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5 Essential Tips for Creating and Serving Stellar Soups and Stews, Italian Style

ALEXANDRIA, VA – If pasta is Italy’s most well-known contribution to the culinary world, soups and stews are Italian cuisine’s best kept secret.

“Soups and stews are the heart and soul of great Italian cooking,” says Domenica Marchetti, author of *The Glorious Soups and Stews of Italy*. “They hold an honored place at the Italian table.” Italians take a wonderfully broad view of what makes a soup or a stew, says Marchetti. Indeed, when it comes to soup, there are so many kinds that Italians have at least half a dozen names to describe them. Each region boasts at least one famous soup (often more), from Ribollita in Tuscany to Canederli in Brodo—oversized dumplings poached in meat broth—in Trentino-Alto Adige in Italy’s far north.

Stews are just as diverse and prized. Pellegrino Artusi, Italy’s revered 19th century authority on gastronomy, called stews “the most appetizing dishes” in Italian cuisine.

While Italian home cooks serve soups and stews all year long, they are especially welcome right now, in the fall, when the air turns crisp and our bodies begin to crave comforting one-pot meals after a summer of grilling. Like the best Italian cooking, soups and stews are easy to master at home if you keep these tips from Marchetti in mind:

- Cook seasonally. Although many vegetables are available year-round in the supermarket, cooking with seasonal ingredients will bring out the best flavor in your soup or stew. For fall, think cream of porcini mushroom soup, rich with the earthy flavor of meaty porcini; or a fragrant stew of pork and fennel, punched up with fresh rosemary and crushed fennel seeds.
- Keep it simple. Some cooks consider soups and stews an invitation to empty their vegetable bins or freezer contents into a big pot and let it all boil. But the best soups and stews rely on fresh ingredients that have a natural affinity for one another.
- Create a flavor base. Most Italian soup and stew recipes begin with sautéing finely chopped vegetables—usually carrots, onions, and celery—and aromatics such as garlic, herbs, and spices, in olive oil. This *sofritto* creates a first layer of flavor on which to build the rest of your soup or stew.
- The right pot makes a difference. A heavy-bottomed pot or an enameled cast iron Dutch oven works great for most soups and stews. Such pots allow meat to brown beautifully over moderately high heat without burning. And, when the heat is lowered, they maintain a gentle simmer necessary for many soups and stews to cook properly, at an unhurried pace. Remember: Don’t rush it. Many soup and

stew recipes benefit from this slow simmering on the stove, or, in the case of some stews, in the oven. This gentle cooking not only tenderizes the meat but also insures even cooking and coaxes out and deepens the ingredients' flavors. Remember that while soups and stews like to take their time cooking, they can usually be made ahead of time, and indeed they often taste better when they have been allowed to sit for a day or two in the refrigerator before being reheated.

- Don't forget the finishing touch. Adding a fresh boost of flavor at the end of cooking enlivens soups and stews. Italians use their best extra-virgin olive oil to drizzle generously over soups and some stews just before serving. Or they may stir in freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or pecorino cheese and minced fresh herbs to brighten the flavor of a finished dish. And don't forget the bread. Many Italian soups are either ladled over toasted bread slices or garnished with freshly baked croutons. These seemingly small touches can make the difference between a good soup or stew and a great one.

The Glorious Soups and Stews of Italy is a collection of more than 70 traditional and contemporary recipes, from vanishing classics such as Semolina Gnocchi in Broth to decidedly modern dishes such as Zucchini Blossoms in Summer Broth. The beautifully photographed book also includes recipes for stocks, sauces, and perfect partners to serve with soup and stew. Organized seasonally, with recipes that are at once inspired and accessible, *The Glorious Soups and Stews of Italy* is a book that accomplished and beginning cooks alike will enjoy throughout the year.

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