild enough as a taste. In Italy, you cut the onion and the whole village is crying."

Pasta with chicken

"We have pasta with everything; with broccoli, with potatoes, with everything. But we do not have pasta with chicken. We do not! You know when you read about a historical fake, that this painting was not painted by the master. Well this looks like something that could be Italian, but it is not. It is a fake."

Pesto

"For me, Pesto is not one recipe; it is more an approach to life."

Tomato sauce

"There are schools when it comes to tomato sauce, honestly. You put in the onion, and people will say "That is not tomato sauce!" You have no onion and others say "That is not tomato sauce!" It is a dogma. It is a faith."

obvious as fruit or meat or fish. Because of the gentle, subtle taste, the less you do to them, the better."

That means cooking them al dente, not over-seasoning and using a little bit of extra virgin olive oil to retain the taste. We need to *respect* our vegetables. Giuseppe praises Ireland's mushrooms, carrots and "excellent" potatoes, gesturing to pizzas topped with potatoes.

In Italy, he admits, sometimes the choice of a vegetarian dish is down to cost. Cheap ingredients can make for tasty dishes though, and he feels this is especially relevant at the moment.

"Say I am inviting some friends over and I don't have much money", he begins. "Well not me, because I am very rich. I can pay my bills – that's our definition of rich." He continues:


"If I can say to somebody 'I cooked everything from scratch; I made the pesto, I made the pasta', that person feels wonderful. You don't have to put much money into it. I think that's what is happening in Ireland with the recession."

It's all about the simple pleasures, and if anyone can teach us about getting pleasure out of life, it's the Italians. Both Giuseppe and Maurizio talk of the pride and honour they feel in spreading the Italian culture through the school. Food is the maximum way to enjoy a culture because it becomes part of your body, Maurizio muses.

Giuseppe describes how his mother and aunts call him with recipes ("you need to teach them this"), and the summers he spends in their kitchens with a notebook gathering ideas for the next year.

"Chefs are the new artists", Maurizio declares. "You choose the ingredients for your masterpiece, you see the result of it, and then you can eat and enjoy."

Next time you frown at the suspicious simplicity of grilled aubergine with chilli and extra virgin olive oil, remember in Italy, that's a masterpiece.

Either that, or you have no soul. 

The Italian School of Cooking is offering a special €35 rate to readers on all cooking courses (usually €65). Just say the word 'aubergine'. See www.flavourofitaly.net.