



BETWEEN THE ROWS
WENDY SCHMIDT

Sprucing up your scruffy garden

This is a scruffy time of year. The weather turns nice and warm and it seems like the trees should have leaves. But they're bare and ugly and look like it's still winter.

It doesn't help that the yard work never got done last fall, making the landscape seem like it's wearing shabby, faded hand-me-down clothes. The fruit trees and roses are scraggly in their need of pruning.

A bright note is that the roses are leafing out. The birds are looking for nests and robins are around town. Everything has its season. So does the yard work, and as usual there are a few timely chores.

- The end of the month is probably soon enough to start indoor garden seeds such as peppers, eggplants and tomatoes.
- Cultivate weeds and remove dead stalks of last year's growth from asparagus bed before the new spears emerge.
- Seeds of hardy annuals such as larkspur, bachelor buttons, Shirley and California poppies should be direct sown in the garden now.
- Heavy pruning of trees should be complete before growth occurs. Trees should not be pruned while the new leaves are growing.
- Summer- and fall-blooming perennials should be divided in spring.
- Prune grapes. This should be done before bud swell but bleeding causes no injury to the vines. Tie vines to the trellis before the buds swell to prevent bud injury and crop loss.
- Cleft and splice grafting can be done now. This must be completed before the rootstock break dormancy.
- Apply dormant oil sprays now. Choose a dry day when freezing temperatures are not expected.
- Spray peach trees with a fungicide for the control of peach leaf curl disease.
- Aphids begin to hatch on fruit trees as the buds begin to open.
- Repot rootbound houseplants, moving them to a container 2 inches larger in diameter than their current pot. Leggy plants may be pruned.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write: greengardencolumn@yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!

An Italian Favorite



Terrence Antonio James/ChicagoTribune-TNS

Baked polenta is topped with a pork ragu, spare ribs braised with aromatic vegetables, red wine and tomatoes. The dish calls for baking and slicing the finished polenta for serving. But you can also serve the ragu on a bed of the polenta, as shown here.

PRIDE IN POLENTA

By **Domenica Marchetti**
Chicago Tribune

As someone who writes about Italian food, I pride myself in knowing, and understanding, Italian ingredients. But when it comes to polenta, I've been remiss.

I did not grow up eating polenta; my Italian mother did not care for it, even though hot polenta topped with ragu is a popular winter dish in her native region of Abruzzo. My own interest in it as a cook was half-hearted. How much appeal, after all, could there be in a bowl of cooked cornmeal? Mostly, the word "polenta" conjured unappetizing images of that vacuum-packed yellow sausage of solid, sliceable corn mush sold at the supermarket.

It was a visit to Valle d'Aosta during Christmas of 2018 that changed my mind about this quintessential cold weather comfort food. In Italy's smallest region, tucked up in the northwest corner of the peninsula, polenta is not just a pantry staple; it is a daily ritual, the way a dish of pasta remains a daily ritual for many people in southern Italy. In Aosta itself, a cozy alpine city ringed with mountains, polenta is featured on every restaurant and



Terrence Antonio James/ChicagoTribune-TNS

Polenta incatenata is a mix of hearty vegetables, protein-rich beans and an abundance of cheese.

osteria menu. Even the town's mini Christmas market had two polenta stands, both of which almost always had customers lined up, no matter the time of day or night. The offerings were various: polenta drizzled with hot melted butter; polenta "concia," with lots of Fontina cheese stirred in; polenta topped with smoky grilled sausages; polenta with beef stew called carbonnade. In the four days my family and I spent there, we tasted them

all, wrapping our hands around warm bowls and feeling the heat of the porridge radiate within us as we ate. All versions were good; but really it was the cornmeal itself, made from local stone-ground field corn, golden in color and toasty in flavor, and cooked at length to bring out the grain's natural sweetness, that won me over.

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Celebrating Lenten season with tasty fish fries

By **Daniel Neman**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Lent. It's a time for reflection. A time for humility. And definitely a time for fish.

For most American Christians, Lent began Wednesday (for the Eastern Orthodox churches, it began Monday). That means believers will spend seven Fridays avoiding meat.

A large number of people during Lent turn instead to fish (though the Orthodox churches avoid fish with backbones, as well).

For this Lenten season, I made four appropriate dishes, two with fish and two with shellfish. Each one was so delicious that I'm afraid they may not be entirely in the spirit of somber reflection and self-sacrifice.

But that's OK. They're great to eat when it is not Lent, too.

I started with the most typical of all Lenten meals, at least in this town: fried fish. I humbly suggest it was better than anything you could get at a church, but that is probably because I made a relatively small batch, instead of the churches'



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Shrimp with soy, garlic, ginger and lemon.

assembly-line cooking, and I used a slightly more expensive ingredient than they use.

The ingredient I used was panko bread crumbs for the breading. I had planned to use the traditional cornmeal, but I discovered as I started to cook that I had run out of the traditional cornmeal. So, panko — which I did have — it was.

And I'm glad it worked out just as I totally intentionally meant it to, because panko makes everything fried taste better. It gives it an extra crispy snap that is simply delightful.

Next up was a dish I hadn't made in some time but has long been a favorite: Shrimp with Soy, Garlic, Ginger and Lemon. When I first met the friends of the woman who

was to become my wife, this is the dish I made. One plateful, and they decided to like me.

With the ingredients listed in the name (shrimp, soy, garlic, ginger and lemon), it is not surprising that it has a certain Chinese flair. It is even stir-fried, though I have also had considerable success modifying the recipe slightly and cooking it on the grill.

Unlike simpler stir-fries, it requires a three-part procedure to cook. First, you make a marinade with all of the ingredients in the title, and more — sherry, for one. After you marinate the shrimp for an hour, you strain out the marinade and thicken it with a slurry of cornstarch and water to make an amazingly flavorful sauce.

Then comes the stir-frying of the shrimp, with more garlic and ginger, plus red bell pepper. Your house will smell as great as your dinner will taste.

My third dish was another old favorite and a traditional way to prepare fish: en papillote. The phrase means "in paper" or "in parchment," and it refers to a way of wrapping

fish or occasionally chicken in a sealed parchment packet along with vegetables and a splash of liquid, often wine.

You bake the packets in the oven, and the fish gently cooks in the steam that is created inside the packet.

This particular version begins with salmon, which is placed on top of a bed of sauteed carrots and mushrooms. Dill is placed on top of that — a natural with salmon — and plenty of shallots to provide a mild, earthy onion flavor. The fish was cooked to perfection, and the whole dish from presentation (everyone oohs and ahs when you cut open the packet) to taste was stunning.

My final dish came from a cookbook by Legal Seafood, the popular East Coast chain of seafood restaurants. The book says that the recipe is one of the restaurants' most popular pasta dishes, which makes sense when you consider the main ingredients: scallops, heavy cream and mushrooms.

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