



More amore: New Italian cookbooks

Star Tribune

There are many reasons why Italian food has been a perennial favorite --often *the* perennial favorite -- on these shores for decades.

Most *cucina Italia* is healthful, with a focus on fresh, seasonal ingredients. There also seems to be something in Italian food that touches our souls in some ineffable way, offering romance and intrigue, at times even transporting us to another place.

But the biggest factor, of course, is that it's just plain delicious and approachable, with enough staples to sate casual diners and a depth of regional dishes to forever intrigue the peripatetic foodie. That's why the best of this year's Italian cookbooks seem fresh and new even if the base ingredients and approaches are familiar.

"Café Firenze" (\$29.99, Brio Press, 248 pages), for example, finds Young Turks, er, Tuscans Fabio Viviani and Jacopo Falleni offering up detailed instructions for scores of innovative dishes and cocktails (Falleni is a mixologist). Accompanying the recipes and reveries is a raft of photographs of dishes,

step-by-step prep and life scenes.

Speaking of fab photos, "Cooking From Above: Italian" (\$24.99, Octopus Books, 176 pages) puts Pierre Javelle's stupendous camera work front and center. He shoots it all -- the final dishes, the ingredients involved, the stages of cooking -- just as the title indicates, from directly above the plate or pan. Laura Zavan's recipes, while given secondary display, are lovely gems.

On a more basic level, what home cook is not forever on the lookout for weeknight recipes, tasty concoctions that can be easily wedged into a hectic lifestyle? The simple preparations in "Quick From Scratch Italian Cookbook" (\$24.95, Food & Wine Books, 192 pages) are a godsend for such folks. Bonus points for the variations that come with most recipes, along with extra instructions such as "seeding zucchini" and "slicing fennel by hand."

Meanwhile, two TV icons produced some of their best work this year. Lidia Bastianich's "Lidia Cooks From the Heart of Italy" (\$35, Knopf, 411 pages) finds the matriarchal PBS host journeying to lesser-known regions such as Basilicata and Le Marche in search of distinctive local recipes. One dish is actually called Poor Man's Supper, but many of these

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rustic recipes fit that billing.

"Mario Batali's Italian Grill" (\$29.95, Ecco, 246 pages) is not just for carnivores, as the red-haired, orange-shoed wonder offers up sizable chapters on pizza, flatbreads and veggies. Along the way, he answers that always gnarly question: What to make of, or with, those teeny-tiny quail?

There are no recipes for quail or anything else in "Why Italians Love to Talk About Food" (\$35, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 449 pages), but anyone with a strong passion for Italian food will find it indispensable. It's like an encyclopedia compiled and penned by a seriously gifted writer, in this case Elena Kostioukovitch. Infused throughout is Kostioukovitch's passion for Italy and its wide-ranging cuisine; you could even call it *amore*.

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