

Sabrine d'Aubergine

Christmas at last!

Holiday recipes and stories from Italy

Guido Tommasi Editore



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St Lucy's sweet buns

These have a wonderful aroma of orange and saffron. They are lovely plain, or with jam and a nice cup of tea. But do bear in mind the “mature cheese & cold cuts” option: most intriguing, as Principessa’s friends claim...

TIME: 3½-4 HOURS

MAKES 20 ROLLS OR 2 WREATHS

300 g/10 oz bread flour

200 g/7 oz all-purpose flour

A pinch of salt

1 unwaxed orange

200 ml/6.5 fl oz fresh whipping cream

2 generous pinches saffron

80 g/just over 3 oz full fat yogurt

100 g/4 oz caster sugar

25 g/1 oz compressed fresh yeast

1 medium egg

20 g/just under 1 oz very soft butter
(plus a knob to grease the bowl)

A handful of sultanas

FOR THE FINISHING

1 egg white, beaten with 2
tablespoons water

2 tablespoons caster sugar

*New to yeast cookery?
Instructions on p.186!*

1. In a large bowl, whisk together the flours and salt and make a well in the centre. Rinse and dry the orange, then grate the zest directly into the bowl (do not mix: risk of lumps!).
2. Warm the cream, just below boiling, add the saffron and allow to cool. Then add 1 tablespoon yogurt, 1 tablespoon sugar and 2 heaped tablespoons flour taken from the respective totals, as well as the crumbled yeast. Mix to break up any lumps and leave to rise in a warm place for about 15 minutes until doubled in volume. In the meantime, break the egg and beat gently. Add the rest of the sugar to the flour.
3. Pour the yeast into the bowl with the flour, add the egg and the remaining 2 tablespoons of yogurt. Mix with a spoon until it becomes hard to stir, then use your hands: pinch a part of the dough from the edge, stretch it outwards, then fold it back into the center. Turn the bowl a few degrees, pinch another part of the dough and repeat the movement. Continue with these stretches and folds for a few minutes, until the ingredients are evenly mixed.
4. Transfer your dough onto the worktop, and knead with the “snakes & snails” technique (see p. 186), stretching and rolling the dough for 12 times (no more than 10 minutes). It shouldn’t be too sticky, but don’t add any more flour: grease your hands and worktop generously with butter and keep doing this between one twist and another (you need to incorporate all the butter).
5. Place the dough back into the clean and freshly buttered bowl, seal with cling film and leave to rise until doubled in volume (it will take about an hour and a half). In the meantime, soak the sultanas in a bowl of warm water.
6. Line a baking tray with parchment paper. Turn your dough out onto the worktop, divide it in half and place one half under the upturned bowl. Cut the other half into 10 pieces, roll into small snakelike shapes about 25 cm/9.5” long, then curl the ends in opposite directions to form a “S”. Place them on the tray separately if you wish them to lead an autonomous life, or side by side if you wish to make a wreath. Place sultanas into the centre of each coil of dough (tuck them in well or they’ll escape!).
7. Put the tray into a large, inflated, well secured plastic bag and allow to rise for 15-20 minutes. Preheat your oven to 220°C/420°F. Beat the egg white gently with 2 tablespoons of water.
8. Brush with the glaze, sprinkle over some sugar and bake for 15-20 minutes. Transfer to a cooling rack by lifting it on its parchment paper, and allow to cool before adding a bow. And don’t forget that you have another 10 buns still under the bowl, waiting to go in the oven...



Butter, sugar and almond stars

“Mala tempora currunt” (bad times are upon us) the butter would say if it could talk. It’s always number one in the list of banned ingredients by the Gastro-Penitents World League. Now, if it’s true that transgression is a corollary of pleasure (a philosophy that can extend to other fields of human existence we won’t talk about here...), it’s easy to understand why the poor butter is permanently at the top of the sinful food hit parade. Let’s say it: butter is delicious, “ontologically delicious” as a philosopher would say. That is a source of absolute pleasure for our taste buds. So, under this premise, don’t you think it would be right to make the most of Christmas by using it a little more often? Butter won’t be offended if it doesn’t hear from you much in the following months: real friendship can withstand the test of time. The recipe is a cross between Danish finiskbrød (who knows why they’re known as “Finnish” biscuits in Denmark), Scottish shortbread, and the fruit pie pastry which is all the rage in our house. All three have an unmistakable aroma. Of butter, of course...

TIME: 2 HOURS (FOR 2 BATCHES)

MAKES ABOUT 50 BISCUITS

FOR THE DOUGH

250 g/8 oz soft butter

100 g/4 oz caster sugar

1 level teaspoon salt

350 g/14 oz all-purpose flour

FOR THE FINISHING

50 g/2 oz finely chopped toasted almonds

1 egg white

2 tablespoons caster sugar

½ teaspoon salt



Hazelnuts and almonds that have been toasted at home have a much better flavour than store-bought ones. This is also true for chopped nuts: if they haven’t been stored well – it happens, sometimes – they completely lose their fragrance. So I strongly recommend that you toast your nuts and break them up with a meat pounder (an electric mixer would turn them into powder). As soon as you have the time, prepare small batches of good almonds and hazelnuts when available. Keep the chopped nuts in a glass jar.

1. Cut the butter into cubes and keep it at room temperature until it becomes soft (not completely melted, just soft to the touch).

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F and line a baking tray with parchment paper.

2. Put the butter, sugar and salt into a mixer and blend at medium speed, scraping the sides often with a rubber spatula so that the mixture stays within the blades. Continue for a few minutes: the butter should become fluffy and soft with the sugar well combined (without dissolving).

3. Add the flour, 3-4 spoonfuls at a time, using the rubber spatula when necessary. When you have finished, place the dough on the worktop, gently press it down with your hands, make a ball and then let it have a refreshing break in the fridge for 15 minutes in a bowl sealed with cling film.

4. Once out of the fridge, roll out the dough with a rolling pin on a worktop that has been lightly dusted with flour, to 5-6mm/0.2" in height (so just a little higher than a baking powder dough). Cut the biscuits into the shapes you prefer. Beware of choosing strange shapes though, it’s not such a great idea to bring out your most adventurous cutters as you’re using an extremely soft rich buttery dough...

If you like a challenge, though, then use the magic of Christmas to help you, but remember to work quickly and handle the dough as little as possible (it will remain weak, even after a little time out in fresh air...), and dip your cutter in flour before each cut.

5. Put the biscuits back in the fridge for 15 minutes, then brush them with the egg white that you have beaten with 2 spoonfuls of water just before. Sprinkle with toasted almonds followed by the sugar and salt (previously mixed). Bake for 15-20 minutes. When you bring them out of the oven they’ll still be soft, so don’t touch them if you want them to keep their shape. Wait about 10 minutes before lifting them delicately and putting them to dry on a cooling rack.

Jellied ham terrine

Don't tell the butcher that you've ordered two pork shanks for boiling. Only tell him if he is a true butcher and when there is no trace of anyone posh in the shop at the time. I'm telling you this because in Italy pork shanks are exclusively for roasting. That's all. It's such a shame. Now back to our jambon; in Gallic kitchens – such as Thierry's, where this recipe comes from – it would be part of an Easter picnic. I always joke with him that it takes a touch of grandeur to call prosciutto (ham) "shank", and he replies that there's only one "ham" and it should be called "ham" in every language; all the rest are cuts of meat, not unique recipes! With his approach things can change, such as adding a terrine of jambon-that-isn't-a-ham-despite-its-name to buffets for friends, even at Christmas. No-one has ever complained.


TIME: 3½-4 HOURS + RESTING IN THE FRIDGE

**MAKES A TERRINE OF 15 X 8 X 7 CM/
6 X 3 X 2.7"**

2 rindless pork shanks
1 beef brisket
½ bottle white wine
3 tablespoons cider (or white)
vinegar
1 large, or 2 small, onions
2 celery stalks
3 carrots
2 bay leaves
1 sprig thyme
2 sprigs parsley
10 peppercorns

FOR THE TERRINE

Gelatine cubes or powder
A large handful of parsley

 *A jelly is not a jelly unless it is transparent. A murky jelly is most unpleasant to the eye, and because the eye tastes the dish before the tongue, it won't even be worth putting on the table. The cooking juices of the flanks should be filtered carefully; get a sieve, spoon and a fine tablecloth and be patient as this step is slow and quite laborious.*

1. Put the flanks and the bone in a large pan (where they can float happily). Add the wine, vinegar, pepper and plenty of water to cover the meat by a few cm/an inch or so. Peel and rinse the vegetables, cut the onion into wedges, cut the celery and carrots into large pieces. Rinse the aromatic herbs. Throw everything into the pan with the meat.
2. Leave to boil over a medium heat for 2½ hours until the meat comes away from the bone easily (but try not to let it disintegrate). Remove and drain the shanks, put them aside. Drain the stock through a colander and when it is cool, put it in the fridge (cover it so that it doesn't absorb other aromas).
3. Now it's time to concentrate on the flanks. Remove the meat with your hands and take off the skin, as well as any remaining nerves and fat. Be as accurate as you can; try to maintain the pieces of meat as intact as possible. When you have finished, put the meat in the fridge covered with cling film.
4. After a few hours (even a day after), remove the fat from the stock, eliminating the layer that will have formed on the surface. Underneath, you'll find a soft jelly; put it over the heat, allow to melt and then filter the liquid (you'll need to arm yourself with patience; this may take a while). Put it back over the heat and reduce it by letting it simmer for 10 minutes. Measure it out in a graduated jug and add an amount of gelatine preparation equal to half the quantity indicated on the instructions (if you need a cube for every half litre of liquid, add half a cube; the bone in the stock will have done the remaining work).
5. Line a tin with a double layer of cling film. Be precise, because it would be shame if your terrine came out perfectly transparent but lumpy!
6. Break the meat up with your hands, following the direction of the fibres (the pieces don't need to be regular). Wash the parsley and chop it finely; sprinkle a thin layer over the bottom of the tin and add the rest to the meat, mixing well.
7. Pour over a stream of gelatine (just warm) on the bottom of the tin, fill it to half way with pieces of meat and pour over more gelatine. Repeat the operation until the tin is full, pressing the meat down delicately; make sure the gelatine is evenly distributed.
8. Put it in the fridge and wait a few hours for the gelatine to set before turning it out onto the serving dish. Serve with a colourful salad and slices of toasted bread.





And while wreaths – of sweet buns, profiteroles, meringues or orange stars – entwine, and spice scents merrily dance in the air, the house gets ready for the celebration that thrills old and young alike: clouds of flour rise and sugar snowflakes fall...



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