

A Traditional Southern Italian *Ragù*

Slow-braised beef yields a rich sauce for a pasta first course, while the meat itself follows as a succulent main dish

BY PAUL BERTOLLI





MENU

Antipasto

Baked Marinated Eggplant

Primo

Pasta & Ragù Sauce

Secondo

Braised Beef

Long-Cooked Green Beans
with Oregano

Dolce

Drunken Figs with Anise

Stay true to ragù's southern Italian origin and pair it with a semolina-based pasta like this rigatoni, which has more bite and substance than egg noodles.

To engage an Italian, particularly a southerner, in a discussion of *ragù* is to elicit much more than a casual conversation about cooking. For *ragù* is not merely a pasta sauce, it's a symbol that evokes the perfume of Naples, the Sunday family table, and a collective nostalgia for what is good, generous, and comforting.

Many dishes go by the name *ragù*, and their ingredients and the way they are made vary from region to region in Italy. In its pure form, *ragù* is a braised meat sauce. There are two principal types: the first uses ground or hand-chopped meat and is found particularly in the north of Italy. *Ragù Bolognese* is the best-known example.

In southern Italy, the tradition is to make a full meal of *ragù* and to enjoy it in two courses. First comes pasta served with a sauce rendered from the slow braising of beef. Then comes the main dish—the meat, which has become fragrant from its exchange with the sauce and tender over the course of its slow simmering.

For a *ragù*
with the
truest,
most direct
flavor,
deglaze
the pot
with water.

LONG, SLOW COOKING MAKES MEAT TENDER AND SAUCE SAVORY

Ragù results from a languid cooking process, during which the flavors of the meat and of aromatic vegetables are gently extracted and concentrated. Characteristic of all great braises, the various components meld into one harmonious surge of flavor.

You can use just about any kind of meat—beef, veal, lamb, goat, or pork—to make a *ragù*. Whatever meat you choose, select a cut from one of the working muscles; they tend to have more flavor and become more succulent after braising. I like to use beef shoulder meat, which is often labeled as chuck.

To make *ragù*, you'll need a heavy-based casserole or a saucepot with a wide surface area and sides that are at least four or five inches high. The pot should be large enough to contain the meat comfortably. Never use a nonstick pot, as its surface discourages a glaze from forming. You'll also need a food mill to purée the braising liquid for the pasta sauce.

FOUR STEPS TO A SOUTHERN ITALIAN RAGU

Begin by browning the meat and the aromatic vegetables; then deglaze the pan and reduce the liquid several times. Next, set the meat to braise. Finally, when the meat is fully cooked, pass the braising liquid through the food mill to make the pasta sauce.

Browning furnishes a savory basis for the *ragù*.

Brown the meat slowly over low heat to encourage a



Tender braised beef follows the pasta in a crescendo of flavor. The meat flavors subtly present in the sauce are fully expressed in the second course.

leisurely build-up of caramelized juices on the bottom of the pot. When the meat is well browned, remove it, add the aromatic vegetables, and let them soften and brown. (If cooked together, the vegetables would burn in the time it takes to brown the meat.)

Repeated deglazing and reducing produce a richly flavored *ragù*. As the meat and vegetables cook, a glaze forms on the bottom of the pot. The next step is to loosen this glaze and incorporate it and all its inherent flavors into the *ragù*.

Water, broth, and wine are the traditional deglazing liquids. For a *ragù* with the truest, most direct flavor, I like to use water. Sometimes I use beef broth to fortify the meaty flavor of the *ragù*. Wine contributes depth and acidity, but I rarely use it. I find there's sufficient body and acidity in meat-and-tomato-based sauces.

Whatever type of liquid you use, add only a small amount at a time. Deglaze the pan, reduce the liquid, and repeat, again using only a small portion of the liquid. Adding all the liquid at once makes a *ragù* that lacks complexity and depth.

Continue to deglaze and reduce until all the liquid has been added. This repeated deglazing and



reducing is what gives *ragù* an intense underpinning of flavor.

When the reductions are complete, stir in the tomatoes. (Reducing the tomatoes would make the *ragù* overly acidic.) Bring it all to a simmer and let the *ragù* bubble pensively for several hours until the meat is quite tender. When the meat is done, set it aside and pass the cooking liquid through the food mill to make the sauce for the pasta.

ROUNDING OUT THE MENU

In Italy, *ragù* is often preceded with an *antipasto* to awaken appetites. Generally speaking, slightly salty, vinegary foods do this job best. For this menu, I've chosen a simple marinated eggplant enlivened with fresh mint. In keeping with the southern Italian tradition, you may wish to serve marinated artichokes or sweet peppers, a shellfish salad, or simply steamed mussels seasoned with olive oil, garlic, or parsley. A bowl of olives would be welcome, too.

When choosing a vegetable to serve with the meat, look around your market for what is freshest and in season and prepare it accordingly. Quickly cooked vegetables, whether lightly sautéed or steamed, provide a pleasing contrast to the long-cooked meat. Slowly braised vegetables, such as fennel, cabbage, or the green beans in this menu, work equally well because of their likeness to the texture of the meat.

A robust meal needs a light dessert. A filling meal like this one is best ended with a refreshing

dessert that isn't overwhelming. I like these dried figs stuffed with walnuts and poached in a brandy syrup with a hint of licorice flavor from the addition of anise and Pernod. Serve them simply as they are in a small bowl with an uncomplicated cookie or with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Baked Marinated Eggplant

If you can't find Italian eggplant, the Japanese variety is a good alternative. Like the Italian, it has a dense flesh with fewer seeds and less water than the globe variety. *Serves six to eight as part of an antipasto.*

- 1½ lb. Italian eggplant*
- ¼ cup olive oil*
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste*
- 2 Tbs. finely diced red onion*
- 2 Tbs. red-wine vinegar*
- 4 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil*
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh mint*

Heat the oven to 375°F. Cut away the eggplant stem, and cut the eggplant lengthwise into ¼-inch slices. Brush the slices on both sides with olive oil and sprinkle them with salt and pepper.

Pour enough water into two sheet pans to just cover the bottoms. Arrange the eggplant slices side by side on each pan. Cover with foil and bake for 25 min. Remove the foil and bake until the eggplant has dried somewhat, 15 to 20 min. Take care during the second stage of the cooking to remove the eggplant before it sticks to the pan.

Transfer the cooked eggplant to a large serving platter. In a small bowl, combine the red onion and vinegar. Add a pinch of salt and pepper. Stir to dissolve the salt. Stir in the extra-virgin olive oil and mint. While the



Tangy, marinated eggplant is a powerful summons to appetite and a good way to begin a rich, filling meal.



Figs poached in brandy are a simple ending to a satisfying meal. The warm spiced syrup is a delicious contrast to vanilla ice cream.

eggplant is still warm, spoon a little of the vinaigrette over each slice. Let stand for 30 min. Serve the eggplant at room temperature as part of an antipasto.

Ragù in Two Courses

This recipe yields enough pasta sauce for at least two meals (12 to 16 portions) and meat enough for one meal. The excess sauce will keep for about a week in the refrigerator or for a couple of months in the freezer. Serves six to eight, with sauce left over.

- 8 cups hot water
- ½ oz. dried porcini mushrooms
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 5 lb. blade-in beef chuck, cut 2½ inches thick
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 4 oz. pancetta, sliced thick
- 4 oz. pork skin, blanched in boiling water for 7 min. (to remove some of the fat) and cooled (optional)
- 1 carrot, diced fine
- 1 large rib celery, diced fine
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced fine
- 1 cup tomato paste
- 1 Tbs. sugar
- 3 cups stewed, crushed tomatoes
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped coarse
- 1½ to 2 lb. pasta, such as rigatoni or penne rigate
- Freshly grated parmigiano-reggiano or ricotta salata

Pour 4 cups of the water over the porcini; set aside.

Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy-based casserole that's big enough to contain the meat with room for the vegetables and sauce. Sprinkle the meat with salt and pepper on both sides and put it in the pot. Adjust the heat so the meat sizzles gently. Brown the meat thoroughly on both sides, turning it over every so often as its juices rise to the surface. This will encourage the formation of the glaze on the bottom of the pan. Pay attention to the



Slow cooking coaxes the maximum flavor out of the green beans. Their color won't be as bright as quickly cooked beans, but they'll have a wonderful texture and a deep, rich flavor.

heat so that the meat and the glaze don't burn. The browning process should take about 40 min.

Add the pancetta and blanched pork skin and brown for another 10 min. Remove the meat from the pot, leaving the pancetta and pork skin behind. Set the meat next to the stove on a platter to keep it warm. Add the diced carrot, celery, and onion to the pot. Allow the vegetables to soften and brown for about 15 min. Meanwhile, pour the porcini through a fine strainer, reserving the soaking liquid. Chop the porcini coarse and add them to the pot with the vegetables.

In a large bowl, stir together the tomato paste and sugar. Add the porcini soaking liquid and use a whisk to blend. Stir in the crushed tomatoes.

When the vegetables are thoroughly browned, add the chopped garlic and stir until it releases its fragrance. Don't brown the garlic.

Repeated deglazing and reducing are the keys to an intensely flavored ragù

Brown the ingredients slowly over low heat. The point is to encourage a leisurely build-up of caramelized juices in the pan.

Deglaze with water, one cup at a time. Loosen the glaze and incorporate it and all its inherent flavor into the sauce.

Further reduction concentrates the sauce. Allow the juices to reduce entirely and the glaze to form again.

Add more water, deglaze, and reduce again. Each reduction adds another layer of flavor, giving the ragù more complexity and depth.

Raise the heat to high and immediately begin deglazing the pot. Add about 1 cup of hot water at a time and use a wooden spoon to loosen the glaze on the bottom of the pot. Allow the brown juice to reduce entirely and the glaze to form again. Add another cup of water; reduce and deglaze again. Repeat this step until you have used 4 cups of water. Add the tomato mixture, ease the meat back in, and bring the sauce to a very gentle simmer.

Braise the meat, uncovered, for 2½ to 3 hours, until it is quite tender, turning it halfway through. If the sauce thickens too much, add water. (The meat should remain submerged for most of the cooking.) Transfer the meat to an ovenproof platter, spoon a little of the sauce over it, cover tightly, and keep it in a warm oven. Remove the pork skin from the sauce and discard it.

Pass the sauce through the coarse blade of a food mill. Work vigorously to push through all the solid content of the sauce. Degrease the sauce if necessary and season it with salt and pepper.

Cook the pasta, figuring about ¼ lb. per person. When *al dente*, drain the pasta and toss it with half of the sauce and a little water over heat to coat the noodles completely. (Reserve the remaining sauce for another meal.) Serve the pasta immediately in warm bowls with freshly grated *parmigiano-reggiano* or *ricotta salata*.

When finished with the pasta course, cut the meat into chunks and pieces (slices are difficult because of the bone).

Long-Cooked Green Beans with Oregano

Long-cooked green beans are a fine accompaniment because of their likeness to the texture of the meat. Serve the beans hot or at room temperature. *Serves six to eight.*

4 Tbs. olive oil
6 cloves garlic, chopped coarse
Leaves from 8 sprigs of fresh oregano
1¾ lb. mature string beans
2 tsp. kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
Juice from 1 lemon
½ cup water

Warm the olive oil in a heavy-based pot over medium heat. Add the garlic and oregano and soften gently for about 2 min. Put the beans in the pot, add the salt, and grind a little black pepper over all. Add the lemon juice and water and bring to a boil. Immediately reduce to a simmer, cover the pot, and cook the beans for 20 min. Remove the cover and cook the beans until nearly all the liquid in the pot has evaporated, 30 to 35 min. During this time, turn the beans over upon themselves with tongs to mix them and coat them with the reducing juices. Allow to cool briefly and serve.

Drunken Figs with Anise

The figs and their warm syrup taste wonderful paired with vanilla ice cream. *Serves six to eight.*

1 lb. dried Black Mission figs
2 oz. shelled walnut halves, cut or broken into two pieces
1½ cups white wine
¾ cup lemon juice
¾ cup sugar
¾ tsp. anise seed
½ cup brandy
1 Tbs. Pernod

Wash the figs with warm water and drain. Working one by one, make a slit in the belly of each fig to create a small pocket. Put a piece of walnut in the pocket and press the fig back together.

In a medium saucepan, combine the white wine, lemon juice, sugar, anise seed, and brandy. Bring the liquid to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer. Add the figs and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the figs are tender, about 40 min. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the Pernod. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Paul Bertolli, a contributing editor for Fine Cooking, is the chef/owner of Oliveto in Berkeley, California. ♦



A tiny slit in the belly of the fig makes a pocket for a piece of walnut. Pinch the seam back together before poaching the figs.



A food mill produces a sauce with the best texture. Work vigorously to press through all the solid contents of the sauce.



Wine Choices

Fruity Italian red wines pair well with tomato and strong seasonings

For this hearty Italian menu, you'll want easy-drinking wines that support the flavors in each dish rather than dominate them.

Fruity Italian reds are great wines for tomato, and for any hot pepper you might decide to add.

These wines love garlic, onions, and herbs—even assertive herbs like oregano and mint. Heading straight to the south, try Corvo red from Sicily; Lacryma Christi or Taurasi by Mastroberardino from the Campania; or a Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.

Medium-weight reds from farther north would also be fine companions for this menu, such as Chianti by Antinori or Ruffino, or Barbaresco by Ceretto. —*Rosina Tinari Wilson, a food and wine writer and teacher, is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking.*