

orecchiette with fennel sausage and swiss chard

Before we opened the Osteria, Matt made all of the dishes he wanted to put on the pasta menu for us to taste together. When he made this dish— his version of a classic from Puglia— that's when I was absolutely convinced that the pasta program we were committing to was a good idea, and that Matt was absolutely the one to execute it. Evidently I'm not alone because this has been our most popular pasta since the day we opened. The chard you will prepare for this dish makes much more than you will need for four servings, as does the Fennel Sausage recipe. It would be a good recipe to double and serve to a crowd—just remember to prepare the sauce and toss it with the pasta in two separate sauté pans.

Serves 4

for the chard

1 bunch Swiss chard
1/4 cup extra- virgin olive oil
Kosher salt
1/2 large yellow Spanish onion, thinly sliced
12 garlic cloves, thinly sliced lengthwise
2 dried arbol chiles

for finishing and serving the pasta

3/4 pound Fennel Sausage
1/2 teaspoon Aleppo pepper
1 cup Basic Chicken Stock, or 1/4 cup salted pasta water mixed with 1/4 cup plain water
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
Kosher salt
12 ounces Orecchiette
3 tablespoons finishing- quality extra- virgin olive oil
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons freshly grated Parmigiano- Reggiano
2 teaspoons fennel pollen
2 tablespoons Toasted Bread Crumbs

To prepare the chard, pull the leaves from the ribs. Roughly chop the leaves and set aside. Cut off and discard the very ends of the ribs and slice the ribs 1/4 inch thick.

Heat the olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium- high heat until it is almost smoking and slides easily in the pan, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the chard ribs, season with salt, and sauté for 2 to 3 minutes, until barely translucent. Add the onion, garlic, and chiles, and season with salt. Sauté the vegetables for about 10 minutes, adding water to the pan (as much as 1 cup total), stirring often to prevent the vegetables browning. (You add water to the pan so you can sauté and sweat the onion without browning it, but you never want the onion swimming in water—just enough so the pan isn't dry.) Add the chard leaves, season with salt, and fold the leaves in with the onion for 1 or 2 minutes

to wilt them slightly. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and cook for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring from time to time, until the chard leaves are very dark green and the onion, leaves, and stems are one soft, homogenous mixture. Turn the vegetables out onto a cutting board and chop, cutting first in one direction and then perpendicular to the first direction, until the vegetables are finely chopped to the point of being almost pureed. Measure out a heaping 1/4 cup of the vegetables for the pasta dish. Use the rest as an excuse to prepare this dish again in the very near future, or spoon a heaping spoonful under a piece of grilled fish, topped with a spoonful of Salsa Verde.

To make the sauce, heat a sauté pan over high heat for about 2 minutes until it's very hot. Add the sausage to the pan and cook it undisturbed for about 2 minutes, until the meat is seared. Stir the meat and cook for another 4 minutes, breaking it into pea-size pieces, until it is cooked through. Add the chopped chard and cook for 2 to 3 minutes to warm it through, stirring the chard into the sausage as it cooks. Sprinkle the pepper over the chard and sausage, add the chicken stock, and cook the sauce for 2 minutes, stirring constantly, to bring the ingredients together. Add the butter, stir until it melts, and turn off the heat while you cook the pasta.

Fill a pasta pot or large stockpot with 6 quarts of water, add 6 tablespoons of salt, and bring the water to a boil over high heat. If you are not using a pasta pot, place a colander in the sink or have a large wire strainer handy to lift the pasta out of the pot.

Remove the orecchiette from the refrigerator or the freezer and drop them into the boiling water. Stir to prevent the pasta from sticking together, partially cover the pot so the water returns to a boil quickly and continues boiling, and cook the pasta until it's al dente, about 2 minutes. About 1 minute before the pasta is done, place the sauce over high heat. Lift the pasta out of the cooking water or drain it and immediately add it to the pan with the sauce. Cook the pasta with the sauce together for 1 to 2 minutes, stirring with a rubber spatula, until the sauce is thick, adding fresh water to the pan if the pasta looks dry or sticky instead of slippery and glistening. Turn off the heat and add the finishing-quality olive oil, Parmigiano-Reggiano, and fennel pollen, stirring vigorously and shaking the pan to emulsify the sauce.

Pile the orecchiette in the center of each of eight plates, dividing it evenly, and spoon any sauce left in the pan over the pasta. Sprinkle a generous tablespoon of bread crumbs over each serving, and serve with the remaining bread crumbs on the side.

Excerpted from THE MOZZA COOKBOOK by Nancy Silverton with Matt Molina and Carolyn Carreno. Copyright © 2011 by Nancy Silverton. Excerpted by permission of Knopf, a division of Random House. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.