

From LIDIA'S ITALY by Lidia Bastianich

## **Ziti with Tomatoes, Eggplant, and Salted Ricotta**

PASTA ALLA NORMA

Sicilians are passionate about both food and opera, so it is no surprise that one of the island's most celebrated dishes is *pasta alla Norma*. What better way to honor the composer Vincenzo Bellini, a native son of Catania (on Sicily's eastern coast), than to name a delicious pasta for *Norma*, one of the great operatic masterworks of all time?

I love both the opera and the dish, and, I can assure you, aside from their name, they're quite different. Those of you familiar with opera know that the title role of *Norma* is so difficult that only the greatest sopranos ever sing it. On the other hand, this recipe is simple and easily made.

2 or 3 small firm eggplants (1 pound total)  
1 ½ tablespoons coarse sea salt or kosher salt, or to taste  
1 cup vegetable oil  
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for a final flourish  
4 garlic cloves, crushed and peeled  
¼ teaspoon peperoncino flakes  
4 cups (or a 35-ounce can) canned Italian plum tomatoes, preferably San Marzano, crushed by hand  
1 pound ziti  
6 large fresh basil leaves  
2 cups ricotta salata, freshly shredded on a hand grater

### **Equipment**

A heavy-bottomed skillet or sauté pan, 12 inches or wider, for frying the eggplant and then cooking the sauce and pasta

A large pot, 8-quart capacity, with a cover, for cooking the pasta

### **Serves 6**

Trim the eggplants, and slice them (skin on) into 1±-inch chunks. Toss them with 1 teaspoon of salt, and drain in a colander for 30 minutes to an hour. Rinse, and pat them dry with paper towels.

To fry the eggplant, pour the cup of vegetable oil in the skillet, and set over medium heat. Spread all the eggplant chunks in the hot oil, and leave them in place for a few minutes to start browning. Fry for about 10 minutes, tossing and stirring occasionally, until the eggplant is soft

and cooked through and nicely browned on all sides.

Lift the chunks out of the oil with a slotted spoon, and spread them on a platter lined with paper towels. Put the eggplant in a warm spot (such as a briefly heated oven) while you make the sauce and pasta. Discard the frying oil, and wipe out the skillet.

Pour 6 quarts of water, with 1 tablespoon salt, into the big pot, and bring to a boil.

Pour the olive oil into the skillet, toss in the garlic cloves, and set over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the peperoncino in, and cook until the garlic is lightly colored, then pour in the crushed tomatoes. Slop a cup of water in the tomato container to rinse it clean, and stir that in along with another  $\pm$  teaspoon salt. Bring the tomatoes to a boil, then lower the heat and cook the sauce at a bubbling simmer for 12 minutes or so, until slightly thickened.

Meanwhile, when the pasta water comes to a rolling boil, stir in the ziti. Cook until almost *al dente*, then lift them out with a spider, drain for a moment, and drop into the simmering tomato sauce.

Toss together for a minute or two, until the ziti are cooked and coated with sauce. Turn off the heat.

Tear the basil leaves into shreds, and scatter over the pasta along with a cup of the shredded ricotta salata. Drizzle a couple of tablespoons of olive oil all over, and toss well. Now spread the eggplant chunks on top of the pasta, and sprinkle over it the remaining ricotta salata.

Serve immediately, spooning both pasta and a portion of eggplant chunks into individual warm pasta bowls.