

Italians turn back the clock to eat cheaply in recession

Leftovers and offal – from stale bread to pig's lung – return to the dinner table as traditional recipes are rediscovered

Tom Kington in Rome
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 14 February 2012 18.00 GMT

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Italians hit by the economic crisis are turning to traditional recipes including Ribollita, a Tuscan bean soup made with stale bread. Photograph: Alamy

Italians facing a long, hard winter with less cash to spend in the supermarket owing to the economic crisis are being encouraged to rediscover the cheap, traditional recipes of their ancestors.

Soups made with old bread and even pig's lungs are unlikely to appear on the menu of Michelin-starred Italian restaurants in London, New York or even Rome, but they are being touted as the nation's real cooking, made at a fraction of the price of many modern dishes.

"Old recipes are a richness that Italy boasts, that were perfected during periods of poverty and are a way to come through the crisis eating well," said Carlo Petrini, the head of the slow food movement, which campaigns for traditional, sustainable foods.

Petrini said the secret of Italy's low cost, old-style cuisine was the use of leftovers, from Tuscany's ribollita vegetable soup, made with stale bread, to le virtù – the virtues – a soup made in the town of Teramo with every winter vegetable left in the cupboard.

"Nothing got wasted and the name of the soup is no coincidence. Young women once had to know how to make it before they got married," said Petrini. "Today food is a commodity. It needs its value back and to achieve that you cannot throw it away. Thanks to the crisis the young are rediscovering this and luckily their parents and grandparents are still around to teach them."

In a roundup of nearly forgotten dishes, La Repubblica listed sbira soup, a Genoese speciality made with tripe, mushrooms, lard, bread, pine nuts and meat sauce that was favoured by policemen and prison guards and served as the traditional last meal to prisoners sentenced to death.

Any talk of cutting out waste in Italian cooking inevitably revolves around making better use of the lesser known parts of animals including offal, which was a peasant staple for centuries, notably in Rome where prime cuts were reserved for the rich, leaving tripe as the city's signature dish.

Arneo Nizzoli, 76, who runs a renowned restaurant in northern Italy near Mantua, said busloads of cookery students were now showing up to eat his *maialata* meals, where he uses as much of the pig as possible, from pig's lung soup to cotechino – a type of sausage – made with tongue, to pig's lard set with garlic, parsley and onion and spread over browned slices of polenta.

"In this cold weather the TV is telling people to eat vegetables and fruit to resist. What is that about? What about lard?" he said.

Pig's noses, cheek and feet, which all find use in Nizzoli's kitchen, cost half a euro a kilo, compared with over €20 for cured pig's ham or prosciutto.

"Sometimes I feel like a culinary archaeologist, but doing it my way means spending less and raising fewer pigs," he said. "These dishes take hours to cook, but if people are out of work they may have that time."

Nizzoli said children raised on plain plates of pasta with parmesan cheese were agog at his meals, particularly his risotto made with salami, although his son Dario admitted that sometimes diners were told they had eaten lung soup only after they had finished.

Horsemeat was once fed to children as a key source of iron by Italian mothers but young customers were now reluctant to try his horse stew, which is slow cooked for hours, said Nizzoli. "Horses were traditionally eaten here when they died but kids today just aren't interested," he said.

Recipes from Il Ristorante Nizzoli

Horse stew

Three kg horse shoulder, two carrots, two onions, two celery stalks, four garlic segments, two spoonfuls of tomato paste, red wine, salt and pepper.

Bind the meat with string or a roasting net, roll it in white flour and seal in oil until it browns. Finely chop and saute the vegetables in a separate pan, then add the meat, red wine, salt and pepper and cook for about three hours, adding water or stock when the liquid reduces. Blend the liquid and the vegetables, serve with the sliced meat and polenta or potato puree.

Lung soup

One pig's lung, a complete celery, one onion, grated Grana cheese, butter, oil, salt, pepper, 'Grattoni' type small pasta.

Saute the onion with oil and butter, add the celery cut in large pieces with water, salt and pepper and some stock if wanted. Cook for half an hour. Separately wash then boil the lung in slightly salted water, mince when cooked and add to the vegetables. Add the pasta, cook and serve with a touch of grated cheese.

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