

DOMENICA COOKS

Spaghetti alla Claudia Cardinale

If the name Claudia Cardinale is familiar to you, it's likely because you are a person of a certain age, or possibly because you are a Fellini or Visconti fan or maybe a Sergio Leone fan (or all of the above). Cardinale, a Tunisian-born Italian-French actress, had her heyday during the era of bombshell actresses, in the company of Sofia Loren, Brigitte Bardot, and Gina Lollobrigida. Among the movies Cardinale starred in were ***Rocco and His Brothers***, and ***The Leopard***, both directed by Luchino Visconti; Federico Fellini's fantastically indulgent ***8 1/2***; and Leone's ***Once Upon a Time in the West***.

How her recipe for spaghetti ended up in my mother's recipe files I can't really say, but I have a hunch it's thanks to my mom's oldest sister, Gilda, who kept tabs on the movie stars of that era through the various Italian gossip magazines she read, ***Gente*** (the Italian version of ***People***) being one of them. The recipe is hand-written in blue pen on a piece of Italian ruled paper that looks like it might have been torn from a notebook. And although the handwriting looks a bit like my mom's, it also doesn't look like my mom's, which makes me think it might be Gilda's.

I came across the recipe while searching for my mom's recipe for sweet Easter bread, which she used to make every year (and which, alas, I didn't find). The handwriting caught my eye first when I opened the creased and folded sheet of paper, then the title of the recipe, and then the recipe itself. It's rich and simple; essentially spaghetti tossed with melted butter, julienned ham (prosciutto cotto), herbs, and lots of grated Parmigiano cheese, one of those old-fashioned recipes with no fancy ingredients and few instructions that you just know is going to be good.

Is it Claudia Cardinale's recipe? I have no idea. I googled "Spaghetti alla Claudia Cardinale" and came up with no recipe (but I did find alluring photos of her circa 1960-something enjoying a nice dish of spaghetti.) Ms. Cardinale's IMDB bio states that in a 1965 interview she told a reporter that "she liked a dry martini before dinner, caviar for hors d'oeuvres, lobsters or oysters for seafood, or a steak alla Fiorentina. When it came to wine, her preference was for a rich, red wine."

It seems to me this pasta dish is very much in keeping with her tastes. (The original recipe in my mom's recipe box is short on detail, so I've added some for clarity.)

Makes 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

Salt for the pasta water

100 g (3 1/2 ounces) butter
100 g (3 1/2 ounces) thinly sliced prosciutto cotto (see NOTE)
Handful (about 1/4 packed cup) fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves
5 to 6 fresh basil leaves
500 g (1 pound) spaghetti
Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil and salt it generously.
2. While the water is heating, make the sauce: Melt the butter in a large skillet set over low heat. While the butter is melting, cut the prosciutto cotto into julienne (thin strips). Finely chop the parsley and basil leaves. When the butter is melted and just beginning to sizzle, add the prosciutto cotto and chopped herbs. Turn off the heat and cover to keep warm.
3. Cook the spaghetti according to the manufacturer's instructions until very al dente (slightly underdone). Turn the heat back on under the butter sauce and, using a pasta fork or tongs, transfer the spaghetti to the skillet, along with a ladleful of the pasta water. Toss the spaghetti in the butter sauce until well coated and glossy.
4. Transfer the pasta to a warmed serving dish and sprinkle liberally with Parmigiano cheese. Toss once more and serve, with more cheese on the side.

NOTE: Prosciutto cotto is simply cooked prosciutto, or cooked ham. It is milder and more than its better-known cousin, prosciutto crudo—the deep red, raw, cured prosciutto that you typically find on an antipasto platter. If you can't find prosciutto cotto (Parmacotto is a brand name to look for), substitute a high-quality American ham from your favorite deli. I used thinly sliced, smoked New England ham that really took this simple pasta dish over the top (a good thing).