

# Gill Arno's Divergent Amatriciana for Forbes Graham

March 15th 2022

This pasta sauce is my own personal take on one of Italy's most classic recipes. I call it "divergent" because my Italian friends tend to say that it has nothing to do with the Traditional Amatriciana Dogma (they are probably right), and also because over time my formula has slowly changed quite a bit, so this is just the current state of my getting it wrong. I have never been to Amatrice, the town in Central Italy from where it originated... but who cares? This is one of my favourite sauces, and my friends also seem to like it a lot (including the Italian ones). All that being said, I don't think I've ever made it at the EI series simply because it is not vegetarian. But in the virtual world of Lockdownland one doesn't have to necessarily eat it, so I've decided to take this opportunity to reveal all the secrets of my own version.

Finding the right ingredients is the first important step. The most difficult to find outside of Italy are guanciale and good pancetta. Pancetta is often translated to English with bacon. It is the same meat cut (pork belly), but the one I prefer is aged with herbs and much less fatty. So - do what you can, or whatever you want, but please stay away from Oscar Mayer or Boar's Head (haha). Guanciale is the mostly fatty meat that comes from the pork's cheeks, and if aged well it develops a sweet aromatic flavor that I think is necessary for success.

Also important are the chili peppers used. My trusty Italian store (which is NOT Eataly, if you know what I am talking about) has two types that work perfectly: Diavoletti Rossi (it means little red devils) which are tiny and of course fiery, and Zafaran, which are much larger and milder, and super fragrant. By the way, the word Zafaran comes from the Arabic *za faran*, which means saffron, apparently because these dried peppers' skin is extra-thin and they can be ground to a dust as fine as powdered saffron. Such ground chili pepper is essentially an Italian version of the originally Spanish pimentón, aka paprika - although it is well-known that all peppers and chiles come from Central America. Regardless, I use them rehydrated and then peeled, and I will explain why and how below. I also like to use other types of chili peppers like Cascabel (aka Rattle Chile) and Choricero/Cuerno de Cabra, and I like to try out different types in varying mixes.



Starting ingredients. The Cascabel chiles are the black ones, the big ones are Zafaran and the tiny are the Diavoletti Rossi. Note that I only use about one inch and a half of the pancetta and guanciale.



The onion is chopped coarsely, the meat is thinly sliced (especially the guanciale).



Guanciale rendering with the hot chiles.



Slowly caramelizing - just a moment before the "pchhh!" point.

Let's proceed now step by step:

I begin by filling my largest pasta pot with water, cover it and put it on the largest stove burner. Then I put 2 inches of water in a small pot, and add all the chiles, making small cuts around the stalk so that water can seep in. As the chili peppers slowly become meaty, the water will become a chili broth, which will be used later on.

Put the small spicy chili (diavoletti) in a large frying pan with a spoonful of olive oil. Keep an eye on them as they begin to fry, then add the guanciale and lower the heat, letting it gently render its fat.

At this point I turn up the heat and add the pancetta, and a moment later the chopped onion. Then I lower the fire again in order to let the onion some time to caramelize with the pork and the hot chiles.

In the meanwhile I pull the larger chili peppers from the chili broth and cool them in running water, then slice them the long way and remove all the seeds. If their pulp has already reached the right softness I just scoop it out on a cutting board with a spoon or knife, otherwise I drop them in their boiling broth for a little longer. When they are soft and meaty I peel them and drop the skins back into the broth, which by now will have turned dark and reduced to about one inch.

Back to the frying pan - now all excess water from the onions will have evaporated, all the pork fat will be rendered and the pan's bottom will start to darken. Raise the heat, and then add half a glass of white wine. Pchhh! I love the sound it makes, and the aromatic cloud that mushrooms above the pan. I also find it quite satisfying to see the dark residue at the bottom of the pan washing out to enrich the sauce.

Perhaps I should remind you to pour yourself a glass of wine, in case you haven't already thought about it. Every really good cook I've met maintains that it is essential for best results.

It is now time to hash the peppers' pulp into a puree, which is added to the frying pan with the meat, the onion and the spicy diavoletti. Mix all well, and then add one 14 oz can of tomatoes. My favourite kind, if it matters, are cherry tomatoes in tomato sauce. Then I add about two thirds of the chili broth and raise the heat. The remaining will be added if necessary as the sauce





Chili peppers puree.



The sauce is slowly reducing while the pasta boils.



Yummmmm..... satisfaction. Looks like tonight I am by myself instead of in Phill's kitchen with a bunch of friends. But tomorrow I will make sure I'll share the rest of the sauce with someone.

reduces. The point here is to achieve the perfect density, which is a matter of individual preference.

By now, the water will be boiling in the big pot. Add salt, and then the pasta. Bucatini are the most commonly used, but I prefer rigatoni.

While the pasta boils add salt to the sauce (if necessary), a good handful of finely chopped parsley and a little heavy cream, or stracciatella cheese if you can find it. Keep stirring.

I drain the pasta half a minute before it is entirely cooked, then I drop it in the sauce pan and keep stirring until it all reaches the perfect amalgamation.

As the photos show, I forgot to get parsley. Not a biggie.. What is essential is to add on top of the pasta plate a generous spoonful of aged pecorino. The Romano kind works well, but why not trying more aromatic types, like Fiore Sardo? Wikipedia tells me that the origin of this variety of sheep milk cheese from Sardinia dates back to the Nuragic Age (between 3900 and 2750 BCE), so it predates the Roman colonization of Sardinia.

That's it - as mamma says, eat your pasta while it's hot!

List of ingredients:

(for 3 people; please look at the photos to get a sense of the quantities)

- olive oil
- aged guanciale
- pancetta pepata
- chili peppers
- onion
- white wine
- 14 oz can of tomatoes
- stracciatella or heavy cream
- parsley
- aged pecorino (grated)

If you are in NY, you can find all the ingredients (except for the white wine and parsley) at Buonitalia, a rather unpretentious Italian food store hidden in the basement floor of the Chelsea Market.