Pan-Sautéed Winter Pears with Pecorino and Walnut Focaccia

The combination of pears and pecorino is traditional in Umbria, the sweetness of the fruit soothing the saltiness of the cheese. The delicious compatibility of the two is less the result of invention than of the timeless availability of the two components.

"We had sheep and so there was cheese. And in one season or another, there was almost always some sort of pear ready to eat either from a wild bush or an orchard tree. So that's what we ate, and that's what we still eat. And the undisputed best way to go about this little meal is to first steal the pear," says the incorrigible Neddo. "Then find a hillside facing the afternoon sun. Once settled, pull a pocket knife from your sack, peel and slice the pear a sliver at a time, eating it from the knife between crumbles of pecorino, also pulled from your sack. Red wine and good bread would not be out of place."

Though surely a dandified reading of the original, this following one is also quite good.

Pan-Sautéed Winter Pears with Pecorino: To serve 6

—6 ripe but still firm winter pears, preferably Bosc.
—4 tablespoons sweet butter.
—1 tablespoon olive oil.
—½ cup very fine yellow or white cornmeal.
—sea salt.
—a pepper grinder.
—1 cup Orvieto Classico.
—2/3 cup chestnut or buckwheat honey, warmed to a liquid.
—About 10 ounces of medium-aged pecorino.

"Stripe" the pears with a vegetable peeler, cut them into halves, leaving the stem intact -either on one half of the pear or split between the two halves -and core and seed the fruit. In a large sauté pan, heat 3 tablespoons of the butter with the olive oil over a medium flame until the butter just begins to foam. Pour the cornmeal out into a shallow plate and press each pear half into it, lightly coating the cut sides only. Place each pear half, cut side down, into the hot fat. Sprinkle the pears with sea salt and generous grindings of pepper. Sauté only as many pears at a time as will fit comfortably in the pan without touching. Leave the pears undisturbed for 5 to 6 minutes to form a good, golden crust and then turn them carefully with a spatula to cook the other side, salting them and grinding on pepper as before. Once again, leave the fruit undisturbed for 5 minutes. Remove the sautéed fruit to warmed plates. Use large or even oversize dinner plates for this presentation, allowing people to smudge bits of the focaccia in the honey and have at the pear without sending it sailing off the edge of some delicate little dessert plate. Raise the flame and rinse the pan with the Orvieto Classico, stirring to dissolve the pan residue. Allow the wine to reduce for 2 to 3 minutes. Off the flame, gloss the sauce with the final tablespoon of butter, swirling the pan to melt it. Place four or five roughly-cut slivers of the pecorino next to the pears on each plate, drizzle with the sauce and threads of the warmed honey. Send around the table a just-baked focaccia for people to tear and pass. Pour the same Orvieto Classico used in the sauce, chilled rather than cold.

Walnut Focaccía

A roundish, flat cake made of water and grain and cooked quickly over the red-hot ash of a fire or a hot stone was perhaps the earliest form of bread. Focaccia is its most direct ancestor. Even the name is derived from focus, fire in Latin. The French fougasse -a ladder-shaped bread often made with walnut oil - is of the same clan. But as it is with so many foods which travel far from their roots, what is passed off as focaccia in many parts of the world can be a cottony, oily, flavorless travesty. Make your own.

To make three 12-inch breads.

—2 1/3 cups tepid water.
—2 ½ teaspoons active dry yeast (or a small cake of fresh yeast, about 20 grams).
—6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra to drizzle.
—1 ½ tablespoons fine sea salt.
—6 cups all-purpose flour.
—2/3 cup stone-ground whole-wheat flour.
—1 cup finely stone-ground white or yellow cornmeal.
—additional water, if necessary.
—2 cups walnuts, lightly toasted and lightly crushed.
—sea salt.

Place 1/3 cup of the tepid water into a large mixing bowl and sprinkle or crumble in the yeast. Stir to dissolve and let stand for five minutes. Meanwhile mix together 6 tablespoons of olive oil, 2 cups of tepid water, and the fine sea salt. Add the liquids to the yeast, add the three flours, all at once, and stir to form a rough mass. Turn the mass out onto a lightly floured work surface and begin to knead. If the mass seems dry, sprinkle over a few drops of additional water at a time until the mass is workable. Continue to knead the mass until a soft, satiny, and elastic dough is achieved; flatten the dough into a rough rectangle and sprinkle over the walnuts. Work the nuts into the dough and reshape it into a rough ball. Set the dough into a lightly oiled bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and set it to rise in a warm, draft-free place. Allow rise until the mass is doubled. This might take as long as two hours. Deflate the dough and cut it into three pieces, shaping each one into a flat round. Place the rounds onto oiled baking sheets which have been lightly sprinkled with cornmeal; cover with kitchen towels and allow to rise for half an hour. Press your knuckles into the dough, creating lovely little pockets which will eventually hold oil and salt. Cover the rounds once again and let them sit for the last rise, about an hour. Now sprinkle or grind sea salt over the breads. Do this generously. Drizzle them with olive oil, hitting the pockets when you can, and bake the breads for 20 to 25 minutes or longer, until they are puffed and nicely golden. Transfer immediately to racks to cool slightly before serving. These can be successfully reheated in a lively oven for a very few minutes.

umbrichelli with olivada

Umbrichelli are rough, hand-rolled and hand-cut ropes of pasta made from only flour, water, and salt. If making fresh umbrichelli seems daunting (which I can assure you it is not; see below), don't be tempted to substitute fresh pasta made with eggs, which is so widely available in America now. It's silky texture and richer flavor is not the best foil for the frank rusticity of the olive paste. Better to approximate the umbrichelli with a thick, dried spaghetti such as bucatini.

Kin to the Provençal tapenade, Umbrian olivada is made with great, fleshy black or purple olives whose briny quality is chastened with a dose of black rum rather than intensified with anchovies as it is in the south of France. Less salty, less aggressive, a pot of the Umbrian paste in the cupboard is gold. Apart from dressing pasta with it, smear it on roasted bread to serve as an antipasto, spoon it over grilled fish or alongside a roast chicken, or stuff it into the hollows of August tomatoes, raw or grilled. In summer, I tend to spoon it into small white cups and set it down as an antipasto with little silver spoons and a tangle of battered and just-fried sage leaves. Except for cold white wine, nothing else seems necessary.

Umbrichelli: To serve 12.

—1 pound all-purpose flour.
—2 teaspoons sea salt.
—water.

On a large pastry board or in a large mixing bowl, pour out the flour, add the sea salt, and mix well. Urge the mixture into a mound, make a crater in its center with your thumbs, and into it, begin pouring water in a thin stream while you work it into the flour with your free hand. The desire here is to achieve a thick, consistent, if rough mass of dough. Once that's accomplished, begin kneading the mass on a lightly floured surface until it begins to smooth out and take on some elasticity. About 8 minutes. Here the fun begins. If you've ever worked with egg-based pasta dough, you'll be familiar with the feverish rolling and rolling and expanding and turning and rolling again and again until the stuff is thin as yellow silk. A magnificent feat and well worth its trouble to be sure. However, traditional Umbrian pasta making is a much less precise art. What that means is that once you've made this dough, there are several ways to proceed in the shaping of the umbrichelli. One can begin by cutting the dough into thirds and, on a lightly floured surface, rolling out each third into a sheet about ¼" in thickness. A little bump, a little tear -nothing can hurt the final result here. At this point one can roll the pasta sheet jelly-roll fashion and cut it into thinnish strips, approximately ¼" wide, dust the strips very lightly with flour and leave them to dry in a flat basket or on a tray lined with a kitchen towel. Repeat the process with the other two-thirds of the dough.

Alternatively, one just pulls off pieces of the dough and rolls them into long thin ropes, drags the rope gently through a dish of flour, and heaves the thing onto the same sort of cloth-lined tray. This is an especially good method for those wishing to either engage or distract any householders beyond the age of four. It's fine child's play, which means it's also fine adult's play. The umbrichelli can be left to dry for half a day or overnight covered loosely in a cool place. Do not refrigerate them. When ready to cook them, bring 6 to 8 quarts of sea-salted water to the rapid boil and tumble the pasta into it. Stir, reduce the heat to keep a quieter boil, and cook the pasta until it rises to the surface. Meanwhile, pour the olivada into a large serving bowl. As the pasta rises to the top, catch it with a skimmer and place it in the bowl. Repeat until all the pasta is cooked. Toss the umbrichelli with the olivada and serve. This is absolutely not a pasta which is enhanced by the addition of Parmigiano.

Olivada: Makes approximately 2 cups.

—1 ½ pounds large black or purple Italian or Greek olives, pounded lightly with a mallet and relieved of their stones.
—3 fat, firm cloves of garlic with no trace of green sprout, peeled and crushed.
—3 tablespoons grappa or cognac.
—3 tablespoons dark rum.
—2 teaspoons red wine vinegar.
—2 tablespoons raisins, plumped in warm red wine and drained, the wine reserved.
—Approximately ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil.

By hand:

Place the stoned olives and the garlic in a large wooden or marble mortar and begin crushing them with a pestle, grinding them against the sides of the mortar until a rough paste is achieved. This takes only a minute or two. Combine the grappa or cognac, the dark rum, and the vinegar and add the mixture, a teaspoon or so at a time, all the while continuing to smooth out the paste by using a grinding motion with the pestle. Add the raisins and their soaking liquid and continue to smooth the paste. Lastly, a drop or two at a time, beat in the olive oil -using the pestle now as a whisk -until a smooth, light, and glossy paste is achieved. All of the one-quarter cup of olive oil may not be needed. Never refrigerate the paste. If not using it immediately or within several hours, transfer it to a glass or ceramic vessel, cover the top with a very thin layer of extra-virgin olive oil, cover the vessel tightly, and store in a cool place. The olivada will keep for several weeks if stored properly.

With a food processor:

In the work bowl of a food processor fitted with a steel blade, process the olives with the garlic, grappa or cognac, rum, vinegar, and the raisins with their soaking liquid to a coarse paste. Scrape the bowl.

With the machine running, add drops of the olive oil through the feed tube, thinning the paste, glossing and emulsifying it. See above for storing suggestions.

Leg of Spiced Pork Slow-Braised in Red Wine with Prunes

This is an ancient celebration dish in both Umbria and Tuscany, historically cooked in December during the harvesting of the olives and the pig-sticking. Stories abound among the farmers about how they'd build olive-wood fires in their outdoor ovens and cook two haunches at a time to feed the troupe of harvesters who hand-picked the olives, feasted, rested, and then moved on to the next estate to repeat the events a few days later. Though recipes and general narrative change from one storyteller to the next, all of them agree about the epic hungers raised up by the clove and cinnamon smoke which curled from the ovens and hung maddeningly, promisingly in the cold blue air of a winter's day.

Even without the glory of an olive-wood-fired oven, the scent of the charring spiced flesh seeps into every millimeter of the house, bringing otherwise well-behaved people to loiter fussily about the kitchen. And if I stand on my terrace for a moment, putting out bread to cool or to greet my neighbor across the alleyway, or if Fernando and I sit, swaddled in winter coats and sipping at warm spiced wine, to watch the sun set, I have seen people stop short on the little street below, look up, inhale. Swoon.

Since I must stay in or near the kitchen for all those hours of its braising, I use the time to lay the table and put together the rest of the supper. Set the bread to rise, stir up the polenta, make a sweet.

Surely on the night of the feast, this was the dish which sparked the most nostalgia. Strangely, even our American guests likened the tenderness and sweetness of the flesh to that of the "baked fresh ham" of their childhoods. When this sentiment was translated to the Umbrians, there was a great shaking of heads and the darting of pitying glances at the New Worlders who would pretend such a dish could be had anywhere but here.

One caveat: no matter how many prunes I cook along with the pork, I never have enough. The supply is always less than the demand. Even people who wouldn't eat a dried prune on a bet start digging about in the sauce for another one. And another one.

To serve 12.

—2 tablespoons fine sea salt.
—2 teaspoons just-cracked pepper.
—1 tablespoon ground cinnamon.
—1 tablespoon ground allspice.
—2 teaspoons ground cloves.
—1 12 to 14-pound leg of fresh pork, its bone intact, its fat well trimmed.
—6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil.
—2 medium yellow onions, peeled and minced.
—3 fat cloves of garlic, peeled, crushed, and minced.
—2 bay leaves.
—14-inch stick of cinnamon.
—Up to 6 cups young red wine.
—1 ½ pound of prunes, stoned.

Combine the sea salt, the pepper, and the dry spices together and massage the potion into all the surfaces of the pig's haunch. Place the perfumed leg in a noncorrosive vessel, covering it tightly with plastic wrap, and allow it to rest in the refrigerator for 2 days.

Preheat the oven to 425°F. In a large terra-cotta or ceramic casserole or a roasting pan, warm 2 tablespoons of olive oil and sauté the onion and garlic to translucence. Massage the haunch with the remaining 4 tablespoons of olive oil, place it over the sautéed aromatics, and roast it for 20 minutes, gilding it and sealing in its juices. Reduce the heat to 325°F and add the bay leaves, the cinnamon stick, and 2 cups of the red wine. Braise the pork, uncovered, basting it at 15-minute intervals with its juices and judicious doses of red wine to compensate for evaporation. Known here as it is in many part of the world as the angels' portion.

Meanwhile, plump the prunes in more of the red wine over a low flame.

After 3 ½ hours have passed, add the plumped prunes to the roasting pan and continue to baste and braise the haunch for another ½ hour to 1 hour, or until its internal temperature reads 150°F. Remove the haunch from the oven and allow it to rest in its juices for 30 minutes.

Remove the pork from its pan, carve it into thin slices, and present it with its braising juice -cinnamon stick removed, corrected for salt -studded with the prunes.

Roasted Chestnut Polenta: To serve 12.

—2 cups whole milk.
—5 cups water.
—1 cup Orvieto Classico.
—1 tablespoon fine sea salt.
—1 teaspoon light brown sugar.
—3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil.
—3 tablespoons sweet butter.
—1 ½ cups coarse, stone-ground yellow cornmeal.
—½ cup chestnut flour (available in specialty food shops and Italian groceries).
—just-ground nutmeg.

In a large heavy stockpot set over a high flame, combine the milk, water, wine, salt, sugar, oil, and 1 tablespoon of the butter and bring the mass to a boil. Stir the cornmeal with the chestnut flour and pour the mixture into a pitcher or measuring cup with a lip. With a large wooden spoon in your stirring hand and the pitcher in the other, begin stirring and, very slowly, begin pouring out the mixture in a thin, constant stream. Stirring all the while. And always in the same direction, if you recall the story about Saint Anthony's feast. Lower the flame then and continue to stir until the pap thickens and bubbles and puffs steam and the spoon can stand up straight in its middle, which should be the case somewhere about twenty minutes into the process. Building a fine, smooth polenta wants a bit of coordination and a willing arm. Off the flame, grate a good quarter of a nutmeg into the polenta and add the final 2 tablespoons of sweet butter. Give it all a good stir and pour it out into an oiled tin -or two of them if that's easier -to a depth of 2 inches. Allow the polenta to cool. Cut it into squares or rectangles or even cut it out with a large biscuit cutter and lay the pieces on an oiled baking sheet. Under a preheated broiler, grill the polenta until the edges are crisped and the little cakes are thoroughly heated. Transfer to a heated platter and pass it along with the pork and its braising juices.

Brown Sugar Gelato with Caramelized Blood Oranges

Extra-virgin olive oil employed as a component in dessert making is as natural here as are butter or cream. Again, oil is at hand and so it's used to every possible advantage. Stirred into simple cakes, it imparts a tender, luscious crumb. In crusts for sweet and savory tarts, in anise-scented cookies, in the batters for pancakes or fritters, olive oil exalts flavor and lightens texture. Its use in gelato is, however, not at all typical.

It was during the ninth-century Saracen reign on Sicily when, along with a rich patrimony of pastry cooking, the art of gelato making was introduced in Italy. Since then every conceivable fruit and herb and seed and essence and perfume has been dedicated to the embellishment of the smooth, satiny stuff, which may very well be the earth's preferred sweet. But the addition of olive oil is a relatively recent conceit. And just as it does in other sweet cooking, the use of extra-virgin olive oil in gelato making lightens the texture of the finished cream and exalts the flavors of the other components. Either finely crushed cinnamon bark, lightly crushed espresso beans, the scraped seeds from the heart of a fresh, plump vanilla bean, Grand Marnier, Cognac, Cointreau, or crystallized ginger might be substituted for the cloves in this recipe. I confess to the occasional debauchery of making the gelato with all of these perfumes and spirits at the same time, dosing the base with the instinctive, restrained hand of an alchemist. The olive oil suspends each layer of flavor so that, on the tongue, rather than tasting their amalgam, one is treated to a series of soft explosions and dissolutions. An extended fireworks display. Should you opt to make the gelato this way, do forget the oranges and the fritters. Forget the dinner.

Brown Sugar Gelato: to serve 12.

—10 large egg yolks.
—¾ cup dark brown sugar.
—8 whole cloves, lightly bruised.
—2 cups heavy cream.
—2 cups whole milk.
—4 ounces extra-virgin olive oil.

Whisk the yolks and sugar together in a large bowl.

Combine the bruised cloves, cream, and milk in a heavy saucepan and, over a medium flame, approach the boil. Strain the mixture. Then, whisking constantly, drizzle the hot cream mixture into the yolk mixture. Return the combined mixtures to the saucepan and, over a low flame, stir the mass with a wooden spoon until the custard thickens enough to coat the back of a metal spoon, about 8 minutes. Transfer the custard to a clean bowl and allow to cool for several hours. Stir the custard and then whisk in the olive oil, incorporating it thoroughly. Either freeze the custard in a gelato maker according to the manufacturer's directions or pour the custard into ice-cube trays and place them in the freezer. At 15-minute intervals, remove the trays and stir the mass thoroughly before returning the trays to the freezer. The freezing and stirring process permits a slow and thorough chilling of the mass and helps to avoid the formation of ice crystals and uneven freezing. After three or four 15-minute intervals, the custard will be lightly set. If you prefer a firmer texture, repeat the process once or twice again.

Caramelized Blood Oranges.

—8 10 seedless oranges or 10 12 blood oranges.
—4 tablespoons sweet butter.
—½ cup sugar.

With a small, sharp knife, peel the oranges, relieving them of both their colored peel and white pith. Horizontally, cut the oranges in thirds or fourths, depending upon their size. Since the fruit will be enduring the perils of hot caramel, it must be cut into sturdy pieces so as not to break apart.

In a heavy sauté pan, large enough to accommodate the oranges, melt the butter over a low flame. Add the sugar and stir constantly with a metal spoon until the sugar turns a very dark brown. Carefully add the oranges to the caramel, turning them about to coat them in the sauce. Be patient if the coolness of the fruit causes the caramel to seize, since it will melt again once the oranges are heated through. Just keep tossing things about. Transfer the caramelized orange slices to a nonstick or lightly buttered baking sheet and cover lightly with plastic wrap. Set aside in a cool place but not in the refrigerator. The oranges can be completed to this stage up to 24 hours before serving.

Preheat the oven broiler. Ten minutes before serving, place the baking sheet with the caramelized oranges four inches below the broiling unit and grill the fruit until the edges begin to take on color and the caramel begins to melt. No need to turn them. Have at the ready warmed, shallow soup plates. Spoon some of the oranges and their sauce into the warmed plates, top immediately with the gelato, and serve with large soup spoons. The idea is to get the dishes to the table and to convince your guests to begin eating while the oranges are still very, very warm and the gelato is still very, very cold. A sensation worth pursuing. The only thing to sip here is an iced Moscato.

Warm Sambuca Fritters

Sambuca berries grow wild along nearly every country road in our part of Umbria. Small, shiny blackish berries in fanshaped clusters atop tall, sturdy stalks, they are called elderberries in English. The clusters of berries -still clinging to their thin, threadlike stems -are removed from the stalks, rinsed, and dried, then dragged through a beer batter, fried in olive or peanut oil, and rolled about in baker's sugar. Served pan-to-hand-to-mouth, these, like warm evanescent kisses, signify the feast's end. In some Umbrian homes, additional to the fritters served at table, one is gifted a paper sack of them to eat on the way home. Or in bed.

Lacking access to wild elderberries, wild or cultivated blueberries can be used with success, as can blackberries, raspberries, or red currants -all of these, of course, wanting sugaring "to taste." Halves of ripe black plums or apricots first soaked in Cointreau are also good.

First prepare the batter. Precise proportions are nearly impossible to recommend since, depending upon the fruit to be used, you will require more or less of the batter. The dose here is generous and, if not entirely needed, make thin, post-feast pancakes the next day and serve them with butter and a squeeze of lemon.

—1 cup all-purpose flour.
—1 cup very fine stone-ground white or yellow cornmeal.
—2 good pinches of sea salt.
—¼ cup sugar.
—beer.

Combine all the dry ingredients in a mixing bowl and slowly whisk in the beer until the batter achieves the consistency of heavy cream. Cover the batter lightly and let it stand for at least an hour. Whisk again. The batter will have thickened slightly to the consistency of a loose custard as the flour and cornmeal swell.

Use a large skillet, about 3 inches deep, filled two-thirds full with peanut oil or extra-virgin olive oil. Even here in the land of extra-virgin, some consider it an extravagance to use it in frying. These find peanut oil an acceptable substitute. Over a medium flame to avoid cool spots, heat the oil to 365 370°F or -avoiding the fussiness of a thermometer -once the oil begins to sway, test the temperature by dropping a half teaspoon of the batter into it. If the batter colors deeply and bobs about within a few seconds, the oil is ready.

Stir the batter. If using other than sambuca berries, add the fruit directly to the batter and stir. With a tablespoon, remove some of the batter and fruit and drop it into the hot oil. Repeat until the pan is full but the fritters are not at all crowded. If using sambuca berries, drag a cluster through the batter and place it into the hot oil. When the fritters take on a dark golden color and float to the surface, turn them gently with a skimmer. As each fritter becomes thoroughly golden and crisp, remove it with the skimmer to paper towels to drain. A sugaring assistant is helpful at this point, one willing to roll the hot things about very lightly in baker's sugar and pile them onto a serving plate. Guests should be lined up at the stove. There's nothing more deflating after all this battering and frying and skimming and sugaring if everyone else is engrossed at table, missing out on the spectacle.