

Sapori e Bonta'

Della Cucina Regionale Italiana

The Truth About Pasta Primavera

by Chef Franco Brigandi

La primavera (springtime) ends at the summer solstice in the last week of June. For me, spring symbolizes the essence of our existence. It signifies new life for nature and for all creatures. It means that love is in the air. At Easter time, we have hope that can bring us closer to God, when we celebrate the Resurrection, for our new life in His Kingdom, and it brings us closer to our Innamorata in a whimsical spring moment surrounded by sweetly perfumed blossoms, while also bringing us closer to our families on Mother's and Father's days. The prolificity of exquisite roses in bloom during this time of renewal is a testimony to the romance and beauty of the season. I am ever reminded of a favorite song from my youth, sung by Claudio Villa, called *Aprite le Finestre, E' Primavera* (Open the Windows, for it is Spring). It was 1955. I was 17, in love with a beautiful English girl I had met in Venice a year before, and still dreaming of the day my ship would take me back to her. I was working on the Italian line's passenger ship, the *Cristoforo Colombo*, sailing from Genova to New York and back. This was a song that spoke to my heart then, and I have found myself humming it ever since:

"Aprite le Finestre, al nuovo sole... E' primavera, E' primavera."

Festa dell'amor, lasciate entrare un poco di aria pura, bambine belle, innamorate,

E' forse e tutto quello che sognate... sara' per voi, la felicità"

("Open all the widows, for the new sun... It is springtime, It is springtime.

Feast of love, let in a little fresh air... beautiful girls, in love.

And maybe, it is all that you have dreamed of... It will be your happiness")

When it comes to food, the best aliments remain the tender young spring animals like piglet, lamb, veal, and chicken, or the many virgin spring garden crops like peas, asparagus, zuc-



Chef Franco Brigandi

chini flowers, spinach, spring onions, and certain varieties of tomatoes, and herbs, not to mention delicate fruits such as strawberries and figs. When creating dishes with these, one cannot help but feel as if you are painting a fine spun masterpiece filled with the notion that romance meets elegance.

I would now like to tell you the real story behind "pasta primavera". In 1975, I was the Maître D' at *Il Gatto Pardo Ristorante*, on 56th Street, between 5th and 6th Avenue in Manhattan. Our Chef, Mio Marchitelli from Abruzzi, was one of the best cuisiniers I've ever known, from whom I gained a lot of my own knowledge as a chef. However, at the time, none of the dishes we served were "light" enough at lunchtime to draw the thousands of weight conscious professional women working in that area, and salads were available everywhere. We needed to bring in more lunch business, so I began asking our female dinner customers and some men, too, what would they like to see on our lunch menu that could bring them into our restaurant. A great portion of them said that they loved pasta, but they felt it was too heavy and fattening for midday. I realized, at that point, that it was time to in-

vent a "light" pasta dish. Since I was also the table-side flambé chef, I became determined to create a pasta leggera, right at the customer's table.

I decided it should be with Capellini d' Angelo (angel hair), for its fine, airy quality that could be swirled artistically on the plate. Then in a sauté pan, I heated some extra virgin olive oil and a pat of butter, and sautéed finely chopped spring onion (or shallot), a thin julienne of roasted sweet red pepper and finely chopped Prosciutto di Parma, until the onion became transparent. I added sliced white mushrooms, and a pinch each of sea salt and white pepper. I let it sauté a few minutes until tender. Then I added a medley of pre-blanchéd veggies: baby sweet peas, asparagus tips, a small, thinly sliced zucchini, and green beans, cut. I added dry white wine, and simmered for 3 minutes until the alcohol evaporated. Then I added a little chicken stock, and a tablespoon of Genoese pesto, lowered the heat, and covered, simmering until the veggies became tender and the broth had reduced. I cooked imported angel hair pasta, al dente, then drained. I melted a pat of butter in

another pan, and added the pasta, and tossed. I added the sautéed veggies and freshly grated Parmegiano Reggiano, lightly tossing them with the pasta, and garnishing it with a few plump basil leaves and halved cherry tomatoes, to appear like a flower on top, and sprinkled on more cheese.

This dish was a novelty in its day. No one, not even in Italy, had yet come up with a pasta dish with only fresh veggies, and no tomato or heavy cream sauce. I had to name it, and "Pasta Primavera" was a slam dunk, for the light concept of fresh spring verdure tossed into angel hair pasta.

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On July 29th, 1975, New York Channel 7 Eyewitness News, with Bob Lape, asked me to premier my creation in front of the camera for one of their *Chefs of New York* series segments, and the rest is literally culinary history. Consequently, after it aired, not only was there a line out the door at lunchtime with all the pasta craving women on a diet, but also, over 10,000 written requests for the recipe came into the restaurant, and many more than that came to the TV station. The words "pasta primavera" became an instant sensation and household word, not to mention that many celebrities who heard about my "light pasta" came to check it out. I cooked it table-side for Hope Lang, Neal Sedaka, John Casevetes, Kim Novak, Patricia Neal, and Barbara Bouchet, among others.

Unfortunately, I was a naive, immigrant, right off the boat, and not yet experienced in the legalities or even the necessity of intellectual property rights protection. So I continued on, unaware of nefarious plans being made to steal the recipe from me. Many of the chefs in the area around *Il Gatto Pardo Ristorante* were my friends, and many of the restaurant owners and managers were our frequent custom-

ers. Of course I was honored whenever one of them requested permission to serve Pasta Primavera in their establishments. However, one restaurant owner, who I will not name because he now also owns a place here in Las Vegas, pretended to befriend me while picking my brain for the exact recipe. His restaurant was then, and is now, one of the top Michelin rated and most expensive restaurants in the world. I thought nothing of it, and eventually moved to Washington, DC to manage a restaurant called *Il Giardino*, on Embassy Row. I spent the next year catering to top politicians and diplomats, and when I had made the owners \$100,000 in profit, my job was done, and I moved to the Poconos where I raised my children and opened my own small Italian restaurant called *Bella Napoli*. Then in 1987, I moved my family to St. Augustine, Florida, where I established the *Villa Santa Monica*, which I had for 22 years before coming to Las Vegas to live near my new grandchild. My son, who was in his teens then, and savvier than I, said "Pop, if you invented Pasta Primavera and you can't go anywhere without seeing that name, then why can't you profit from it?" I did not know how to answer to that, so my son called channel 7 in New York to inquire. They told him that yes, they did have the taped segment of me introducing Pasta Primavera in their archives, which would prove



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An ad for Chef Franco Brigandi's Restaurant, *Villa Santa Monica*

that I had invented and named Pasta Primavera in 1975, but unfortunately, a certain restaurant owner in New York (the one that pretended to befriend me) had waited 6 months until he was sure that I was not going to copyright the name, (and in the meantime doing some talk shows and press releases, claiming that he created my dish), and when there was no resistance, he copyrighted the name, himself. Then he turned around and sold that copyright to General Foods for \$2.5 million dollars in 1976. The television station also mentioned that there was not much we could do about it at that point because the statute of limitations had run out. They informed him

that they were not at liberty to release a copy of that tape to us, but if it ever went to court, they would release it on a subpoena. Needless to say, we did not sue.

I have always helped others become rich with my knowledge and creativity, and the little I have made for myself has all gone to support my parents and my seven brothers and sisters in Italy, to give my children a boost in life, and to help many charities. But although at age 77, living meagerly on one, below poverty level Social Security check here in Las Vegas, with nothing in the bank to show for my labors, I still feel enormously rich, because I have my health, truly good friends, my faith, the love of my family, the joy of listening to the melodic tweets of Rudy, my beloved canary, my tiny porch garden that I tend, where I can witness the miracle of spring as my seedlings raise their newborn heads out of the soil and grow like children into beautiful blooms, and my hobbies of writing for *La Voce*, cooking for my church, and teaching soccer to children. What more could a man ask for in the autumn of his life?

Buon Appetito!

Ask Chef Franco I am pleased to receive so many wonderful messages, and requests for my recipes. Thank you. Please keep emailing me at cheffrancofoods@gmail.com. My Original fully detailed recipe for Pasta Primavera is available on request.

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