



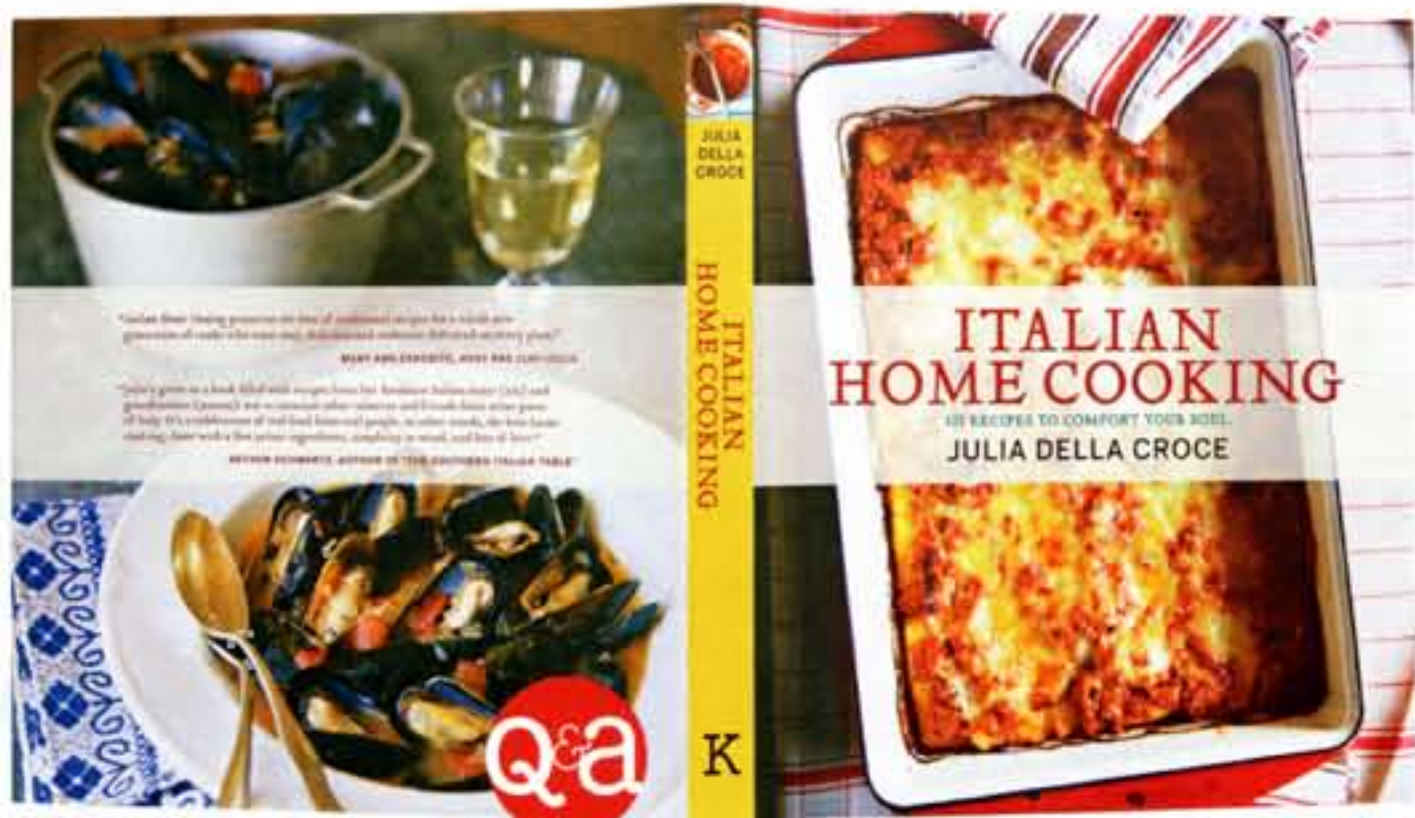
House Beautiful  
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## COOKBOOK

### Italian Home Cooking

Food "lovingly cooked at home" gives us an exquisite sense of well-being and warmth, says Julia della Croce. (Especially if it's Italian.)

Interview by  
SARAH McCOLL



"In America, we call it 'comfort food.' The Italians call it *cucina casalinga*, 'home cuisine.' It is the Italian food I love best." JULIA DELLA CROCE

ITALIAN HOME COOKING  
BY JULIA DELLA CROCE  
(KYLE BOOKS), \$30

**SARAH McCOLL:** I'm not exaggerating when I say that after reading your book, I wanted to cook every single recipe.

**JULIA DELLA CROCE:** And you can! It's just simple home cooking—but the best of it.

**I don't think I really understood Italian cooking before. I'm surprised that the ingredients are so basic—and so few.**

What the Italians are so good at is knowing how to do as little as possible to ingredients to get the flavor from them. It's not a chef's cookbook, with complicated, time-consuming recipes and a three-page list of ingredients where you're thinking, "Why do I want... This is gonna take me..." I just want to get dinner on the table!

If the ingredients are fresh and you use good olive oil, good vinegar, genuine cheese, you simply don't need a lot of them. I remember my mother saying

that when she was growing up in Italy, they didn't use herbs a lot. They relied on the flavor of the ingredients. They might put basil in the tomato sauce or rosemary in the roast, but that was it. And certainly the Italians don't use huge amounts of garlic.

**They don't?** They do not. Never to the extent that Italian-Americans do, where they just kill things with garlic. Or just, in general, by trying to be inventive and before you know it, there's too much going on. You'll see dishes in some of the best restaurants like fresh pasta with pesto and sun-dried tomatoes and broccoli and... *ach!* It doesn't work. You're destroying it. Pesto already has all these amazing things in it.

**I was heartened to see a 30-minute tomato sauce. I thought Italians cooked it all day.** I have to dispel that myth in every book I write. If you cook

a sauce all day long, you ruin it. You have to cook tomatoes quickly. Another thing: Italians never put sugar in tomato sauce. Heresy! They use carrots, which sweeten it naturally.

**What comfort food would you make on a cold, gray day?**

If there are enough people to cook for, polenta. My kids love it. A great, really simple thing to do if you don't have time: make the polenta and put something like Taleggio cheese on top. That's it. Serve it with greens or a salad. Now, that's not slimming, but so what? Everything in moderation.

**There's something so sumptuous about your perspective on food. It's not punishing.**

The Italians are many things—I mean, they're not perfect—but one thing they're not is puritanical. And they're certainly not puritanical about food. They know how to enjoy it! >>

## COOKBOOK JULIA DELLA CROCE

### LUISA PETRUCCI'S OVEN-FRIED CHICKEN WITH BREAD CRUMBS

Serves 4

I heard about Luisa Petrucci's home cooking from her daughter, who talked so lovingly about her mother's food that I couldn't resist asking for her recipes. Luisa emigrated from Umbria but learned to cook from her Sicilian mother-in-law. This Sicilian version of oven-fried chicken, with its delightfully crunchy coating and moist, tender meat, is so similar to deep-fried chicken that you'll hardly be able to tell the difference.

- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 3½ pound cut-up free-range or organic chicken and its liver
- 1 cup lightly toasted panko crumbs or bread crumbs
- ¼ cup finely, freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, Pecorino Romano, or Grana Padano cheese
- 3 large cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 1 teaspoon milk



- 1 Preheat an oven to 350 degrees. Grease an ample baking pan with olive oil.
- 2 Trim excess fat from the chicken pieces and discard. Trim any fat or membranes from the liver. Wash the chicken and pat dry with absorbent paper towels. Keep the wing tips intact and cut the wings at the joint to separate the drumettes.
- 3 Combine the bread crumbs, grated cheese, garlic, parsley, salt, and pepper to taste and spread on a sheet of waxed paper or on a platter. Beat the eggs and milk in a wide bowl next to the waxed paper. Roll the chicken pieces in the crumb mixture. Dip each piece in the beaten egg and roll once again in

- the crumb mixture. Arrange them in the baking pan. Drizzle evenly with olive oil.
- 4 Bake the chicken until golden and cooked through, about 30 minutes for breast pieces and 40 minutes for dark meat, or until an instant-read meat thermometer registers 160 degrees. Be careful not to overcook. Allow the chicken to settle for 10 minutes before serving hot.

### Sarah Makes the Chicken

Not one to be intimidated by glamour shots of food (Oh, who am I kidding? Yes, I am), I stared at the photo of Luisa's chicken—luscious perfection!—and thought: You, too, can do it. So I took a deep breath, poured a glass of wine, pulled my apron strings taut, and confidently set about trimming excess fat, cutting wing joints, separating drumettes. When I tossed the warm bread crumbs, fragrant garlic, and nutty-smelling Parmesan with my fingertips, I knew very good things were ahead. Okay, I might have over-toasted the "lightly toasted" bread crumbs trying to insouciantly shake the pan. Julia Child-style. But no matter: an hour later, hot from the oven, my chicken was golden, gorgeous, and, best of all, scrumptious. It's still hard for me to believe that such humble ingredients and unfussy preparation could yield a dish as tasty as Luisa Petrucci's chicken. In the middle of the night, I tiptoed into our dark kitchen and popped open the leftovers. Yes, even cold: a crunchy delight. ♦