



# Piedmont's Stews

Micol Negrin

Photos by Ric Deliantoni



*In Northern California just as in Asti, winter is the season for rich, robust, comforting meat braises—and Gianni Fassio cooks them all at Palio d’Asti in the Golden Gate City.*

**M**AYBE WINTER is my favorite season because I lived in Isola d’Asti. I’m addicted to the chill, the fireplace blazing, the truffles, the big, rich stews,” says Gianni Fassio. I’m spending the day with Gianni and Bruno Soleri, a friend of Gianni’s, at Palio d’Asti, watching them prepare Piedmontese stews. A little odd, in a way, considering it’s hardly winter: it’s September in San Francisco; it’s anything but chilly, yet the combination of Gianni’s baritone and the smells emanating from the cookpots are making me believe it’s winter in Piedmont, and I’ve just come in from a walk in the woods.

“I think no dish represents the Piedmontese table better than our *Gran Bollito Misto*. Most northern regions of Italy do a *Bollito Misto*, but nowhere is it more regal than in Piedmont. The dish itself is based on two numbers: three and seven. Traditionally there are seven different cuts of veal plus seven ornamental meats: oxtail, beef tongue, calf’s head, calf’s foot, *cotechino* sausage, *polpettone*\*, and boiling hen. There are either three or seven sauces to accompany the meats, and the platter of meats is brought to the table so that everyone can select the cuts they want,” Gianni explains as he and Bruno check on the progress of their *Bollito Misto*.

Previous page: Gianni Fassio slicing meats for his *Bollito Misto* in the kitchen of his San Francisco restaurant, Palio d’Asti. This page: Gianni mingles with customers in front of colorful paintings depicting Asti’s traditional Palio, a horse race held in this small Piedmontese city every year.



## BOLLITO MISTO

A simplified version of Gran Bollito Misto. The cooking time of the different meats varies, therefore they are each added in a specific order so that at the end of the 2 hours they are all done to perfection. Serve with a young Barbera d'Asti.

3 onions, studded with 3 cloves each  
 5 celery stalks, cut into 1/2" pieces  
 5 carrots, cut into 1/2" pieces  
 3 bay leaves  
 10 grains allspice  
 3 pounds veal shoulder  
 3 pounds beef short ribs  
 1 beef tongue  
 1 boiling hen  
 1 cotechino (pork sausage), if available, punctured with a fork  
 Honey-Mustard Sauce (recipe follows)  
 Salsa Verde (recipe follows)  
 Salsa Rossa (recipe follows)

Place 2 onions, 4 celery stalks, and 4 carrots in a pot large enough to hold all the meat. Add 2 cups of water; bring to a boil. Stir in 2 bay leaves, the allspice, veal, short ribs, and tongue. After 1 hour remove the tongue from the pot; peel off the tough outer skin and return to the pot; cook for 1 more hour.

In another pot, add the remaining onion, celery, and carrot to a pot large enough to hold the hen. Add 2 cups of water; bring to a boil. Add the remaining bay leaf and the hen; cook 30 minutes, then add the cotechino to the pot. Cook for 30 more minutes.

Place the meats on a platter with the vegetables, cut into serving pieces, and serve with the three sauces. SERVES 12

## HONEY-MUSTARD SAUCE

1 tablespoon powdered mustard  
 10 walnuts, shelled and chopped  
 1 cup honey

Mix the mustard with enough hot water to create a creamy paste in a small bowl; stir in the walnuts and honey, and refrigerate the sauce until needed.

## SALSA VERDE

Salsa verde is a classic sauce made all over Italy. It accompanies the meats in Bollito Misto perfectly, lending them a fresh flavor.

3 slices white bread, crusts removed  
 1/3 cup white wine vinegar  
 1 bunch Italian parsley, leaves only  
 4 garlic cloves  
 3 salted anchovies, boned and rinsed  
 10 salted capers, rinsed  
 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
 salt

Moisten the bread with the vinegar. Finely chop the parsley, garlic, anchovies, and capers; turn into a small bowl and add the bread. Beat in the olive oil and salt. Refrigerate until needed.

## SALSA ROSSA

Red peppers give this sauce a pretty red color.

3 slices white bread, crusts removed  
 1/4 cup red wine vinegar  
 3 red peppers, finely chopped  
 1 small onion, finely chopped  
 3 celery stalks, finely chopped  
 1 carrot, finely chopped  
 2 garlic cloves, minced  
 1 dry chili pepper, crumbled  
 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
 1/2 cup tomato sauce  
 3 salted anchovies, boned, rinsed, and finely chopped  
 8 salted capers, rinsed and finely chopped  
 1 hard-boiled egg yolk, finely chopped  
 2 sage leaves, finely chopped  
 1 thyme sprig, leaves only, finely chopped  
 1 tablespoon Italian parsley, finely chopped  
 salt and pepper

Moisten the bread with the vinegar. Cook the red peppers, onion, celery, carrot, garlic, and chili pepper in the olive oil for 10 minutes. Add the tomato sauce; cook 5 more minutes. Cool.

Fold in the anchovies, capers, egg yolk, sage, thyme, parsley, salt, and pepper, and refrigerate until needed.



*There are eight simple steps to cooking a delectable Venison Stew with Blueberry Compote.*



I look inside the pot. The slow, gentle cooking—one of the hallmarks of Piedmontese cuisine—has drawn out all the flavors from the meat. Saying the meat is fork-tender is downplaying it: in fact, it's spoon-tender, so buttery and soft that a nudge with a spoon is all it takes to cut it. Gianni declares the Bollito done, and sets it out on a handsome platter, ready to be savored.

BEST KNOWN for its fragrant white truffles and Barolo, Piedmont, a region that touches southeastern France, is not a place where cooks shy away from intense sensations. Fog enshrouds its tiny towns and gorgeous valleys more often than not, lifting like a delicate veil around midday to reveal sprawling meadows, pointed church spires, a herd of cows grazing in the fields or stopping traffic along winding roads. Winters can be bone-cold, and as Gianni will tell you, there's nothing better to beat off the chill than a glass of red wine and a healthy serving of meat braised with aromatic ingredients.

"Piedmont is where you go if you want to be comforted. That's what these stews are: the ultimate comfort food," says Bruno.

At Palio d'Asti—one of San Francisco's finest Italian restaurants and Gianni's labor of love, opened in 1990 in the city's Financial District—patrons in need of comfort food can feast on rabbit in a velvety egg-lemon sauce, beef shoulder braised in robust Barolo, venison stewed with juniper berries served with blueberry compote.

"The wonderful thing about the cooking of Piedmont is that it tastes like your grandmother was at the stove. It's a cuisine that blends French influence from the House of Savoy and peasant roots in the countryside, and the result is magical," enthuses Gianni, who has been introducing authentic Italian flavors to San Francisco since he owned the city's famous Blue Fox and was the first to import fresh white truffles from Piedmont.

As we eat and talk, my eyes are drawn to the colorful mural behind me. It depicts the medieval pageantry of the Palio d'Asti, a bareback horse race run in Asti every September—less famous by far than its counterpart in Siena, Gianni assures me that I must see it this year when I'm in Italy.

The wine flows, the conversation does too, and we return to the kitchen, where

Previous page: The makings of one of Gianni's favorite dishes, Venison Stew with Blueberry Compote; odd as the combination may sound, it's actually a classic in Piedmont. This page: The finished dish—juniper berries add a haunting aroma to the delicate blueberry compote that is served along with the braised venison.

## TURKEY BREAST JEWISH-STYLE

*A specialty of Jews from Moncalvo, north of Asti. Serve with a Dolcetto d'Alba.*

### For the vegetables:

1 small onion, chopped  
1 carrot, chopped  
2 celery stalks, chopped  
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
2 eggplants, cut into 1/4" cubes  
1 red pepper, cut into 1/4" cubes  
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
1 tablespoon tomato paste  
1/4 cup red wine vinegar  
1 tablespoon sugar  
salt

### For the turkey:

3 turkey breasts, approximately 2 pounds, skinned  
salt and pepper  
2 onions, chopped  
10 sage leaves, chopped  
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
1 cup dry white wine  
2 cups chicken broth

Make the vegetables: Sauté the onion, carrot, celery, 1 clove of garlic, half of the eggplants, and half of the pepper in 3 tablespoons of the olive oil. After 10 minutes, add the tomato paste and vinegar; stir and cook until the liquid evaporates. Cool in a bowl; blend with the sugar and 2 tablespoons of the olive oil in a food processor until smooth.

In the same pan, sauté the remaining eggplants, pepper, and garlic in the remaining olive oil for 10 minutes over high heat. Add salt; fold into the purée.

Make the turkey: Season the turkey with salt and pepper; cook in a pan with the onions, sage, and olive oil, turning once, until it is done, about 30 minutes. Remove to a plate; pour out any fat from the pan. Add the wine and cook until it almost evaporates. Add the broth; return the turkey to the pan. Bring to a boil; simmer 15 minutes.

To serve, thinly slice the turkey. Arrange it on 6 plates. Spoon on 1 tablespoon of the sauce, then the vegetables, and serve. SERVES 6



## GARLIC PORK LOIN

Heat  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of extra-virgin olive oil, 1 rosemary sprig, and 4 sage leaves in a heavy pot. Season  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pounds of pork loin with salt and pepper; sear on all sides; remove from the pot, pour off the fat, and discard the rosemary and sage. Add 2 minced garlic cloves; raise the heat. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup dry white wine; reduce until there is only 1 tablespoon left. Add 2 cups milk and heat; return the pork to the pot. Simmer, covered, 45 minutes. Strain the sauce; reduce to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup; adjust the salt. Slice the pork; serve with the sauce and a glass of Barbaresco. SERVES 4



Gianni's Garlic Pork Loin (top) is perfect for winter; the sharpness of the garlic is tamed by long cooking over gentle heat. Gianni Fassio (above) examining a glass of Barbera with General Manager T.J. Jacobberger.

Gianni and Bruno show me their rosemary-infused milk-braised pork and their stewed turkey breasts. Together we peel garlic, we dice carrots, we sauté and we stir and we taste. This, I realize, is what Piedmont's stews are all about: people getting together around the fire, connecting with one another, celebrating the seasons, creating something that's meant to be shared.

## VENISON STEW WITH BLUEBERRY COMPOTE

*Serve this stew with a bottle of Barolo.*

For the stew:

- 2 pounds boneless venison shoulder, cubed
- 2 onions, cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " pieces
- 3 carrots, cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " pieces
- 2 celery stalks, cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " pieces
- 2 teaspoons black peppercorns
- 2 tablespoons juniper berries
- 1 tablespoon cloves
- 5 bay leaves
- 5 garlic cloves, chopped
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 3 cups red wine
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup flour
- 1 cup heavy cream or milk

For the blueberry compote:

- 3 shallots, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons juniper berries
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup gin
- 2 pounds blueberries
- salt and pepper
- sugar (optional)

Make the stew: Combine all the ingredients except half of the wine, all of the olive oil, all of the flour, and all of the cream in a bowl. Refrigerate 1 day, turning the meat every 8 hours. Strain the marinade and reserve. Heat the olive oil; add the vegetables and venison, then the flour; cook until browned. Add the marinade; boil 5 minutes. Add the remaining wine. Simmer, covered, stirring often; add cream if the sauce dries out. Cook 45 minutes, or until tender; raise the heat. Reduce the sauce until thick.

Meanwhile, make the blueberry compote: Combine the shallots, juniper berries, butter, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of water in a pan. Cook until the water evaporates and the shallots start to brown. Add the gin (if the heat is too high it will catch fire); boil for 2 minutes. Add the blueberries; simmer until they soften. Add salt and pepper, and sugar if needed, and serve with the venison. SERVES 6 