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food Shaped by tradition

Classic Tuscan dumplings let rustic flavors shine through

By Lisa Zwiern
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Malfatti are tender spinach and ricotta dumplings whose name translates from the Italian to “poorly made,” which is a misnomer, of course. You can make them well — and easily.

In some parts of Italy, the dumplings are called ravioli gnudi or just gnudi (naked) because the spinach mixture, which might elsewhere be used as a filling for ravioli, has no

pasta wrapper. Both malfatti and gnudi are considered peasant food: simple, rustic, and inexpensive.

Though the dumplings require little effort, they are time consuming because they’re shaped by hand. At Bina Osteria in the Theatre District, malfatti are cooked to order. Chef Will Foden serves them drizzled with browned butter, garnished with shaves of Parmesan and crispy sage leaves. The treatment reflects the chef’s respect for ingredients; he likes to let the flavors



PHOTOS BY WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Bina Osteria’s malfatti includes ricotta, eggs, nutmeg, semolina flour, and fresh spinach. Spoon are used to form the dumplings, which are cooked and served with Parmesan and sage leaves.

shine through.

“It’s a classic Tuscan dish,” he says, “but something you don’t see that often here.” Foden, 33, learned to make malfatti last winter while working at a hotel and winery in Cortona, Italy. He went to learn more about Tuscan’s traditional foods, but the chef isn’t new to Italian cuisine. He worked for Dante de Magistris at both Blu and Dante. In January he joined the team at Bina Osteria as chef de cuisine.

For home cooks, Foden suggests making a big batch of malfatti and freezing them until cooking time. He recommends using either spinach or Swiss chard, but not tougher textured greens like kale or collards, which are too strong. He usually mixes some baby arugula in with the spinach to add a subtle peppery bite. With frozen spinach, the dumplings won’t taste as fresh or be as vibrantly colored.

Foden shapes the spinach-ricotta mixture, which is bound with an egg and a little semolina flour, into ovals with a slight triangular shape, that he deftly forms using two spoons. Home cooks can try this or shape the mixture with their hands.

The key to tender dumplings is to eliminate excess liquid. Drain the spinach and wring out moisture first with your hands, then in a kitchen towel. Let the ricotta drain in a fine-mesh sieve over a bowl overnight.

If there’s too much liquid in the mixture, you’ll need more flour, explains Foden, “and too



much flour makes the dumplings tough.”

If you’ve ever eaten leaden gnocchi you’ll know what he means. The idea is to turn the

translation of malfatti around so it makes no sense.

Lisa Zwiern can be reached at lisa@lisazwiern.com.

Malfatti

Serves 4 generously

Begin the day before by preparing the ricotta; remove as much liquid as possible from the cheese and from the spinach. If the dumplings are too moist, they'll require extra flour, which will toughen them. Cook the dumplings in water at a rolling boil and don't add too many at once, so the water temperature does not drop and cause the malfatti to fall apart. Serve with sage brown butter or your own lightly seasoned tomato sauce. To freeze uncooked dumplings, line a baking sheet with plastic wrap. Sprinkle it with $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon semolina. Freeze malfatti until solid. Transfer dumplings to a plastic bag and freeze for up to 3 months.

- 1 cup whole-milk ricotta**
- 2 pounds fresh baby spinach or
1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds baby spinach and
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound baby arugula,
rinsed**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grated Parmesan**
- 1 egg**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper**
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon grated nutmeg**
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup semolina flour**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter**
- 20 fresh sage leaves**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Marsala wine**
- 20 small, thin slices Parmesan**

1. Have on hand 2 rimmed baking sheets.
2. Tip the ricotta into a fine-mesh strainer. Set it over a bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight.
3. In a large pot, bring about 1 inch of water to a boil. Add half of the spinach (and arugula, if using) and steam, covered, stirring once or twice, for 2 minutes or until wilted. Drain in a colander and rinse with cold water. Repeat with the remaining greens. With your hands, squeeze the spinach a little at a time to remove excess water. Place in a dish towel and squeeze again. Chop the spinach finely. You should have about $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups.
4. In a bowl, combine the spinach, ricotta, Parmesan, egg, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Stir with a fork until blended. Stir in $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of the semolina.
5. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Line 1 baking sheet with paper towels.
6. Place the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ cup

semolina in a shallow bowl. Remove $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon of the flour and sprinkle it on another baking sheet.

7. Shape small handfuls of the spinach mixture into ovals about $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide at the center. Gently toss the dumplings, a few at a time, in the semolina flour. Place on the floured sheet.

8. With the water at a rolling boil, cook 6 dumplings about $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 minutes (the longer time if frozen), or until they are rolling around the surface. Use a slotted spoon to transfer them to the paper-towel lined sheet. Repeat with the remaining dumplings.

9. Set the oven at 300 degrees.

10. In a skillet over medium heat, melt the butter. Cook for 5 minutes or until starting to turn golden. Add the sage and fry for 1 minute or until crisp. Remove the skillet from the heat and use a fork to transfer the leaves to a plate.

11. Working in batches, add 6 or 7 dumplings to the butter (watch for spattering). Return the skillet to medium-high heat. Cook the dumplings, turning with tongs, for 2 to 3 minutes or until golden. Transfer to an ovenproof dish and place in the oven. Repeat with the remaining malfatti.

12. Add the Marsala to the butter. Cook over medium heat for 1 minute. Spoon the sauce over the malfatti. Top each with a piece of Parmesan and a sage leaf. *Lisa Zwirn. Adapted from Bina Osteria*