

CIANFOTTA (CIAMBOTTA) NAPOLETANA

VEGETABLE STEW

MORE THAN MOST DISHES in the region-wide repertoire, ranking along with pasta and beans, cianfotta highlights the old and sometimes still staunch provincialities of Campania. The fact that it is pronounced and spelled many different ways says everything. In Naples, the hub, the place where everything grown and made in the region can be had, cianfotta is most often an appropriately elaborate stew of tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, potatoes, and onions seasoned with capers, olives, and parsley. But in Capri, where peppers never used to grow, they never use peppers in this dish—an important distinction, a proud Caprese will tell you. And in the spring on Capri, they make a stew of garden peas and their famous fava beans that they call cianfotta. In Salerno, an old-style cianfotta could be just peppers, eggplant, and potato, each fried separately, then baked together in the oven with chopped garlic, salt, pepper, and lard or olive oil. In the rural parts of Salerno, a stew of wild spring greens and potatoes might be called cianfotta, too.

“The important thing is the fat,” a home cook in Salerno told me. “You should cook each vegetable separately, so that each one gets done just so.” She tilted her head, indicating that “just so” wasn’t so easy to obtain or that important anyway. “But then, if they haven’t cooked in the same fat, you have to let their fats mingle.” Another housewife, this one from Benevento, told me: “I put in every fat I find in the refrigerator—a little butter, a little lard, a little olive oil, some prosciutto fat if I have it. But I don’t tell my children about the lard. They’d kill me for using lard.”

This recipe uses a classic Neapolitan combination and technique. Only the peppers are fried separately, and to their oil are added the other vegetables, one at a time, from those that cook the longest to those that need the least time. So, for instance, if you want to add zucchini to the mixture, add it last. If you want to add green beans (stringbeans) or fresh cranberry beans, add them at the beginning. Like any vegetable stew, cianfotta can be made ahead and kept for several days in the refrigerator. But eat it at room temperature or warmed. It is usually served as an antipasto or side dish, but, with bread and a piece of cheese, you can easily make a meal of it.

Makes 9 to 10 cups, at least 8 servings as an antipasto or side dish

2 pounds eggplant, peeled and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch cubes

1 teaspoon fine salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 pounds red peppers, washed, cored, seeded, and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch squares

1 pound onions, peeled, cut in half through the root end and sliced thinly

1½ pounds potatoes, peeled and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch cubes

1 pound (2 large) tomatoes, cored and cut into roughly 1-inch pieces

1½ teaspoons salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Gaeta olives, pitted or not (or other black-purple olives,
such as Greek or Niçoise)

3 tablespoons salted capers, rinsed thoroughly, coarsely chopped if large
(or use small capers in vinegar or brine, rinsed, but not chopped)

1½ cups loosely packed basil or parsley leaves, finely cut

1. Salt the eggplant.
2. Meanwhile prepare the rest of the vegetables as specified in the ingredient list.
3. In a large casserole, preferably terra-cotta or enameled cast iron, heat the olive oil over medium heat and when hot enough to make a piece of pepper sizzle immediately, add the peppers and fry, stirring frequently, until they are just tender, about 8 minutes. With a slotted spoon or skimmer, remove the peppers, leaving the oil in the casserole.
4. Add the onions to the hot oil and sauté until onions are well wilted, 5 to 8 minutes.
5. Add the potatoes and cook them, stirring frequently, for about 5 minutes.
6. Dry and squeeze the eggplant with paper towels, then stir the eggplant cubes into the casserole. Cook with the rest of the vegetables for about 5 minutes.
7. Add the tomatoes, the salt, and the pepper, stir well, then adjust heat to lowest possible. Cover the pot and let the vegetables simmer very gently until the potatoes and eggplant are just tender, stirring frequently, from 15 to 30 minutes, mainly depending on the size of the pot.

(continued)

8. Add the reserved fried pepper and continue simmering gently, still covered, for at least another 15 minutes, still stirring frequently, until the eggplant and potatoes are totally cooked and tender.
9. Add the olives, the capers, and the basil or parsley. Stir, uncovered, for about 3 minutes, to blend the flavors.
10. Cool and serve warm or at room temperature, correcting the salt and pepper just before serving.