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In Napa, it's one big family affair when it comes to malfatti

- Cynthia Liu
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Spinach dumplings called malfatti have been an old-time Napa favorite for decades. Malfatti, which literally means "badly made" in Italian, are believed to have been invented by mistake when extra ravioli filling was ingeniously recycled into dumplings.

"We're in every potluck in Napa, every function, Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve," said Peter Ibrahim of Lawler's, a liquor store that has been selling malfatti and ravioli as takeout since the 1950s. Lawler's has been known to sell 12,000 malfatti on Christmas Eve. "Between us and the Depot, we probably feed all of Napa on Christmas Eve."

Lawler's and the Depot Hotel are the two places known for malfatti, and many locals believe that malfatti were invented in Napa. However, there are malfatti in Italy, as well as variations, such as spinach gnocchi, Swiss chard malfatti and spinach ricotta gnudi.

Chef Mia Chambers, who runs Cucina con Mia cooking school in Italy, explained that in Italy, they use ingredients such as potatoes, flour, eggs or cheese as a binder; in Napa, they used day-old bread. "As we all know, Italians don't waste anything, so they took that ingenuity to make malfatti."

The Napa malfatti contain spinach, eggs, bread and cheese. Lawler's forgoes the cheese, while the Depot's Clemente Cittoni uses Parmesan cheese as well as fresh basil pesto. The dough is rolled into dowels, then cut into shorter pieces. The dumplings are poached in boiling water until they float.

Chambers finds that the addition of bread to the malfatti gives it a rustic texture. "It's good because it can stand up to the heavy meat sauce they use," she said.

The Lawler's malfatti recipe comes from Rosi Martini, Genevieve Lawler's mother. Although Ibrahim has carried on the tradition for 15 years, he does not know the details of how Martini came to make the malfatti, and both Lawler and her son, Ray, are deceased.

The Depot's malfatti came into existence around 1930, when owner Teresa Tamburelli had to feed a hungry baseball team. All she had left that day was ravioli filling, so she made dumplings with the filling, as she remembered her mother had done. Tamburelli and Martini were sisters, and there is no rivalry between Lawler's and the Depot. Once, when Ibrahim ran out of sauce, he borrowed tomato sauce from the Depot to make more of their own. In fact, Ibrahim is afraid he will not be able to accommodate the overflow if Cittoni, who has been the Depot's chef since 1971, retires.

"I want him to be open," said Ibrahim. Cittoni came to the Depot in 1961 as a busboy and dishwasher, and worked with Tamburelli until her death a decade later. His 40-plus years of experience with making pasta is particularly evident with his potato gnocchi.

Malfatti and ravioli are \$3.25 a dozen at Lawler's. For \$25, one can feed five people with takeout from Lawler's.

For example, when Ralph Shanks' parents lived in Napa, the Shanks family had a tradition of eating takeout malfatti from the Depot. Instead of going out for Kentucky Fried Chicken, they would get malfatti, said Lisa Shanks.

At the Depot, locals come in the back door and wait in the kitchen with pots in hand for malfatti to go. Lawler's will also fill up customers' own containers. On Christmas Eve, people used to wait up to four hours for their malfatti, but now locals can drop off their containers and the store will call them when their order is ready. Ibrahim said he has customers from as far as Seattle and New York, but doesn't ship malfatti because he is afraid the quality will be compromised. Maintaining and even improving upon the standards set by the Lawlers is paramount to Ibrahim's family, which bought the liquor store from Ray Lawler.

"He knew we would run it the way he wanted to run it," said Ibrahim. His mother, Nadia, makes malfatti and ravioli seven days a week. Napa-inspired malfatti has even

made it into the cookbook for the restaurant Terra, where it is paired with a rabbit and forest mushroom cacciatore sauce. Co-owner Lissa Doumani said the recipe was derived from Lawler's, where she worked during high school.

"I like Lawler's malfatti because they're smaller and I worked there, but I probably like the Depot sauce better -- the flavor is richer," said Doumani. Indeed, Cittoni's sauce recipe, passed down from Tamburelli, is a labor of love that involves sauteing veal, vegetables and aromatics in olive oil, reserving some of the fat that has been rendered from the veal. Then he simmers the veal with pesto, tomatoes and red wine for several hours.

Toward the end, Cittoni adds dried mushrooms and prepares a roux from the reserved veal fat to thicken the sauce. The Tamburelli family (son Nick is now 93) just sold the Depot. After taking this month off, there will be a trial period in September to determine if Cittoni remains as the chef or will retire.

Finding malfatti

You can find malfatti at Lawler's Liquors, 2232 Jefferson St., Napa, (707) 226-9311; and at the Depot Hotel 806 Fourth St., Napa, (707) 252-4477.

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