

Lidia Bastianich keeps it simple in her new cookbook

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Cookbook author, TV host and celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich is one of the most famous Italian cooks in the U.S. She's also a successful restaurateur, with eight restaurants specializing in Italian and Italian-American cuisine.

Yet when she prepares meals for her own family at home, she's like the rest of us: She likes to keep it simple, with straightforward, no-fuss recipes that don't require impeccable technique or fancy ingredients.

Take cannellini beans, for instance. Found in every classic minestrone and many Italian salads, the white kidney-shaped legume can also add an inexpensive punch of protein to a plate of greens or make a fish dish more substantial.

"They are perfectly good and delicious from the can," Bastianich says on a recent phone call from her home in New York.

Using food right from a can or box (such as oven-ready dried pasta) also streamlines the cooking process while eliminating the pot and pans that tend to pile up with scratch cooking.

Her latest cookbook, "Lidia's A Pot, a Pan, and a Bowl" (Knopf, \$30), hit store shelves on Oct. 19. It has 100-plus homey and easy-to-prepare recipes that require fewer steps and ingredients than her previous tomes, but still deliver incredible Italian flavor. As she writes in the book's forward: "Sometimes, you just want to cook something that doesn't leave you with a pile of dishes."

This is Bastianich's 16th cookbook and arguably one of her most user-friendly, streamlined to be "as straightforward to cook as possible" and using a minimal number of pots and pans. It was born, she says, out of her desire to carry on her relationship with her fans, many of whom love to cook along with her on her various cooking programs at PBS Food and her YouTube channel, Tutto Lidia.

"I get this feedback, 'You make me feel so secure in my kitchen.' 'So I can't help myself. I think, 'What can I give them next so they stay in the kitchen?'"

While the theme of simplicity will likely resonate with home cooks who churned out three meals a day at the height of the pandemic, Bastianich actually started work on the cookbook before the coronavirus shutdown. But much of the testing with her daughter and co-author, Tanya Bastianich Manuali, and longtime PBS culinary producer Amy Stevenson was done during quarantine in her home in Queens, New York.

"I have a large house," she says. "We opened all the windows and put the masks on and that was that. We worked around it."

She chose to focus on

one-pot dishes — meals made in a single skillet, Dutch oven, baking sheet or roasting pan — because the approach fits the busy times we live in. She also liked the creative challenge of creating simple, minimally messy dishes with layered, harmonizing flavors.

That meant eliminating as many chef secret techniques as possible, focusing on the timing and sequence of ingredients, and making cooks realize it's OK to substitute different vegetables or proteins to accommodate personal tastes and budget.

For instance, she uses cod in a seafood dish instead of salmon or shrimp.

It also required constantly thinking, "How did my grandmother or mother cook for the family?" when she was growing up in Istria, a mountainous region of Croatia that was once part of Italy.

"It was fun to be able to use my years of experience in a commercial kitchen and traveling and synthesize it down to a simple baking pan that everyone can relate to," she says.

The journey took her at least one place she never thought she'd go: Into the Italian food aisle for oven-ready lasagna noodles, which she turned into a knock-out skillet lasagna recipe that comes together in about 45 minutes.

While fresh is always better, the process of making dough from scratch takes time and practice. Bastianich was surprised to find how well dishes turned out with pre-cooked noodles and shells, so long as you make sure there is enough liquid in the baking pan for the pasta to cook in the oven. She stuffs them with three cheeses, parsley and scallions.

The chef also tried her hand at Instant Pot cooking for the first time during the pandemic, and gives tips to readers willing to experiment with adapting some of the cookbook's recipes to the electric multicooker.

Almost all of the recipes can be served as a one-course meal. Many also could shine as an appetizer or side dish in a multi-course feast, or be portioned and frozen for a quick leftover dinner. All are Bastianich favorites that have their roots in the Italian cooking the chef is famous for.

Along with a chapter on eggs, the cookbook dishes up soup and salad recipes with an eye toward seasonality. It also takes a deep dive into seafood and unfamiliar fish such as monkfish, which she cooks with cannellini beans into a savory stew. There also are more than 20 meat and poultry dishes.

You'll find a wide assortment of primi pasta and risotto dishes, which are the cornerstone of Italian cooking and perfectly suited for one-pot cooking: chicken eggplant parmesan, gemelli with pesto and tomato, chicken cacciatore and zucchini bread lasagna, to name a few. There's also a recipe



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

These cakey chocolate chip cookies from Lidia Bastianich's new cookbook have a secret ingredient — they're made with ricotta cheese.

for pan pizza.

Ever the teacher, Bastianich sprinkles tips and tricks throughout, and also offers substitution and serving suggestions.

"It's for everybody, even the beginners," she says.

As for the cooking vessels themselves, the chef is quick to point out that her book takes an "expansive" view of one-pot cooking. Some of the recipes actually require an extra bowl or plate during prep, cooking or plating.

Cooking, Bastianich says, should always be fun, welcoming and delicious, as well as an expression of your love and affection for the people around your table.

"I see the connection when people get together, and feel nourished in every way," she says.

She hopes her latest cookbook will help home cooks feel more comfortable in the kitchen while realizing that good cooking doesn't have to be complicated.

"It's all about the comfort zone," she says.

BEER-BRAISED BEEF SHORT RIBS

This is one of Lidia Bastianich's favorite recipes in her new cookbook, "Lidia's A Pot, a Pan, and a Bowl." It combines beef short ribs, carrots and potatoes in a rich beer broth thickened with a pestata of almonds and dried porcini mushroom — the perfect dish for a chilly fall evening.

I couldn't find short ribs at my local market, so I took the advice in the recipe headnotes and substituted big chunks of beef chuck and cut the initial

cooking time by about half.

Served with crusty bread and a green salad, this makes a hearty lunch or simple supper.

¼ cup dried porcini mushrooms
1 cup slivered almonds, toasted
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 pounds bone-in beef short ribs
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
3 large carrots, cut into 1-inch chunks
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
2 fresh bay leaves
12 ounces dark ale
6 cups chicken stock, homemade or low-sodium store-bought
3 medium onions, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks
1 pound small red potatoes, halved
2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley

Combine porcini and almonds in the work bowl of a mini-food processor. Pulse to make an almost smooth pestata.

Heat olive oil in a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Season short ribs with 1 teaspoon salt and several grinds of pepper. Brown short ribs all over, removing them to a plate as they brown, about 5 minutes per batch.

Add carrots and toss to coat in the oil. Cook carrots until they begin to brown, 2-3 minutes, then make a space in the pan and add the tomato paste there. Cook and toast the tomato paste in that space until it darkens a shade or two, about 1 minute. Add thyme and bay leaves, and stir to combine.

Add pestata and stir to toast lightly, 1-2 minutes. Add beer, bring to a boil and cook until beer is reduced by half. Add back the short ribs and add 4 cups of stock. Adjust the heat so the liquid is simmering, set the lid ajar and simmer until the

short ribs are almost tender, 60-75 minutes.

Add remaining 2 cups stock, onions and potatoes. Return to a simmer and cook until everything is very tender and the sauce is thick and flavorful, 40-50 minutes more. Stir in parsley, remove bay leaves and serve.

Serves 6.

— "Lidia's A Pot, A Pan and A Bowl" by Lidia Matticchio Bastianich and Tanya Bastianich Manuali (Knopf, October 2021)

SKILLET LASAGNA

Everyone loves lasagna but a traditional recipe is tough to make on a weeknight. This skillet recipe comes together in about 45 minutes using oven-ready noodles.

For a heartier dish, Lidia suggests adding a few crumbled links of Italian sausage or browned mushrooms. If you don't like peas or simply want to veg it up, add a few handfuls of baby spinach to each layer. Be sure to allow it to sit for at least 15 minutes before serving so the lasagna can more easily be cut into portions.

Extra-virgin olive oil, for coating skillet
¾ cup marinara sauce, homemade or store-bought
1 cup fresh ricotta
1 cup shredded low-moisture mozzarella, divided
½ cup freshly grated Grana Padano
1 large egg, beaten
½ cup frozen baby peas
2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley
Kosher salt
Red pepper flakes
12 sheet no-boil (oven ready) lasagna

Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add enough olive oil to make a thin film on

the bottom of the skillet. Add 1 ¾ cups marinara with ¼ cup water and bring to a simmer over medium heat.

In a bowl, combine ricotta, ½ cup mozzarella, ¼ cup grated Grana Padano, egg, peas and parsley. Season with salt and a pinch of red pepper flakes, and mix well.

Layer three of the noodles in the skillet over the sauce. (I had to break the ends to fit.) Dollop 1/3 of the ricotta mixture on top of the pasta in the skillet, and spread it out to cover noodles; then drizzle with ¼ cup of the tomato sauce. Make two more layers, ending with noodles. Drizzle with remaining 1 ½ cups sauce. Top with the remaining ½ cup mozzarella and ¼ cup grated cheese.

Cover skillet and simmer until pasta is al dente (test by piercing the center with a paring knife), 20-25 minutes.

Preheat broiler. Sprinkle remaining ¼ cup grated cheese on top and broil the lasagna until the top is nicely browned, about 1 minute.

Let sit for 15 minutes before cutting and serving so the lasagna will settle and portions can be cut more easily.

Serves 4.

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CHOCOLATE CHIP RICOTTA COOKIES

Lidia Bastianich gives an all-American favorite Italian flair in this cakey cookie recipe with ricotta cheese. Even my daughter, Catherine, who professes to detest ricotta, loved how it makes the cookies soft and smooth.

1 stick unsalted butter, at room temperature
1 cup granulated sugar
2 large eggs
8 ounces fresh ricotta
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 ½ cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
Kosher salt
1 cup mini-chocolate chips (or more to taste)
Confectioners' sugar for dusting, optional

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment.

Cream butter and sugar in a large bowl with a handheld mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Reduce speed to medium, and add eggs. Beat until smooth. Add ricotta and vanilla and beat to combine.

Sift the flour and baking powder right into the bowl, and add a pinch of salt. Mix on low speed until just combined. Stir in chocolate chips by hand.

Drop cookies in heaping tablespoons onto the baking sheets, leaving about 2 inches between cookies, in three rows of five. Bake, rotating the trays from top to bottom halfway through, until cookies are puffed and golden at the edges, about 18 minutes. Remove to a wire rack to cool.

Dust cookies with confectioners' sugar before serving, if desired.

Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

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