



# CAPRA'S KITCHEN

In the hands of this big-city star chef, rustic Italian cuisine never goes out of style

BY Julia Aitken ■ RECIPES BY Massimo Capra  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Edward Pond



**W** "WE SPENT 40 DAYS DRIVING THROUGH the hills around Rome searching for the best porchetta sandwich." No, Chef Massimo Capra isn't describing a recent food jaunt back to his native Italy. He's relating, with a chuckle, how he spent part of his compulsory military service there in 1980. During a NATO exercise while, as Capra puts it, "everyone else was jumping out of planes and other stuff," the soon-to-be chef and his colleagues in the heavy artillery arm of the Italian forces were on the lookout, not for the bad guys, but for the fixings for a decent veal parmigiana and a good, rustic pasta.

If Disney released a computer-animated movie about an Italian chef, he'd look like Massimo Capra. Generously proportioned, with an impressive handlebar moustache and an infectious laugh, Capra plays the part to a T. The chef-owner of the Toronto restaurant – and favourite celebrity hangout – Mistura and its upstairs supper club, Sopra, also writes a column for the *Globe and Mail*, makes regular television appearances and has a successful cookbook, *One Pot Italian Cooking*, to his name. And, Capra juggles it all with such panache it seems like one big giggle. This is a guy whose glass is brimful and he's loving it.

Thirty years on from those mealtime manoeuvres in the hills above Rome, it's still traditional food that commands Capra's attention. He admits to rarely getting excited about modern cuisine. And molecular gastronomy, with its foams and jellies to which some avant-garde chefs are so partial, leaves him cold. "There are too many

elements on the plate to really enjoy any of them," he explains.

With Capra, it's all about using good ingredients well. Such is his passion, he talks about a supermarket display of seasonal vegetables driving him "insane" – in a good way – with their beauty and freshness, and admits that his whole family are just a little bit crazy. "At every meal, we're getting excited about the next one," he explains.

Nothing wrong with that when the dishes are as pure in their flavours and as honest in their execution as the trio Capra has created for us here.

## Grilled Octopus with Potato Salad with Olives and Cubanelle Peppers

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

According to Massimo Capra, in Italy a cork is traditionally added to the liquid when cooking octopus to tenderize it but he admits this is a bit of an old wives' tale. Capra says simmering the octopus gently then letting it cool in the cooking liquid does just as good a job.

### POTATO SALAD:

2 cups (500 mL) 1/2-inch (1-cm) cubes peeled Yukon Gold potatoes (about 2 medium)  
1/4 cup (50 mL) extra-virgin olive oil  
2 tbsp (25 mL) fresh lemon juice  
2 cubanelle peppers, seeded and thinly sliced  
1 sweet onion, thinly sliced  
1/2 cup (125 mL) black olives, pitted  
1/4 tsp (1 mL) each sea salt and black pepper

### GRILLED OCTOPUS:

6 cups (1.5 L) water  
1 large carrot, finely chopped  
1 small onion, finely chopped  
1 stalk celery, finely chopped



4 cloves garlic, crushed  
2 tbsp (25 mL) red wine vinegar  
1 tbsp (15 mL) sea salt  
1 tsp (5 mL) black peppercorns  
4 cleaned octopus (about 8 oz/250 g each)  
1/4 cup (50 mL) extra-virgin olive oil  
2 tbsp (25 mL) fresh lemon juice  
Peeled, seeded and diced tomato for garnish  
Pea shoots for garnish

**POTATO SALAD:** In a saucepan of boiling, salted water, cook potatoes for about 10 minutes or until tender. Drain well. In a bowl, toss the potatoes gently with 2 tbsp (25 mL) oil and the lemon juice. Set aside. In a heavy skillet, heat remaining oil over high heat. Add peppers and onion; cook, stirring often, for about 6 minutes or until peppers and onion are softened and browned. Remove the skillet from the heat; stir in olives, salt and pepper. Let stand for 5 minutes. Stir pepper mixture to scrape up any browned bits from bottom of skillet. Add pepper mixture to potatoes; toss gently. Taste and add more salt and pepper if necessary. Set aside at room temperature until ready to serve.

**GRILLED OCTOPUS:** In a large saucepan, combine water, carrot, onion, celery, garlic, vinegar, salt and peppercorns. Bring to a boil over high heat; boil, covered, for 10 minutes for the flavours to blend. Add octopus to the saucepan; return water to a boil. Reduce the heat to maintain a gentle simmer; cook, covered, for 15 minutes or until octopus are tender. Remove the saucepan from the heat. Let stand, covered, for 1 hour. Remove octopus from the saucepan; drain well. (Broth can be strained then frozen for use in your favourite fish soup recipe.) In a bowl, toss octopus with 2 tbsp (25 mL) olive oil and 1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt.

Preheat the barbecue to high. Grill the octopus for 3 to 4 minutes, turning often, until browned and warmed through. Alternatively, heat an oiled ridged grill pan over high heat; cook the octopus (in batches if necessary) for 3 to 4 minutes, turning often, until browned and warmed through.

To serve, divide potato salad among 4 plates. Cut each octopus lengthwise into quarters. Top each portion of potato salad with 4 pieces of octopus. Drizzle with lemon juice and remaining olive oil. Garnish each plate with diced tomato and pea shoots.



## Kobe Beef Strip Loins with Glazed Heirloom Carrots

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

Massimo Capra likes to serve these succulent steaks with a potato-mascarpone purée and rosemary-roasted potatoes, but the glazed carrot accompaniment he's chosen here adds a touch of colour. Chef Capra prefers American Kobe beef as it's less fatty and substantially cheaper than Japanese Kobe. Either variety can be hard to find and both are undeniably expensive; if you prefer, substitute top-quality, well-marbled, well-aged regular beef strip loin steaks instead.

### GLAZED HEIRLOOM CARROTS:

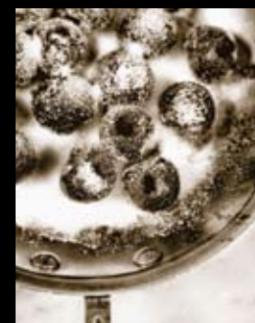
3 bunches 6-inch (15-cm) carrots with tops (about 22)  
2 tbsp (25 mL) unsalted butter, melted  
1 tbsp (15 mL) olive oil  
3 cloves garlic, minced  
1/4 tsp (1 mL) each sea salt and black pepper

### KOBE BEEF STRIP LOINS:

1 tbsp (15 mL) olive oil  
4 1-1/2-inch (4-cm) thick Kobe beef strip loin steaks (6 oz/175 g each)  
3/4 tsp (4 mL) each sea salt and black pepper  
2 tbsp (25 mL) unsalted butter  
1-1/2 tsp (7 mL) finely minced fresh rosemary  
1-1/2 tsp (7 mL) finely minced fresh sage  
1-1/2 tsp (7 mL) finely minced fresh thyme  
1-1/2 tsp (7 mL) minced garlic

**GLAZED HEIRLOOM CARROTS:** Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Trim the bottoms and tops of carrots, leaving just a little green top on each one. Scrub and dry carrots; cut in half lengthwise. In a large bowl, combine butter, oil, garlic, salt and pepper; add carrots and toss to combine. On large, greased, rimmed baking sheet, spread carrots out, cut side up, in a single layer. Bake in the centre of oven for 30 minutes. Turn carrots over; bake for 15 to 20 minutes or until carrots are tender and browned. Keep warm until ready to serve.

**KOBE BEEF STRIP LOINS:** Heat a large heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add oil, tilting skillet to coat with oil. Sprinkle steaks



on both sides with salt and pepper. Sear steaks for about 4 minutes on each side for medium-rare.

While steaks are cooking, in a small saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Add rosemary, sage, thyme and garlic; cook, stirring, for 2 minutes. When steaks are ready,

remove them to a cutting board. Brush each with butter mixture. Cover loosely and let stand for 10 minutes before serving.

To serve, cut the steaks crosswise into thin slices. Divide carrots among 4 dinner plates; drape slices of steak over each portion of carrots.

## Poached Cherry Meringues with Vanilla Ice Cream

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

Massimo Capra has a passion for meringue and admits to enjoying a portion of it with whipped cream every single day. This pretty, stacked version is wonderful during cherry season but works well, too, in the fall with good-quality sour cherries from a jar.

### MERINGUES:

2 egg whites (at room temperature)  
1/4 tsp (1 mL) fresh lemon juice  
1/2 cup (125 mL) granulated sugar  
1/2 tsp (2 mL) vanilla

### POACHED CHERRIES:

1/3 cup (75 mL) granulated sugar  
1/4 cup (50 mL) cherry brandy  
1/4 cup (50 mL) white wine  
1 tsp (5 mL) grated lemon zest  
1 lb (500 g) fresh sweet cherries, pitted and cut in half or 2 cups (500 mL) drained, jarred, pitted sour cherries  
2 tsp (10 mL) fresh lemon juice  
1-1/2 cups (375 mL) vanilla ice cream  
Mint leaves for garnish  
White-chocolate-dipped cherries (optional)

**MERINGUES:** Preheat the oven to 225°F (107°C). On a piece of parchment paper large enough to line a large baking sheet and using a pencil, trace twelve 2-inch (5-cm) squares at least 1 inch (2.5 cm)

apart. Place parchment on baking sheet penciled side down. In a bowl, beat egg whites and lemon juice until soft peaks form. Gradually add two-thirds of the sugar, then vanilla, beating until stiff peaks form. Gradually fold in the remaining sugar. Spoon meringue into a piping bag fitted with a 1/2-inch (1-cm) round tip. Pipe meringue onto penciled squares on lined baking sheet. Alternatively, spread about 2 tbsp (25 mL) meringue onto each square with a blunt knife or palette knife. Use knife to level tops of squares. Any remaining meringue can be formed into rounds in spaces on the baking sheet.

Bake in the centre of the oven for about 1 hour or until meringues are crisp and dry. Turn oven off; leave meringues in oven for 30 minutes. Remove meringues from the oven; let cool to room temperature on the baking sheet on a wire rack. Carefully lift meringues off the paper. Store in an airtight container until ready to serve.

**POACHED CHERRIES:** In a large non-reactive skillet, combine sugar, cherry brandy, white wine and lemon zest. Cook over high heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Add cherries. Reduce heat to maintain a simmer; cook, uncovered and stirring gently occasionally, for about 10 minutes for fresh cherries, 5 minutes for jarred, until cherries are just tender. Drain cherries well through a fine sieve, reserving cooking juices. Return juices to saucepan. Cook over medium-high heat for 1 to 2 minutes or until thickened and syrupy. Stir in cherries and lemon juice; set aside to cool completely.

To serve, spread ice cream on each of 8 meringue squares, dividing evenly. Place 1 ice-cream-topped meringue on each of 4 dessert plates. Arrange 4 to 6 cherries over ice cream. Repeat layers once. Top each stack with remaining meringues and a small spoonful of cherries. Garnish each plate with any remaining cherries and syrup, and white-chocolate-dipped cherries, if using. (A)

