

Polpette di Melanzane

CRISPY EGGPLANT MEATBALLS

These meatless "meatballs" are found in both Calabria and Sicily, but Sicilians would add currants and pine nuts. In parts of Calabria, cooks tuck a cube of Caciocavallo cheese inside each ball. Some cooks omit the fine breadcrumbs on the outside, but I like the contrast of crunchy coating and creamy interior. Eggplant *polpette* make a great appetizer for a stand-up party because they are bite-size and can be eaten with your fingers. They look exactly like meatballs, and when the budget is tight, Calabrian cooks will simmer them (without the breadcrumb coating) in tomato sauce (see Variation, page 33). They serve them as a second course, following pasta tossed with the tomato sauce.

SUGGESTED WINE: Fattoria San Francesco "Ronco dei Quattroventi," Cirò Rosso Classico, Calabria

A modern-styled, medium-bodied red wine with tomato, mint, and cranberry aromas similar to those in Pinot Noir.

ALTERNATE: Pinot Noir

1 large eggplant, about 1 pound (450 grams), unpeeled

Kosher salt

1 cup (80 grams) fresh breadcrumbs (page 127), or more if needed

¼ cup (25 grams) freshly grated pecorino cheese

2 tablespoons minced flat-leaf parsley

1 garlic clove, minced

Freshly ground black pepper

1 large egg, lightly beaten

⅓ cup (50 grams) fine dry breadcrumbs (page 127)

Extra virgin olive oil for frying

CUT THE EGGPLANT into 1-inch (2½-centimeter) to 1½-inch (4-centimeter) cubes. Bring 2 quarts (2 liters) of water and 1 tablespoon salt to a boil in a 4-quart (4-liter) pot over high heat and add the eggplant. Boil uncovered until the eggplant is soft, about 10 minutes. The cubes want to float, so you will need to push them down into the water repeatedly with a wooden spoon. Drain in a colander and let

cool, then press on the eggplant with a wooden spoon to remove excess water. The eggplant should be as dry as possible. Very finely chop by hand.

In a bowl, combine the eggplant, fresh breadcrumbs, cheese, parsley, and garlic. Blend the ingredients gently with a fork, then season to taste with salt and pepper. Mix the egg in thoroughly. In a small skillet lightly coated with olive oil, fry a tablespoon of the mixture and taste for seasoning.

Working with a little of the mixture at a time, roll between your palms into small balls about 1 inch (2½ centimeters) in diameter and set them on a tray. If the mixture is too moist to roll easily, stir in a few more fresh breadcrumbs. Put the fine breadcrumbs in a small bowl, roll each ball in the crumbs to coat evenly, then set the coated balls aside on a clean tray.

Pour olive oil in a 10-inch (25-centimeter) skillet to a depth of ½ inch (12 millimeters). Don't skimp on the oil or the meatballs won't fry properly. Turn the heat to medium. When the oil begins to shimmer, put a test ball in the skillet; it should sizzle immediately. If not, let the oil heat a little longer. When the oil is ready, carefully place half the balls in the skillet. They should fit in a single layer without crowding.

Fry the balls, turning them gently with a spoon so as not to break them, until deeply browned all over, about 3 minutes total. With a slotted spoon, transfer the balls as they are done to a tray lined with paper towels. Repeat with the remaining balls. Let cool for about 10 minutes, then serve.

MAKES ABOUT THIRTY-TWO 1-INCH (2½-CENTIMETER) MEATBALLS

Variation

Make a double batch of Quick Tomato Sauce (page 53). Shape the balls but do not coat them with fine breadcrumbs. Fry them in olive oil as directed above, then simmer them, uncovered, in the sauce over medium heat for 10 minutes. Boil one pound (450 grams) of long or short pasta, such as spaghetti or penne, drain, and toss with about 1½ cups (355 milliliters) of the sauce and some freshly grated pecorino cheese.