

[Brandywine Table]

Like Mamie Used to Make

A FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS SHARES THE STORY BEHIND THEIR AUTHENTIC ITALIAN COMFORT FOOD.

Alyssa Thayer

IN ITALIAN FAMILIES, FOOD IS LOVE AND LOVE IS family. And while pizza and pasta have become ubiquitous in this country, most of these foods pale in comparison to the real thing. Authentic Italian food is a symphony of fresh ingredients and practiced preparations. Taste, sight, feel and intuition serve as the instruments, all finely tuned by a long line of masterful matriarchs.

In the case of the Vaccaro family, owners and operators of **Aunt Mamie's Italian Specialties** in West Chester, the woman behind the recipes and passion for cooking was Philomena Vaccaro, affectionately called "Mamie."

Philomena's family emigrated from Southern Italy to Pennsylvania when she was a child, but Italian food remained the central theme of their lives. After settling in, her family opened an Italian eatery called Vaccaro's and would gather family, friends and neighbors each weekend for Sunday Dinner (really lunchtime).

"We always had a house full of people growing up, and it was always centered around the table, the food and eating," remembers Philomena's granddaughter, Denise Schatz. Denise's father Mike Vaccaro spent a career in the Marines, but even as his family moved around, the thing that always helped build community and bring people together was their food. "Gatherings always included lasagna, meatballs or something that was an authentic meal from our Italian heritage," Denise remembers.



Theresa Vaccaro, Denise's mother, selling at the Farmers Market



Mike and Theresa Vaccaro, with the West Chester mayor at the opening of their location at 835 Lincoln Ave.

After his retirement, Mike and his wife Theresa decided to open a small food business and name it after Mamie. Their original menu was simple — fresh pasta, gnocchi and marinara sauce — and they sold it all at local farmers markets. One of their favorite parts of selling at markets is interacting directly with customers. "Last week, a woman told me she bought ricotta gnocchi from us and mushrooms from another vendor and made something delicious. Those are the stories I love," Denise says.

While Aunt Mamie's continues to cater to their loyal foodie following, they've also expanded their line of prepared meals to accommodate those who are too busy or unable to cook from scratch.

All the culinary know-how at Aunt Mamie's is "homegrown" and descends directly from Mamie, who spent hours in the kitchen teaching her daughter-in-law Theresa the recipes. And while the team has grown over time, they all have one thing in common: "Everyone who works here grew up in an Italian household, with the root of their families being native to Italy," Denise says.

Nothing makes the Vaccaro family happier than being able to share those original recipes that have been cherished for so many years. It's their way of welcoming us to the *famiglia*!

You can find Aunt Mamie's fresh pasta and prepared Italian sauces and dishes at local farmers markets, or you can order directly from their website and pick them up from their kitchen in West Chester.



Philomena and Joseph Vaccaro with their family.

Recipes

While some of Aunt Mamie's recipes require special tools and tons of hands-on practice, they've graciously shared this selection of recipes to help bring a taste of Italy to our kitchens.

Italian Meat Sauce

What could be more delicious and classic than a good red meat sauce? Pair it with thicker and shorter pasta that can hold up to the sauce, or enjoy over ravioli or gnocchi.

Serves 8

- 1/4 C. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 lb. ground beef (at least 85% lean, the leaner the better)
- 2 tsp. garlic powder
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. pepper
- 4 T. tomato paste
- 28 oz. ground (or crushed), peeled tomatoes
- 28 oz. tomato puree
- 2 T. fresh basil, chopped
- 2 tsp. sugar



In a large stock pot, heat oil until shimmering. Add onions and sauté until translucent (about 5 minutes). Add garlic and cook just until it releases its fragrance.

Add beef and cook until browned. If there's a lot of fat in the pot, drain the fat. If it's just a little fat, don't bother trying to drain it. Sprinkle garlic powder, salt and pepper onto the meat and stir.

Stir in tomato paste and cook until the bright red color disappears. Meat should be a dark brown/burgundy color.

Add tomatoes, tomato puree, basil and sugar.

Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat to a simmer, stirring occasionally, until the meat sauce is thickened. This can take about an hour.

Taste the sauce and add more salt and pepper as desired.

This sauce pairs well with pappardelle, spaghetti or rigatoni pasta. It also goes well with potato or ricotta gnocchi and cheese ravioli.

Pasta Primer

There's much more to good pasta than just boiling water. Up your noodle game with a few of these famiglia-approved tips.

Fresh Take – Fresh pasta is different in many ways from its dry counterpart. For one, it's more delicate and needs far less cooking time (only a few minutes should do the trick). It also tends to have simpler ingredients. For Aunt Mamie's pasta, it's only semolina flour and water. That's it!

Market Made – Because fresh pasta has a shorter shelf life than dry, Aunt Mamie's makes it day of or the afternoon before — now that's fresh! Have more than you can use? Denise recommends freezing the pasta as the best way to save it.

Dried Dish – While the delicate texture of fresh pasta can't be beaten, there are certain recipes when dry pasta is the way to go — like using pasta in soups that you plan to store and reheat.

Great Shape – Not only is there a decision between dry and fresh pasta, there's also a choice of shape. Denise says short pasta with more nooks and crannies (think fusilli and penne) is great for standing up to heartier dishes with meats and veggies, while delicate linguinis and angel hair do better with lighter sauce recipes.

Deciphering Done-ness – Aunt Mamie's team tirelessly tested their pasta to give you accurate cook times, but if you are working with a product without instructions, Denise says the best is simply to try it. Carefully pull a piece out, let it cool, taste it and decide. "You want it slightly chewy but not falling apart," she says.

Salt Like the Sea – Many chefs and home cooks will emphasize the importance of salting the pasta water. Some say to do it before it boils, others say after, but all agree it must be done. Just be careful that salinity is accounted for when using the water to build your sauce.

Star Starches – Think twice before throwing out that pasta water, for it's the stock secret of any Italian chef. The dissolved starches in the water serve as both a binding agent for the sauce and the pasta, and as a sauce thickener (as the water cooks out). Italian recipes often say to cook pasta al dente in water and finish it in the sauce.

Pasta Alla Norma

This tomato-based pasta dish is said to have Sicilian roots and was originally created to highlight summer produce. Trust us when we say this is a year-round crowd pleaser.

Serves 4

- 1/4 C. olive oil
- 2 medium size eggplants (approx 2 pounds total), peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/2-1 tsp. crushed red pepper flakes (optional, based on your spice preference)
- 1/2 tsp. dried oregano
- Nonstick cooking spray

2 C. marinara sauce, warm
1/2 C. fresh basil leaves, chopped, plus a small handful for garnish if desired
3/4 C. freshly grated Parmesan cheese
8 oz. fresh rigatoni, or pasta of your choice

Preheat oven to 400°.



In a large bowl, drizzle olive oil on eggplant cubes and stir gently to coat all pieces. Sprinkle with salt, crushed red pepper flakes and oregano.

Spray a cookie sheet with nonstick cooking spray, spread prepared

eggplant on tray and bake for 15 minutes or until browned on the exterior and soft on the inside.

Remove eggplant from tray and place in a large bowl.

In a large pot, boil 4–6 quarts of water with 1 1/2 tablespoons salt. Cook pasta according to package directions.

Drain and add pasta to bowl with eggplant. Stir in marinara sauce, freshly grated parmesan cheese and fresh basil. Garnish with additional basil if desired.

Chicken Marsala

This is a great weekend meal idea that boasts all the best savory notes of cold weather meals without being too heavy. Enjoy as part of a relaxed evening in good company.



Serves 4

1 C. flour
4 (6–8 oz. each) boneless, skinless chicken breasts
Salt and pepper
1/4 C. vegetable oil
2 1/2 oz. pancetta, cut into 1-inch long and 1/8-inch wide pieces
8 oz. white mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin
1 garlic clove, minced
1 tsp. tomato paste
1 1/2 C. sweet Marsala wine
4 1/2 tsp. lemon juice
4 T. unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces and chilled
2 T. fresh parsley, chopped
1 lb. fresh spaghetti or fettuccine

Preheat oven to 200°.

In a 6-quart pot, bring 4 quarts of water and 1 1/2 tablespoons of salt to a boil.

Place flour in a shallow dish or pie plate. Slice each chicken breast in half, horizontally, then cover chicken halves with plastic wrap and pound to an even 1/4-inch thickness with meat pounder. Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Working with 1 cutlet at a time, dredge in flour mixture, shaking off excess, and transfer to large plate.

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until the oil is shimmering. Place 4 chicken cutlets in skillet and cook until golden brown on first side, about 3 minutes. Flip cutlets, reduce heat to medium and cook until no longer pink and lightly browned on second side, about 2 minutes longer. Transfer to large oven-safe plate.

Wipe out skillet. Repeat with remaining 2 tablespoons oil and remaining cutlets. Tent plate loosely with aluminum foil and transfer to oven to keep warm while making sauce.

Cook pancetta in the now-empty skillet over low heat, stirring occasionally and scraping up any browned bits, until crisp, about 5 minutes. Remove pancetta with a slotted spoon and transfer to paper towel-lined plate.

Add mushrooms to skillet, increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and lightly browned, about 8 minutes. Stir in garlic, tomato paste and crisp pancetta and cook until tomato paste begins to brown, about 1 minute. Be careful not to cook longer than a minute or the garlic may burn. Turn off the heat and stir in Marsala, scraping any browned bits.

Return to high heat, bring to a vigorous simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until sauce is thickened and measures 1 1/4 cups, about 5 minutes.

Add pasta to boiling water and cook according to package directions.

Off heat, stir in lemon juice and any accumulated chicken juices into the Marsala sauce. Whisk in butter one piece at a time. Stir in parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Pour sauce over chicken and serve immediately with pasta.

Lemon Garlic Pasta

This simple yet scrumptious dish is a good one to add to your dinner arsenal. Using that starchy pasta water to create the perfect silky consistency takes your pasta night to a whole new level.



Serves 4

1 lb. fresh pasta
1 T. olive oil
2 T. unsalted butter
6 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 tsp. red chili flakes
Zest and juice of one lemon



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1/2 C. grated parmesan cheese
Chopped parsley for garnish, optional
Salt & pepper to taste and to salt the pasta water

Bring 6 quarts of water and 1 tablespoon of salt to a rolling boil. Cook pasta according to package directions. Reserve 1–2 cups of pasta water before draining.

Heat olive oil in a large pan over medium heat. Add butter. Once butter is melted, stir in garlic and chili flakes and cook for 1–2 minutes. Watch carefully, as garlic can quickly burn.

Toss cooked pasta into the garlic-butter mixture. If it looks too dry, start adding small amounts of reserved pasta water until desired consistency is reached.

Stir in lemon zest and juice, then add parmesan cheese and toss well to combine.

Sprinkle with chopped parsley, additional cheese and lemon zest, if desired. Serve immediately. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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