

## Graffagnino Family Lasagna

This hearty lasagna recipe has been handed down over several generations. I do not know the actual origin of the recipe – whether it originated in Sicily, where my grandfather was born, or whether it was concocted on the family cook stove in New Orleans, the family’s home in the New World. I can only attest that it has always been, and continues to be, a special occasion whenever it is prepared and served to family and honored guests.

Be prepared to spend several (blissful) hours in the kitchen. The “oohs” and “ahs” from the lucky dinner guests will amply reward your hard work.

Serves 8

### Ingredients

1½ lb. ground beef or chuck  
1 lb. sweet Italian sausage (remove from casing)  
¼ cup olive oil (note: if recipe is doubled, 1/3 cup oil will suffice)  
2 cups (at least) coarsely ground onion  
3 (medium) cloves fresh garlic  
seasoned salt  
pepper  
½ tsp. basil  
½ tsp. oregano  
¼ tsp. thyme  
2 tbsp dried parsley (or 3 tbsp chopped fresh)  
½ tsp. fennel or anise seed (required only if Italian sausage lacks this ingredient)  
½ tbsp sugar  
2 tbsp flour  
¼ cup white wine  
½ can beef broth or consommé  
28 oz can whole or pureed tomatoes  
6 oz can tomato paste  
1 lb. fresh, sliced mushrooms  
¼ lb. butter or margarine

2 medium eggplants (peeled and sliced lengthwise)  
2 cups (or so) robust (extra virgin?) olive oil in which to fry eggplant

4 oz freshly ground Parmesan and/or Romano cheese  
1 lb. grated mozzarella  
1 lb. lasagna noodles

### Stage I – The Meat Sauce

Brown ground beef and Italian sausage in large skillet or frying pan. Italian link sausage should be removed from casing and thoroughly mixed with the ground beef in the frying pan. When meat is cooked, remove excess fat from the pan, then spoon meat into large bowl and set aside.

In the same pan, leaving just a couple of tablespoons of the meat drippings, add ¼ cup olive oil, coarsely chopped onions and garlic. Cook until tender, then add spices: seasoned salt, pepper, thyme, oregano, basil, parsley, and sugar. (Note: if Italian sausage does not contain fennel or anise, add ½ tsp. of either to the mixture at this time.)

Stir in flour until mixture approaches doughy consistency, then stir in wine and broth. The mixture should now be a thick soup. Thin with more wine or tomato juice from the canned tomatoes, if necessary, then put

mixture into blender or food processor briefly. Remove after onions have been chopped, but not purified, then pour back into the pan. Purify canned tomatoes and tomato paste in the blender. Add to onion mixture in the pan and mix thoroughly.

NOTE: At this point you should have approximately 1½ quarts of a delightful tomato sauce. On another day it can be augmented with canned clams, or ground turkey, or ground pork, or ground veal for a variety of pasta dishes!

Add cooked meat to the tomato and onion sauce. This yields a very thick, meaty concoction.

Sauté mushrooms in butter or margarine, allowing it to cook down. Add mushrooms and the rendered liquid to the meat sauce. Simmer on very low heat, stirring often. Be careful not to allow sauce to scorch on the bottom of the pot.

The sauce may be prepared ahead of time and stored in refrigerator or freezer.

### **Stage II – The eggplant**

Peel and slice eggplant lengthwise (thickness should be about ¼ inch). Submerge slices in water for a few minutes, then towel dry.

Heat enough olive oil to cover bottom of skillet or fry pan, then add eggplant slices. Add additional oil as needed. (The oil is soaked up by the eggplant at an alarming rate!) Turn slices when they begin to brown slightly on the surface. Remove from heat when slightly browned and crisped on both sides. The slices will be soft (and impregnated with oil) beneath the surface. Place cooked slices on paper towels or brown paper bags to absorb excess oil.

This is a messy job, and not much fun, but is critical to the flavor and character of the final product.

### **Stage III – Final Assembly**

Cook lasagna noodles in boiling water, drain and place in cold water to keep from sticking together during assembly. Do not overcook, or the noodles will be too difficult to handle.

Layer ingredients in glass pan or serving tray as follows:

Place just enough meat sauce in bottom of the pan to moisten it and to prevent noodles from sticking to it in the oven. Then alternate layers of noodles, meat sauce, cheese (both mozzarella and freshly grated Romano and/or Parmesan), then eggplant. Continue layering until you run out of room in the baking pan(s), or until you run out of ingredients.

The noodle layer is best if the noodles are overlapped. The eggplant layer need not blanket the surface, but the slices should be placed close enough together so that each serving will benefit.

Do not leave exposed noodles on the top layer, even at the edges, as they will brown and become tough and inedible in the oven.

The assembled product, if covered securely with plastic wrap and aluminum foil, can be kept in the freezer for several weeks before baking.

It is advisable to defrost frozen recipes before baking. Bake at 350 degrees for about an hour, or until you can see it bubbling around the edges and the aroma completely fills your kitchen and your house! Slice and serve hot with good Italian bread, salad and wine. *Buon appetito!*