

## Pesto is the essence of summer

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Posted:

MercuryNews.com

Pesto is a subject that brings out the passion in any devotee of Italian food. Raise the topic with Luca Minna, co-owner of San Francisco's renowned Farina, and you won't be going anywhere anytime soon.

The conversation may start out with references to pine nuts, then veer over to Coco Chanel, before careening into Bay Area fog and Kennedy aphorisms. But suffice it to say, you'll never look at pesto Genovese the same way again. You also likely won't be able to resist the urge to make it yourself, because Minna and his chef, Paolo Laboa, are happy -- nay, delighted -- to share the recipe that won the Pesto World Championship in Genoa, Italy.

There's just one condition:

We Americans have got to stop calling that chunky, army-green stuff at the supermarket "pesto." True pesto, says Minna, is a vivid emerald green, silky and redolent of basil, and it contains neither Asian pine nuts nor powdered Parmesan. It's kissed by garlic, not drenched in it. And it's made with love and reverence.

The reason we sought out Minna in the first place was that he and Laura Garrone, his childhood friend and partner at Farina, just penned a glossy coffee table book, "Old World New: Family Meals From the Heart of Genoa" (M3 Media Group, \$39.95, 188 pages), inspired by Farina, their Italian restaurant in San Francisco's Mission district. The book is an ode to Genoa and to the cuisine of Italy, filled with page after page of photographs that will either send you directly to the Alitalia counter to book the next flight out -- or to the kitchen. It includes just 24 recipes, divided into four seasonal menus.

The point of my original call to Minna was to ask for help in devising the perfect menu for a summer dinner party or an al fresco repast. But the subject quickly turned to pesto, which runs through the veins of anyone from Italy's Ligurian coast, and Minna was off and running.

Minna, Garrone and their entire kitchen staff all hail from Genoa. Some of them grew up together. The reason they opened their restaurant here in 2007 -- OK, the reason for a restaurant at all -- was a horrific pesto experience in New York City.

"The true cooking of any country is the real mirror of the traditions, the culture, the influences, the opportunities that nature provides," Minna says. "It's an adaptation of all our flavors and historical meals. I'm always being invited to Italian restaurants. (People) think they're making me a favor, but the result is a disaster. Oh my god, it's unbelievable how Italian culture is misrepresented."

They chose to open the restaurant in the Bay Area because the climate is so similar to that of Genoa -- the ocean, the hills, the lush farmland and the marine layer that distributes salty minerality over the earth in the form of misty winds, gentle rain and our signature fog.

The goal was to create a restaurant that did the most authentic -- a word Minna despises, by the way -- Italian fare with Genoans in the kitchen, centuries-old recipes burbling in pots and *Ocimum basilicum* "Genovese" in the mortar.

"Basil is a very unstable, amazing gift of nature. It can turn into a minty flavor, or basil flavor if it absorbs the right amount of sun and minerality through the rains and weather," Minna says. "California is an amazing land, exactly my mirror of the Ligurian region. We brought over our basil from Liguria and spent about six months traveling around to find a farmer capable of growing the basil, a perfect match for our basil plants."

These days, home cooks can find similar basil at Bay Area farmers markets and most good grocers, he says. Use it with the best quality olive oil and parmigiano, and add garlic with a light hand.

"Garlic is as powerful as the basil. You want to use it properly," he says. "The majestic final touch is the pine nuts. It's the binding element that glues all the components together to make the magic."

He recommends using pine nuts from Tuscany, the ones that cost "crazy money." Their less expensive cousins from Asia are not the same thing. They're less expensive, he says, "but it ruins the food."

Grind the mixture with a mortar and pestle, as Italian nonnas have done from time immemorial, or use a blender to yield that "sensual, fantastic, emerald green sauce." Toss it with the most ethereal, silky pasta, and Minna promises people will say, "It is sinful! It is sexy!"

It's no wonder we lost our train of thought.

"The dinner menu?" Minna prompted. Start with a focaccina -- a small focaccia topped with prosciutto and burrata, he suggests.

"It's warm and salty, sweet and creamy. It's an explosion of pleasure."

The pasta, he says, "goes without saying," and a branzino cooked in broth makes a beautiful, light secondi. And for dessert, try cookie baskets filled with mascarpone cream and strawberries.

It's magic.

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## An Italian Dinner Party

Antipasto

Focaccina Genovese

con Prosciutto di Parma

e Burrata

Small focaccia with

prosciutto and burrata

Primo

Mandilli di Seta al Pesto Genovese

Handkerchief pasta with pesto Genovese

Secondi

Dentice in Brodetto con Carciofi

Branzino in broth with

artichokes

Dolci

Cestino di Pasta Matta

con Fragole

Cookie baskets with mascarpone cream and strawberries