

FOOD

When it comes to keeping it real in the kitchen, Nonna knows best

PUSATERI'S

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A Mother's Day ode to the woman who taught me how to cook

BY IDA PUSATERI | APRIL 26, 2019



Just for mom: French toast stuffed with delicious hazelnut chocolate and topped with a quenelle of vanilla whipped cream. See my recipe, below.

Every recipe I cook and love today, I learned from my mother. As is true of many Italian daughters, I was schooled early on how to make a good sugo: you watch the process once or twice and it becomes second nature. So preparing food with a sense of pride comes very

naturally to me. I remember my family gearing up for September, when tomatoes reached their full ripeness, perfect for sauce. Winter was salami season, when meats were prepared and cured in the basement cantina. And in between all the long-term curing and canning—when foods were prepared for the year to come—there was the small matter of nightly supper: what would it be tomorrow night? This was always on my mom’s mind.

Given her love of cooking, it’s probably no surprise that the Pusateri’s kitchen really started with my mom, whom everyone affectionately calls Nonna Dina, back when we first opened our Avenue Road location in 1986. My husband, Cosimo, loved my mom’s lasagnas and said, “Dina, you’ve got to come to the store. Let’s just make a few batches and we’ll put them out.” My mom eagerly agreed, thriving on the maternal call to action. The more she could make, the happier she was. Every day, there were at least a dozen lasagnas out on the counter. They’d be gone within minutes. Our customers would say to each other, “Oh, you have to try this!” It was the beginning of our prepared foods business—we put out simple dishes, and everyone loved them.



Ida Pusateri

After that, we struck on an idea I’ll call the Nonna Brigade. We enlisted the best cooks we knew, all Italian moms and grandmothers, to make the authentic food we were raised on. One would be on lasagna duty, another on meatballs, another on chicken cacciatore, and yet another breadng veal cutlets or stuffing pork tenderloin. Even the tomato sauce we sell in the store today is the recipe my mom made when I was growing up.

In the early years, when Pusateri’s was a small store on St. Clair, our Italian customers would buy peppers in bulk to can for the year. But in the summertime on Avenue Road, our nonnas took over the parking lot to roast bushels worth of peppers on barbeques, then carefully peeled the skin and marinated them in garlic and olive oil. It was always a bit surprising for customers who pulled into the lot but, to us, it was just what you did in the summer.

Nonna Dina

After about a year, we hired our first chef, a young woman named Lisa, to create more diverse dishes for us. She joined the ranks of the Nonna Brigade but couldn’t speak a word of Italian, which was difficult because they didn’t speak much English. It made for a lot of funny moments, like when she tried to teach the older Italian women how to make scalloped potatoes. They were horrified: “Milk and butter on potatoes? What is this?”

Even today, I'll walk through the store and think about what I'm going to make for dinner that night. Customers often look at me sceptically: "You cook? When you have all this prepared food at your disposal?" The answer is yes. (Full disclosure: I buy my lunch.) Cooking is a big part of me, partly because I don't know any other way. Even my kids try to make something from scratch every day, which just goes to show you that generational habits die hard.

Still, I know how busy everyone is these days, especially working moms. Not everyone has time to chop onions or carrots for a soup. That's exactly why we want our prepared foods, our meats and ready-to-heat dishes, to be made naturally with high-quality ingredients. There's a lot of comfort in knowing that when you warm up our items, they'll taste just like you cooked them yourself. Not homemade by Nonna, but very close.

This Month's Recipe

Moms deserve a break (and treats) more than anybody. What better way to celebrate her this Mother's Day than with a delicious dessert? My decadent recipe for **Stuffed Chocolate Hazelnut Suprema French Toast** is great for the rest of the family, too.

Serves: 4

Ingredients

- 1 Harbord Bakery Braided Challah
- 5 large eggs
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 cup Venchi Chocolate Hazelnut Suprema
- Butter for pan-frying
- 1 cup whipping cream
- 1/4 cup confectioners sugar
- 1 vanilla pod, seeded
- Coconut flakes

Instructions

- Slice challah into 1/4" slices.
- Take a slice of challah and spread one side with chocolate hazelnut spread. Repeat with another slice. Sandwich together. Repeat until you've used the entire loaf.
- Whisk eggs, milk and vanilla together and pour into a flat pan. Dip each sandwich into the egg mixture, coating all sides.
- Pan fry in butter over medium heat for 3-4 minutes per side, or until a golden crust forms.
- Using an electric hand mixer, blend whipping cream, sugar and vanilla bean seeds until stiff peaks form.
- Top sandwiches with a quenelle of vanilla whipped cream and dust with confectioners sugar and coconut flakes.

Tips

Burning your butter? Try using equal parts (1 tbsp. each) butter and olive oil. If you're not a quenelle pro, your ticket to quenelle-dom is an oval ice cream scoop. Shh... your secret's safe with us.

Ingredients available at [Pusateri's Fine Foods](#)