

## Ode to the tomato

*I love tomatoes, the wonderful discovery that they are; I love them served with fried eggs, basil and Parmesan; I love them in tomato bread soup, where the balance between the flavours sings like a bird perching on a branch waiting to migrate.*

*I love to rub this red fruit on a thick slice of day-old Tuscan bread, before drizzling some of my Aunt Giuliana's very own Bagno a Ripoli olive oil and a drop of my friend Simone's prestigious vinegar, made from a secret recipe and stored in barrels in a private cellar.*

*And yet, feelings for this wonderful fruit can easily turn sour when it makes the transformation from simple recipe ingredient to show stealer; when the other ingredients, no matter how complex and intriguing, are forced to take a back seat to this flavour and appearance enhancer.*

## Il ragù

Italian meat sauce

Serves 4 to 6 people:

- \* 800g finest quality minced meat
- \* 80g suet
- \* 2 red onions
- \* 1 large white celery heart
- \* 1 carrot
- \* 1 garlic clove
- \* 1 large glass extra virgin olive oil
- \* zest of 1 lemon (yellow part only) optional
- \* 1 glass full-bodied red wine plus 3 fingers dry Marsala wine
- \* ready- or home-made stock
- \* 500g peeled canned tomatoes
- \* 1 bay leaf
- \* 10 peppercorns
- \* salt and pepper



Prepare your flavour base by finely chopping the onions, carrot and celery and placing in a large saucepan (I like pans with an enameled surface, but this is just a personal preference. The cookware just needs to be good quality, as the success of the dish will depend on this). Leave to stew over a low heat until the onion loses its sharp aroma and begins to become translucent; continue stirring with a wooden spoon until the garlic starts to change colour. After about seven or eight minutes, add the minced meat, crushed garlic clove, ten black peppercorns, dried bay leaf and the suet. Add the meat to the chopped flavour base and mix in, browning over a high heat.

You'll need to be very careful as the mince tends to release some water and you'll need this to evaporate pretty quickly so that the sauce doesn't take on an unpleasant boiled meat taste. This stage of the preparation often trips up inexperienced chefs as you also want to avoid the mince drying out too much, otherwise you'll be left with a dry sauce.

When you have finished browning the meat, pour in the red wine and Marsala and allow the alcohol to evaporate. Once the alcohol has evaporated, add the peeled tomatoes (passed through a strainer), chopped lemon zest (optional), salt and ground pepper. Cover with boiling home-made (or ready-made) stock, place a lid on the pan and simmer for about two hours and fifteen minutes, stirring occasionally. You can now take the lid off and continue cooking for another half hour or so, or until the sauce has thickened.

Antonia, the chef I worked alongside at Trattoria Zà Zà for over twenty five years, used to sneakily add a splash of milk to the sauce whenever I broke off for a coffee break or when she thought I wasn't looking. A Molise native, Antonia was convinced that the milk would give the sauce an even finer and more delicate flavour. Antonia, if only you knew how many times I'd leave the kitchen on purpose so you would do that!