

Ziti with Fennel Tomato Sauce

A recipe from *Not the Same Old Spaghetti Sauce*, © 2012 Diane Darrow and Tom Maresca

We first met this sauce 10 years ago, during a memorable visit to the dean of Campanian winemakers, Antonio Mastroberardino. For several generations the Mastroberardino family have been making – and in some cases, saving from extinction – the traditional wines of Naples. At that time, they had recently been charged by the Italian government with the prestigious task of replanting vineyards in the ruins of Pompeii with as close as they could get to the ancient Roman grape varieties, using the ancient Roman forms of cultivation.

We were given a private tour of this fascinating task – imagine the contrast of new vine shoots within 2,000-year-old Roman brick walls – before heading inland to the hills that hold Mastro's main vineyards and winery. There we had an astounding lunch of local specialties, catered by the chef of Ristorante Il Gastronomo. We remember vividly our first encounter with buffalo-milk ricotta, a flavor impossible to describe or match. After several more excellent antipasti, this pasta appeared. Its lively fennel scent immediately focused our attention and from the first taste we were addicted. That sauce was probably made with wild fennel to attain its special pungency, and if you're lucky enough to get wild fennel by all means use it here. We've done our best with the farm-grown version to recreate the pleasure of this simple, elegant dish.

3 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, peeled and halved
1 dried hot peperoncino rosso
1 cup finely chopped fennel bulb
3 tablespoons chopped onion
3 ounces ground beef
2 cups drained, canned Italian-style plum tomatoes, pureed in a food processor or food mill
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
Salt
1 stalk fennel with leaves (optional)
1 teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed in a mortar
1 pound imported Italian ziti
Crushed red pepper (optional)

Heat the olive oil in a nonreactive pan over medium heat. Add the garlic and peperoncino and cook until the garlic is lightly browned. Press the garlic against the floor of the pan to release its juices, then discard the garlic pieces and the peperoncino. Add the chopped fennel and onion to the pan and cook for 5 minutes, or until the vegetables are soft but not browned.

Add the ground beef, breaking it up with a fork, and cook until it loses its raw pink color. Stir in the tomatoes, oregano, 2 teaspoons salt and the leafy fennel stalk (if using). Bring to a simmer, cover and cook at a gentle simmer for 30 minutes. Stir in the crushed fennel seed and continue cooking for 30 minutes.

Remove the fennel stalk. If you like, puree the sauce through a food mill (we prefer to leave it nubbly).

Bring a large pot of water and 1 tablespoon of salt to a boil. Cook the ziti until al dente and dress with the fennel sauce. Pass crushed red pepper at the table for those who like a spicier dish.

Wine Recommendation

This nubbly, genteelly flavored dish wants a mellow sort of wine, something on the soft side. We like Dolcetto with it, but there's no reason a less-than-powerhouse Merlot shouldn't work well too, or even a Cabernet franc, whether from the Loire, Friuli or California. If you want regional fidelity, try a youngish (three- to five-year old) Aglianico, or – simpler yet – a Lacrima Christi rosso.