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Open House

It's possibly no exaggeration to say that my mother-in-law Alda's Sunday lunch is a full third of the three things I like about being married to my Italian husband. The first time I attended one, at her large and elegant apartment in Rome, there were hand-cut egg noodles—pasta fresca—and roasted red peppers and boiled zucchini and cruets of golden oil from her own olive trees in Puglia. There was mozzarella, still warm from the caseificio, and the table was laid with her wedding silver and two heavy cloths, crisp and starched and freshly ironed. The tall shutters were half-closed against the harsh afternoon heat. The whole family—her six children and the spouses and the grandchildren—had arrived in a swarm, and soon the small mob was casually dispersed throughout the many rooms of the grand apartment, relaxed and just hanging out.

There were many bottles of chilled Müller-Thurgau from the Alto Adige—particularly delicious and nearly effervescent from acidity—that my husband had grabbed from the local wine store with the same total ease and casual confidence with which the Italians pick out their bright blue ties and pull on their orange cashmere sweaters. Effortless. Genetic. A freaking cultural birthright.

I've been to a dozen of Alda's Sunday lunches by now. If you doze in the big leather chair for a few minutes after the meal, she picks up the magazine that has slipped from your lap and sets it next to you on the table. If you break a dish while helping to clean up afterward, she shrugs and smiles, saying she never liked that dish anyway and she's been hoping for years someone would break it. If you stroll into the kitchen where she is arranging the food and snatch a sliver of prosciutto from a platter, she smiles and does not scold you.

I've come to want this for my kids, too. I want them to know that even when they are 40 years old, they can come over on Sunday at 2:00 p.m. and have lunch. They can bring their kids, their boss, their friends, their friends' friends. I don't care. Just come over.

So, finally, I decided to start the small tradition of Sunday lunch at our own home in New York; I told everyone I knew and invited them all. I'm starting a tradition, I said. It'll be every Sunday, I announced, from now through all eternity, and you are welcome.

For the inaugural lunch, I composed a menu with Alda in mind and shaped it around what I thought she might cook. I would make [a fresh pasta dish with fried eggs and pine nuts and brown butter](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Brown-Butter-Pasta) (<http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Brown-Butter-Pasta>). And there would be some [fennel with cream and Parmesan](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Fennel-Baked-in-Cream-Finocchio-al-Forno) (<http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Fennel-Baked-in-Cream-Finocchio-al-Forno>), baked al forno, by which I mean in our General Electric digitally controlled oven, into which we have shoved a heavy pizza stone that lives there permanently. I also planned a simple bagna cauda of sweet red cabbage wedges, elevated by warm anchovy butter. And for Michele, my husband, I'd make some scamorza cheese fried in a pan—a dish that he loves and that he taught me to make. Some of his doctor and scientist friends were expected, and a writer friend of mine.

Except that somehow my husband and I fell into one of those massive, lacerating, deep and dark marital blowouts that you never forget for as long as you live. On Sunday morning I came downstairs and started to boil water for my coffee. I was looking in the cupboard for a filter but landed on a brand-new box of instant mashed potatoes.

"Whoa," I exclaimed.

Michele, trying to enjoy the newspaper, looked up over his reading glasses and said, "What?" Then he reached across the counter and pointed out to me the big red advertising hype splashed across the front of the box, and read it out loud in his thick Italian accent: "One hundred perrrrrcent rrrreal Idaho poe-tay-toes."

Michele has both an M.D. and a Ph.D. and he doesn't mind my telling you so. I am a chef who started as a dishwasher 30 years ago, and that little discrepancy between us, I should mention, comes up from time to time. And somehow it presents itself on this morning and escalates, unfortunately, to previously unreachd and ferocious heights. The double-doctor educates me—the poor little dishwasher who will sadly never understand the complex and scientific virtues of dehydrated potatoes—as he will.

I break furniture.

"I can't even fake this lunch," I bellowed. "I'm not going through the goddamned motions," I yelled down the banister as I grabbed our two young sons—the remaining full two-thirds of what I like about being married to this man—and stomped up to the third floor of our home.

Oddly, I don't really give such a big shit about boxed mash in our cupboard. We've got Hellmann's. We've got Häagen-Dazs. We've got Progresso. There are chemicals produced by Dow stashed under our kitchen sink. It's not that.

But whatever it is, I spend the rest of the morning on the third floor with the kids, refusing to cook. In my industry, you are never down or off. Your bad day, your imminent divorce, your no-show, no-call dishwasher don't count. You suck it up and give good restaurant. But for some reason, on this particular day, worn down in just this particular way over a box of dehydrated freeze-dried potato flakes, I could not rally.

Then I heard the doorbell. I heard voices way downstairs. I did not uncross my arms from in front of my chest. The doorbell rang again, and sounds of life and gaiety began to float up to the third floor and then, right behind that, the smell of something good to eat. Something rather good. Catharted and spent—I had screamed what there was to be screamed, cried what needed to be cried—I took the stairs one step at a time, with my two boys in my arms, and joined everyone in the kitchen.

Michele, now in an apron, had completely rallied. He had opened the very best Italian reds that we owned and into the oven he had plopped two frozen cheese pizzas onto the stone. He smiled at me in exactly the right way, the way that says "Let's forget it," and poured me a glass of the Sassicaia, a ruby incredibleness, which made a direct warm path to my heart. And then this man—amore mio—pulled the pizza out of the forno; the otherwise doughy, bad bread basket type of crust had become extra crisp and the flabby cheese had become nutty and concentrated. We all descended on it. Just by cranking the oven to 500 degrees and leaving them in for a little longer than the package instructions advise, he had made a truly delicious lunch, which is one way of salvaging store-bought frozen pizza—and tradition—that I will forever remember. By the back door, I noticed, he had stacked the broken chair into a neat bundle of kindling, to be put out later with the garbage.

[Recipe: Brown Butter Pasta \(http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Brown-Butter-Pasta\)](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Brown-Butter-Pasta)

[Recipe: Finocchio al Forno \(Fennel Baked in Cream\) \(http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Fennel-Baked-in-Cream-Finocchio-al-Forno\)](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Fennel-Baked-in-Cream-Finocchio-al-Forno)

Plus:

[See all of the 25 Greatest Meals Ever \(http://www.saveur.com/gallery/25-Greatest-Meals-Ever\)](http://www.saveur.com/gallery/25-Greatest-Meals-Ever)

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The Angry Chef

Every year, I prepare a Thanksgiving dinner for 24 people at my mother's condo in Hollywood, Florida. It is a healing and horrifying event for me, full of joy and spite. You see, my mother, who has weighed 119 pounds for as long as I can remember, taught me from a young age to be afraid of food. Not all food, but certainly all foods with sugar and fat in them. I think my first word was Mommy and my second was skinny. Needless to say, she is an awful cook because she doesn't eat anything—not anything that normal people would want to eat.

Despite her hang-up (or maybe because of it), I actually like food. And I like to cook. I started to appreciate cooking in college thanks to a professor who was famous for his dinner parties. He was one of those borderline-inappropriate teachers, full of menace, intelligence, and sexuality. At one of his soirees I'd asked how he learned his craft and he said by reading cookbooks. Then he hit on me. That's it! I was inspired—not to be gay, but to cook. The idea that I could do something giving and seemingly selfless and still be the center of attention seemed magical. So, I started cooking for people (or, as a girlfriend recently accused me of doing, cooking at people). That's why I make such a big deal about Thanksgiving, flying in, from New York or Los Angeles or wherever I'm living at the time, to cook the holiday dinner at my mother and my extended family.

Last year I went all out. I got to her house a few days before the big meal to start stocking up: fresh-killed turkey, extra turkey parts to enrich the stock for the gravy, potatoes (sweet and regular), cream, sour cream, whipping cream, butter, sugar, flour. I filled my mother's fridge with some of her mortal enemies. She dealt with it. She likes having me there. She'd even had her one knife sharpened and borrowed a carving set.

I refused her help and tried not to be annoyed by her questions.

"Can't we use low-fat sour cream?"

"No."

"Why don't you use half the amount?"

"What's the point? It's once a year we eat like this!"

"Will you make a few Brussels sprouts without butter?"

"Fine. I can do that. Now, please leave me alone. I am cooking."

The [apricot-walnut stuffing](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Apricot-and-Walnut-Stuffing) (<http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Apricot-and-Walnut-Stuffing>) is the key to my Thanksgiving dinner. It is a recipe passed down from my college professor. It is rich and soul-satisfying. It makes an impact. It is talked about. I cook the stuffing outside of the bird.

So, last Thanksgiving, in the crucial moments before serving the meal, I put the stuffing in the oven next door to brown the top. (Mom's neighbors are snowbirds; she has the keys to their condo, and I took advantage of the second oven to prepare double the amount of food.) I ran over to my mom's to strain the Brussels sprouts. I went back next door to find a smoke-filled kitchen. I pulled the stuffing out. It was black and smoldering. I stormed back to my mother's kitchen and said, "We're screwed. Everything is ruined. Send everyone home." She went next door with me and tried to calm me down. I paced around screaming, "What's the point? Throw it away. The whole dinner is destroyed!"

My mother said, "Scrape the burnt off the top. Stop making a production." I wanted to make a production, the Marc's

Thanksgiving Dinner Is Perfect production.

"What do you know about food?" I said. "Who is going to eat this?"

"So what?" she said. "You're being a baby."

She was right. I was being a baby. I pulled some of the charred stuffing off and I set out the food. No one noticed anything wrong. The dinner was a hit. My relatives took huge helpings of mashed potatoes (my fluffiest yet) and commented on the juiciness of the bird. They went back for seconds and thirds of the stuffing. While I savored each bite and every compliment, my mother sat there across the table with her plate of plain Brussels sprouts and some of the charred stuffing.

Halfway through the meal, she said: "You know what, Marc? The burnt top is the best part." —*Marc Maron, stand-up comic and host of the podcast WTF with Marc Maron, at WTFpod.com*

Recipe: [Apricot and Walnut Stuffing](http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Apricot-and-Walnut-Stuffing) (<http://www.saveur.com/article/Recipes/Apricot-and-Walnut-Stuffing>)

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HERB ROAST CHICKEN WITH PAN SAUCE

Serves 4 to 6

Meme washed her chickens inside and out before cooking them, removing every last bit of fat, overlooked feathers, and any bruises, blemishes, or blood spots. She said if you didn't, it tasted too "chickeny." That bird was sanitized—or so she thought. I would never argue with Meme, but according to the USDA, washing chicken is not necessary. If the bird is contaminated, dangerous bacteria are not going to be affected by cold tap water. Washing the chicken actually increases the chance of cross-contamination; water that has touched raw chicken and splashed into the sink can potentially contaminate other food.

This recipe relies on a classic French preparation: stuffing the bird with aromatics, roasting it to perfection, and using the pan juices plus added shallots, wine, and stock to make a light sauce. There's not a lot to cloud the plate or palate or mask a mistake. I will often order chicken, seemingly the most boring dish on the menu, when trying a new restaurant. Simple roast chicken is the test of a good cook.

1 (4- to 5-pound) chicken
1 teaspoon dried herbes de Provence
3 bay leaves, preferably fresh
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 large lemon, quartered
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
1 large carrot, chopped
1 onion, preferably Vidalia, chopped
2 shallots, finely chopped
1/2 cup dry white wine
1 1/2 cups chicken stock (page 227) or low-fat, reduced-sodium chicken broth
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, cut into bits (optional)

Preheat the oven to 425°F. To prepare the chicken, trim the excess fat from inside of the chicken cavity. Season the cavity with the herbes de Provence, bay leaves, salt, and pepper. Squeeze lemon juice into the cavity and then insert the used lemon quarters. Rub butter over the skin and season with salt and pepper. Tie the ends of the drumsticks together with kitchen twine. Set the chicken in a roasting pan, on a rack if you have one.

Roast the chicken for 15 minutes, then decrease the heat to 350°F. Roast for an additional 15 minutes, then add the carrot and onion to the pan. Continue roasting, basting occasionally, until the juices run clear when the thickest part of the thigh is pierced with a knife, an additional 30 to 45 minutes. Remove the chicken to a cutting board and tent loosely with aluminum foil to keep warm. Using a slotted spoon, remove the vegetables to a warm platter and tent loosely with aluminum foil to keep warm.

To make the sauce, remove all but several tablespoons of the fat from the roasting pan and place the pan over medium heat. Add the shallots and saute, stirring frequently, until softened, about 2 minutes. Add the wine and cook until it is reduced by half, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the chicken stock and increase the heat to high, scraping the skillet with a wooden spoon to loosen the browned bits.

Cook until the sauce is slightly reduced, about 5 minutes more. Carve the chicken and pour any accumulated chicken juices from the cutting board into the roasting pan. Decrease the heat to medium. Whisk in the butter. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve the chicken with the sauce on the side.

THE POZOLE AT LA PALAPA is based on one of Barbara's mother's recipes. She is an artist living in Mexico City, and she often travels to the state of Jalisco to exhibit her paintings in Ajijic, an artists' colony, which is where she first ate this wonderful ancho chile-laced *pozole rojo*. It is an unusual pozole because most versions call for chile powder and add it at the end of cooking. Here, whole anchos are pureed and added earlier, so they infuse the dish more fully with their flavor and impart a rich color. We often serve this soup in espresso cups with demitasse spoons for parties. It also makes an easy and terrific main course for a family meal.

chicken and hominy soup

POZOLE ROJO

SERVES 6 TO 8 AS A FIRST COURSE, OR 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN COURSE

- 3 ancho chiles, seeded and membranes removed
- 2 cups water
- ½ cup coarsely chopped onion
- ½ cup coarsely chopped tomato
- ¼ cup corn oil
- 1 tablespoon crushed garlic
- 6 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 cups ½-inch-cubed cooked chicken (see Chicken for Stuffing, page 145)
- 1 (15-ounce) can hominy, rinsed and drained
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- Kosher salt

GARNISHES

- ½ cup chopped radishes
- 2 tablespoons dried Mexican oregano
- 2 teaspoons piquín chile powder
- 1 cup chopped avocado
- 1 cup shredded romaine lettuce
- Lime slices

In a small saucepan, combine the chiles and water and bring to a brisk simmer over medium-high heat. Lower the heat and simmer gently for about 15 minutes, or until softened. Drain the chiles, reserving the water. Transfer the chiles to a blender or food processor, add the onion and tomato, and process until smooth, adding the reserved water as needed to achieve a smooth consistency. Discard the remaining water.

In a skillet, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook for about 1 minute, or until it softens. Do not overcook. Add the tomato-chile paste (take care, as it will spatter) and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 5 minutes, or until cooked through and the oil rises to the top. Remove from the heat.

In a small stockpot, combine the broth, tomato-chile paste, and chicken and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the hominy, return to a boil, and cook until heated through. Add the cumin and about 1 teaspoon salt, then taste and add more salt if needed. If the soup seems too thick, thin with a little water.

Ladle the soup into 4-ounce ramekins, espresso cups, or similar dishes for a first course, or into regular-size bowls for a main course. Top with as many of the garnishes as desired and serve immediately.

SALMON HOT POT

Ishikari Nabe

Like in Alaska, salmon is a way of life on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island. For generations, fishermen there have flocked to the Ishikari River, where the salmon return to spawn every fall. For generations, too, they've enjoyed the area's namesake hot pot, cooked with their fresh catch. We got this authentic recipe from a restaurant owner whose great-grandfather opened the place in Ishikari Port in the nineteenth century to feed the crews of the local fishing boats. Along with salmon, this classic version of the dish calls for potatoes and yellow onions, vegetables introduced to Japan by Dutch traders about 400 years ago. You can cook the salmon with the skin on or off, as you desire. We prefer wild Alaskan king, sockeye, or Copper River salmon for this hot pot, but arctic char, sea trout, salmon trout, or farmed salmon work well, too.

SERVES 4

4 cups dashi (page 30)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup shiro miso (page 15)

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup mirin

1 medium Spanish onion (about $\frac{3}{4}$ pound),
cut crosswise into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick slices

$\frac{1}{4}$ small head green cabbage (about $\frac{1}{2}$ pound),
cut into bite-size pieces

2 medium Idaho potatoes (about 1 pound), peeled,
halved lengthwise, and cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick
slices

$\frac{1}{2}$ package (about $\frac{1}{2}$ pound) firm tofu, cut into
4 pieces

1 ounce harusame (page 14), soaked in water for
15 minutes

1 negi (page 10), sliced on an angle into 2-inch
pieces

$3\frac{1}{2}$ ounces (half of a 200-gram package) enoki
mushrooms, trimmed and pulled apart

4 ounces shiitake mushrooms (about 8 pieces),
stemmed

1 pound salmon fillet, halved lengthwise and sliced
into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick pieces

2 cups shungiku leaves (page 11), stemmed

1 tablespoon salmon roe, for garnish (optional)

Sansho (page 18), for accent

Prepare the broth by combining the dashi, miso, and mirin in a bowl, whisking to blend well; reserve.

Place the onion slices on the bottom of a hot pot and randomly pile the cabbage and potatoes on top of it. Pour in the reserved broth. Cover the pot and bring it to a boil over high heat. Decrease the heat to medium and simmer for 3 minutes.

Uncover the pot, and place the tofu, *harusame*, *negi*, enoki mushrooms, and shiitake mushrooms on top of the other ingredients, arranging each in a separate, neat bunch. Cover the pot again and simmer for 5 minutes more.

Uncover the pot and arrange the salmon slices on top of the other ingredients. Simmer until the salmon

continued

Wild sea bass with salmoriglio

Salmoriglio is a pungent marinade-cum-sauce from Sicily. It is traditionally made with oregano though I generally use marjoram, as we have a profusion in our vegetable garden during the summer. You can make the sauce a few days in advance—leaving the flavors to mature and intensify at room temperature (not in the refrigerator)—but add the lemon juice just before you are ready to use it. In the summer, I often serve this fish dish simply with sliced perfectly ripe tomatoes, drizzled with olive oil, and really good, chewy peasant-style bread.

Serves 4

4 wild sea bass fillets (with skin), about 6½ ounces each
1 tbsp olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
lemon wedges, to serve

Salmoriglio

4 small cloves garlic, peeled and roughly sliced
½ tsp good-quality sea salt
½ tsp dried red chile flakes
bunch of marjoram or oregano, leaves only
scant 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
½ lemon

First make the salmoriglio. Pound the garlic using a mortar and pestle to a rough paste, then add the salt and continue to pound until smooth. Add the chile and marjoram and pound lightly, then pour in the olive oil and stir well to combine. If using straightaway, squeeze over the lemon juice; otherwise, set aside, adding the lemon juice just before serving.

To cook the fish, preheat the broiler. On the skin side only, brush with olive oil and season generously with salt and pepper. Lay the fish, flesh side down, on the broiler rack and place under the heat.

Cook the sea bass fillets without turning for 5 to 6 minutes, or until the skin is blistered and deliciously crisp and the flesh underneath is delicately translucent.

Carefully transfer the fish fillets, skin side up, to warm plates and spoon over the salmoriglio. Serve at once, with lemon wedges, good bread or new potatoes, and a salad.

Salmoriglio is an excellent marinade for chicken or lamb, and is perfect for basting fish and red meat during cooking. Or you can simply spoon it over cooked fish (as here), meat, or vegetables before serving. It is particularly good smeared over broiled eggplants or roasted squash, or drizzled over ripe tomatoes.

