

# The 'wrong' -way ravioli that turn out 'the best'

## He combines the styles of Italian forebears

By ELAINE TAIT

"People who read this are gonna say he does this or that wrong," said Andrea Pasquale Abruzzese (Andrew to his friends), owner of a Newtown painting company. "But after they taste, they say I make the best." The ravioli I watched Abruzzese make at the Ruins, a Lambertville, N.J., cooking school, had a creamy cheese filling so light you'd swear it was helium-helped, pasta as supple and thin as expensive China silk, and state-of-the-art gravy that seemed to have just the right amounts of everything. "These are unquestionably the world's best ravioli," I announced. But then, I'm just a food writer. Abruzzese, 35, once invited a friend's Italian grandmother to watch. "She said I did everything wrong, didn't use the right cheese, made them too thin, etc.," he said. "Then she tasted them. She said they were the best ravs that she had ever put in her mouth. "In Italian cooking, everybody thinks that he makes a better sauce and pasta," he said. "It's what you grow up with." Abruzzese, who cooks regularly for his management executive wife, Mary Lou, and two young sons, said he learned kitchen basics from watching the many talented cooks in his family's home in the "Little Italy" section of Baltimore. A paternal grandmother introduced Philadelphia cheesesteaks to Baltimoreans in the late 1930s. Aunt Rose started Rosa's pasta company. Aunt Mary made ravs and breaded veal cutlets for an Italian club. Aunt Josephine was always cooking for the neighborhood or for the church. Abruzzese remembers helping her make 15,000 ravs for St. Leo's annual dinner, "They sold out halfway through the day."

I was always hanging around the kitchen, I would compliment whoever was doing the cooking so they would let me help." His father's family was from Abruzzese, his mother's from Naples. His ravs are an amalgam of features from the Looking of both regions. They are not, however, Old World Italian, he says. "Ravioli," he mused, "are a holiday dish for Italian Americans. I've traveled pretty widely in Italy. You can't get ravioli as we know them there." The Neapolitan side of the family makes its ravioli gravy with more tomato paste and lots of onion. "They cook it three to four hours," Abruzzese said. Cooks from Abruzzi take less time, use almost no tomato paste and a lot of water, as much water as tomato, and they cook vigorously. He added that his gravy was "a little of each - to keep everybody happy."

### Andrew's Gravy

4 to 6 pork short ribs  
12 ounces chuck steak with bone  
4 veal shanks  
4 cloves chopped garlic  
1/4 cup olive oil  
3 cans (35 ounces each) whole Italian style tomatoes  
2 tomato cans water  
Salt and pepper to taste  
1 can (6 ounces) tomato paste  
1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

Place meats in a roasting pan and brown in a 350 degree oven for 30 to 45 minutes. In large, heavy-gauge pot saute garlic in olive oil until light brown. Add tomatoes, water, salt and pepper. Boil briskly for 20 to 30 minutes uncovered. Add meat, paste and basil, and simmer for one to two hours as you wish. Remove meat from sauce and keep warm while preparing ravioli for serving.

From his father, who was a professional painter with a real talent for cooking, Abruzzese learned to use the word gravy for a liquid that is thickened with an agent, such as tomato paste or flour. Sauce, on the other hand, is reduced in volume through cooking. "Marinara is a sauce," he says. "It is just oil, garlic basil, tomatoes, salt and pepper." Abruzzese makes his ravioli filling with ricotta cheese mixed with grated Locatelli and shredded and chopped mozzarella. The mozzarella should be part-skim, he says. "It chops better than the softer whole-milk mozzarella." "The Abruzzese side never used mozzarella," he said. "We learned to do that from my mother's side when we moved to Baltimore. "Sometimes the ricotta gets a little wet. If it feels wet, I sprinkle a quarter-cup grated Locatelli on top, cover it with plastic wrap and put it in the fridge. That keeps it from getting mushy. Abruzzese makes his ravioli dough without oil and a little warm water - for elasticity. After kneading, he lets it sit with plastic wrap for 30 minutes. He pushes his thumb into the dough at intervals around its circumference, making deep depressions. "Aunt Mary says it helps relax the dough," he explained. His dough is rolled, using a pasta machine, until it is tissue-thin. "It's 100 thin to freeze," he said. He thinks (and he hopes they will forgive him for this) that many Italian home cooks make the dough a little too thick so that it can survive freezing. "When you cook it [the thick dough], it swells up, making it even thicker."

As a child, Abruzzese considered himself quite grown-up when he was given the responsibility of forking the ravioli. Forking means sealing the edges by pressing with the tines of a fork, and there's an art to even this simple step, he said. "Don't pick up the fork. Rock it back and forth with the heel of the fork staying on the table." This gives a nice, even pressure and a good seal. Although his ravs don't freeze, they can be stored overnight. "But don't wrap them in plastic wrap and refrigerate them when they're still warm," he said. "The condensation will collect on the plastic and get the ravs soaked. Wait until they're cold to cover them." Abruzzese advised being sparing with flour when making the dough. "But after you've shaped and forked them, use a lot of flour to keep them from getting sticky." The flour should be applied like face powder, adhering lightly to the surface of the ravs. His first ravioli were made at a girlfriend's home to impress her and her parents, he says.

### Ravioli Filling

3 pounds ricotta  
3/4 cup part-skim mozzarella, shredded  
3/4 cup shredded Locatelli  
2 large eggs, approximately  
Salt and pepper to taste  
3 tablespoons chopped parsley or to taste

Combine all ingredients. Mix thoroughly, but don't overmix directed above. Makes 60 to 75 ravioli.

The ravioli themselves were a big success, but the sauce was not tasting or smelling the way he thought it should. "Halfway through, I called Aunt Mary. I told her, 'I made the sauce just like you do, but it doesn't taste like yours.' She asked what ingredients I had used. I told her, and her advice was 'Go ahead. There's nothing there that can hurt you.' It turned out great. "There are so many things that can go wrong with ravioli. You could talk all day about it." His insurance is to use the same ingredients for every batch he makes. The ricotta is from Maggio, The tomatoes are Italian-style from California by Tuttorosso. The flour is always Gold Medal. Other cooks might guard the secrets to recipes they have spent most of their young lifetimes perfecting. Not Abruzzese, who gives rave-making demonstrations at the drop of a toque. "You learn from teaching. When you cook, you just do it. You don't normally take time to talk through every step. If you're teaching, it brings things out, refines your abilities." Andrew Abruzzese's recipe makes 60 to 75 filled ravioli - enough for six or seven servings:

### Ravioli Dough

5 cups all-purpose flour  
6 extra-large eggs  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/4 cup warm water, approximately  
Boiling salted water  
Ravioli Filling (recipe below)  
Andrew's Gravy (recipe below)  
Grated Locatelli cheese

Pile flour on pasta board. Form a well in center. Place eggs, salt and one-quarter cup of warm water in the well. Beat eggs slightly, in the well. Gradually take in surrounding flour to form dough. When dough is formed, knead until smooth. If dough is too dry, add more water. If it's too wet, add a small amount of flour. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rest 30 minutes. When dough has rested, cut into 10 equal portions. Remove two portions. Reserve remaining dough, covered under plastic wrap. Roll each portion of dough through pasta machine, starting at a setting for thinnest dough. Roll dough through at each setting once, dusting with flour at every other setting. To shape ravioli: Cut long strips of dough into manageable lengths, about four inches wide. Spoon some filling, in one-tablespoon amounts, about two inches apart, down the center of each long strip of dough. Fold the long edges of dough together over the filling. Cut individual ravioli into two-inch squares, using a sharp knife. Seal the three open edges of each ravioli by pressing cut edges together with tines of fork. Forked edge should be the width of a finger-tip. Flour ravioli generously to prevent sticking. Place on pans sprinkled with white cornmeal. If ravioli are to be stored several hours or overnight, refrigerate, uncovered, until cooled, and then cover with plastic wrap. To cook: Heat large pot of water (the bigger the better; water should not cool down when ravioli are added). Add 1 tablespoon salt per quart of water. Place ravioli in boiling water and cook for about three minutes after they float to the surface. Drain well. To serve, spoon a portion of Andrew's Gravy in serving platter. Add drained ravioli. Add additional gravy. Pass grated cheese. The gravy is made with meat, which should be served separately. Makes six to seven servings. There will be leftover dough. Roll this more thickly and cut into noodles. Dry or freeze for later use.

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