

CELEBRATING GOOD FOOD, FAMILY AND ITALY

By HENRIETTA MACGUIRE

Author Mark Leslie takes readers on an Italian adventure featuring a love of pasta, Italy and the family and friends he met during his journey. “Beyond the Pasta: Recipes, Language & Life with an Italian Family” was inspired after a trip to Italy in 2001.

Julius Cesar would never make it with the anti-cholesterol crowd: “Give me men about me who are fat with sleek heads,” he says in Shakespeare’s play. “Yon Cassius hath a lean and hungry look... Such men are dangerous.”

As a former stage manager of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Mark Leslie is familiar with the quotation but does not agree with it. His new book has just come out. It’s called “Beyond the Pasta: Recipes, Language and Life with an Italian Family” and it doesn’t advocate sleek fatness. Rather, his emphasis on Italian cooking dramatizes how you can create comfort food at a luscious level and still not pork up till your buttons pop.

The book describes life in a small Italian town in central Italy, each chapter covering a single day. “I lived with a family and every morning I’d go out with Nonna, the grandmother, to do the shopping for the day. Everything fresh, in-season fruits and veggies, two kinds of fantastic bread, cheeses to die for, and of course, homemade pasta. In addition to recipes they taught me a valuable lesson. I found out that even if you’ve spent hours and hours preparing the food, sharing a meal is not about what’s on the plate. It’s about family & friends, about warmth and laughter, memories and showing affection. That’s what really makes cooking important.”

Mark must have fitted in perfectly with his Italian hosts. He is tall and muscular, as talkative as his “grandmother,” Nonna, with whom he explodes into a loud laugh as he tries to control his sly, wicked sense of humor. Since he is spontaneous and impulsive, every now and then he tends to snap out a few wisecracks mocking the sacred cows wherever they turn up.

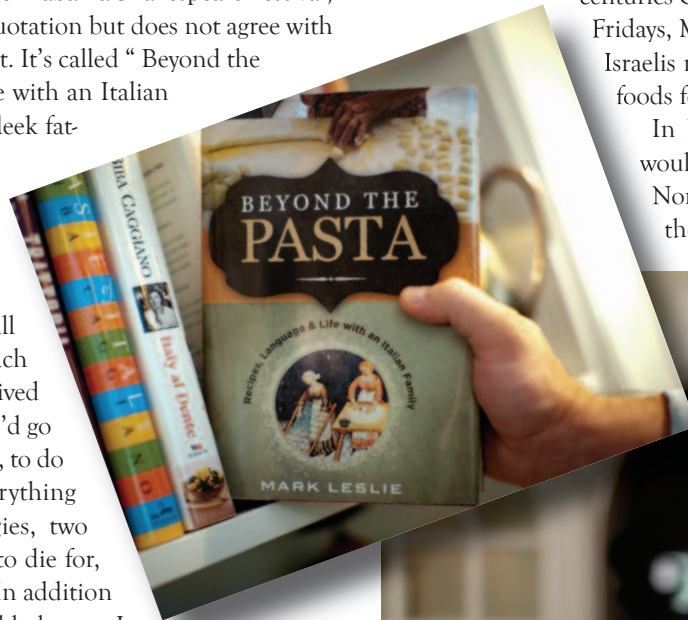
The book illustrates that one of the many advantages of Foodie Travel is that it lets you penetrate into the culture of other countries. Because it’s at the heart of a society, food reveals a great deal about social customs, about the position of women, the agriculture of a region, the religious mores, the transportation system and a host of other aspects. Take domestic customs. “In Italy, men are always served first in the family. After the man has food on his plate at the head of the table, then the women sit down. Men are not expected to help with preparing or serving food or clearing the

table and it would never occur to them even to offer.” In general the home is the woman’s domain and men do not wash dishes, take out the trash, go shopping for food or become involved with domesticity in any way.

“Now look how food reveals American society,” Mark said. “Fast-food heaven, eat while you work, one hour for lunch, Time is Money, try to combine business and a sandwich, and above all, hurry. Exactly the opposite of many other countries; Turkey, Italy, most Middle Eastern ones take three hours for lunch, or sit at a restaurant all afternoon over coffee. No one pressures you.”

Even religion enters into the equation. For centuries Catholics were expected to eat fish on Fridays, Muslims cannot touch pork, and the Israelis must serve matzah and other special foods for Passover and the Shabbat.

In Mark’s book he describes how he would learn to cook in the morning with Nonna and then spend several hours in the afternoon with Alessandra, her



daughter, learning Italian. As a professional teacher who had spent several years instructing foreigners she knew that mastering a new language was a matter of endless repetition: 'The adjective always has to agree with the noun in gender and number,' along with a thousand other rules.

"Learning a language is so complicated, so full of nuance and subtleties that it's a lot more difficult than most people think," Mark says. "First of all you have to develop a trained ear to hear the differences in the sounds: the English 'O' and the Italian 'O' are different. And ditto on the other letters. Secondly, every language has its own rhythm, what words you emphasize in the sentence. And thirdly, conjugating all those verbs in the subjunctive can drive you crazy. As Alessandra said, endless repetition."

When he would go out with Nonna buying veggies she would correct his attempts at Italian. "Not only Nonna, they all corrected me all the time: mother, father, granny, daughter, neighbors. Everybody. It was a neighborhood project: teach il Americano to speak Italian. Not just a project, but also a kind of game. They made bets: what would il Americano remember from yesterday to say properly today? And if I started to make a mistake, the little kids would help me cheat by whispering the word. Of course, I bribed them with candy."

The book sweeps along from day to day. Italian words are tossed in constantly along with their translation, his host family comes alive with humorous incidents, the enchanting city-and-country backgrounds lend their celebrated magic, a trip to Rome provides a chance to show Mark's love of history, art and travel. Perhaps the most appreciated touch is the recipe for an Italian dish at the end of each chapter. There are tips on how to make it, what to avoid, what to concentrate on (see sidebar). In addition there's a detailed description of meals in large and small restaurants with explanations of the recipes and what the high point of the feast was, especially the relatively low price.

Mark's love for all things Italian comes across with a dozen strings attached. Automatically he responds to the warmth of food and family finding in Italian cooking and culture satisfying soul food in every sense of the term. **ML**

Polpette: meatball stuffing for chicken

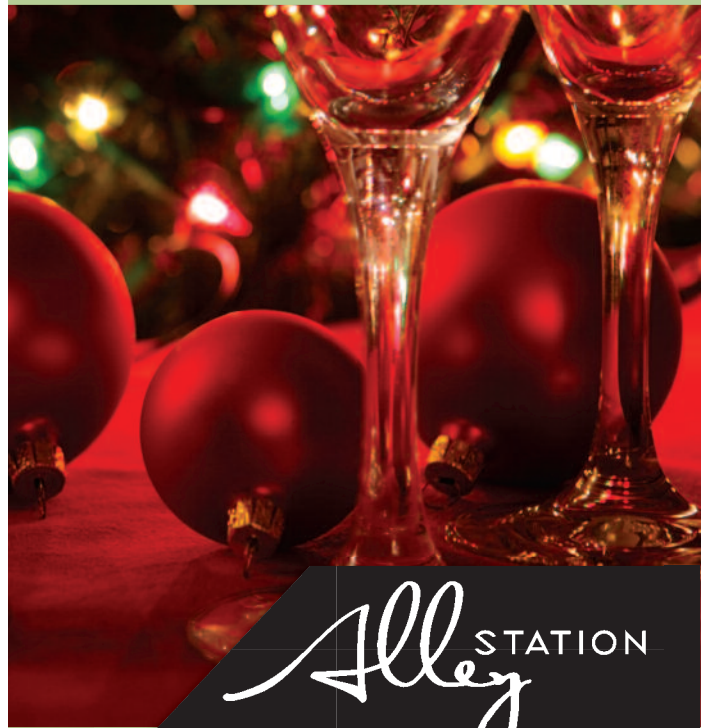
The secret to moist meatballs and stuffing is day-old bread. It is reconstituted in water, squeezed dry and added to insure that the meatballs will be moist when served.

- 2 slices Italian bread (1/2-inch slices of a Tuscan boule or similar bread)
- 1/2 cup dried bread crumbs
- 1/2 pound ground veal
- 1/2 pound ground turkey (or ground pork)
- 2 eggs
- 1 large minced clove garlic
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- Sunflower oil for frying (substitute vegetable or canola oil)
- Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

Soak bread slices in water for 5 minutes. Squeeze water out of bread and combine all ingredients in bowl — except bread crumbs. Mix well. Shape into about ten meatballs and roll in bread crumbs. Fry in an inch of hot fat until brown on all sides. Drain on paper towel and serve hot with Parmigiano cheese or with a marinara sauce.

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