

Searching for Johnny Marzetti: 2 men, a myth and a legendary hot dish

By Monica Kass Rogers

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Johnny Marzetti, the baked pasta dish with tomato and meat sauce, is a Midwest favorite, with origins in Columbus, Ohio. This version is made with roasted tomatoes and onions that flavor the meat and tomato sauce. (Monica Kass Rogers/for the Chicago Tribune)

Chef Avishar Barua places the flat, bronze disk he uses to extrude creste di galli (cock's-comb-shaped) pasta, into my hand. The disk is warm from the heat of the kitchen where Barua makes his primo version of Johnny Marzetti, Columbus, Ohio's signature dish.

Barua's Marzetti is a many-splendored thing: pasta dough using spent grain from the Middle West Spirits distillery attached to his

Service Bar restaurant, tomato sauce from a secret recipe handed down from the distillery owners' Italian grandmother, a five-meat Bolognese, three cheeses, and chile-oil sauteed mushrooms, all baked and oozing together under a cap of house-made garlic bread.

Johnny Marzetti never tasted so good.

A more humble version, a combination of ground meat, noodles and sauce with melted cheese, has pretty much defined "iconic" in the American comfort dish realm for more than 100 years. Called Roman Holiday, Tallorini, Noodles Napoli, Salmagundi, Yumzetti and even Irish Monkey in midcentury cookbooks, Marzetti-esque casseroles have long been a meaty mainstay at potlucks, sporting event banquets and tailgating parties. Home cooks across America still lean on them as what's-for-dinner. But only Columbus has enshrined one as its culinary signature.

In fact, Columbus culture is so steeped in Johnny Marzetti, the phrase "making a Marzetti" has become synonymous here with making a casserole. "Sure," says Nick Ray, sitting at the bar at the India Oak Bar & Grill with a big bowl of the saucy stuff. "Everybody loves a Marzetti. We all ate them in the school cafeterias, and at least once a week, your mom would make a Marzetti with whatever was left in the fridge."

These days, typical versions of Johnny Marzetti aren't printed on restaurant menus. More often, they're scrawled on the wall of lunch specials at neighborhood bars and diners, joining hearty stalwarts like stuffed cabbage, and kraut and sausage. Meanwhile, citing

health consciousness, Columbus school lunch programs recently evolved away from the rich dish, a move that has both heightened nostalgia and made it likely that future generations of Columbus natives won't know the casserole's origins.

Those origins intrigue, because before there was a hot dish, there was a Johnny. Actually — two of them: a father and his son. Johnny Sr., who was born in 1836 and died Christmas Day 1899, was one of Columbus' most widely known and successful businessmen. Starting in 1861 as a produce vendor with a stand at the corner of Gay and High streets, he would go on to make a fortune in real estate deals, owning the entire block he started on, plus another at Euclid Avenue and High Street, and the entire frontage from Euclid to Seventh Avenue. His son Johnny Jr., a handsome, dapper man, followed in his father's footsteps in real estate before an untimely death in 1872 at age 32.

The famous dish that bears the Johnnys' name is fabled to have started with Joe and Teresa Marzetti, Johnny Sr.'s brother and sister-in-law (Johnny Jr.'s aunt and uncle), who operated a restaurant called Marzetti's, which opened in 1896 at the corner of 10th Avenue and High Street, and expanded to two more locations. (In a 1977 letter, Joe and Teresa's daughter Gertrude includes a family tree substantiating that John Marzetti Sr. was her father's brother. Census and death records bear this out.)

But the T. Marzetti Co. (yes, of the famous salad dressings) that grew out of the now-defunct regional restaurant empire says Teresa never put the dish on the menu. And it can't confirm the legend that the dish was Johnny's favorite food or that Teresa

"invented" the dish. That's not to rule out the possibility that the dish was served as an off-menu special, a spokesman for the company allows. Or, that a well-meaning representative for the restaurant may have circulated the home-cook version of the dish that's been published far and wide as "The Original Johnny Marzetti."

Slippery attributions aside, the dish has survived. It cycled through simple from-scratch renditions of the 1900s through 1930s. It morphed into a piquant version using Arturo brand sauce and green olives called Johnny Mazetti that was served by U.S. Army commissaries in the Panama Canal Zone. It survived the icky canned-soup iterations of the '50s through '70s. And it now is rising to better, scratch-made variations from chefs such as Barua, and Bill Glover at the Hilton Columbus Downtown, who does a pork belly version.

Interestingly, although Barua didn't dig through the Columbus Dispatch archives to find inspiration for the chile oil and pork he has in his recipe, the first appearance of the dish in the newspaper's April 11, 1916, edition was a spicy rendition. Called John Marzetti, the recipe, credited to Mrs. George T. Gill, had ground pork, chili powder, cayenne pepper, tomatoes and onion in the mix and was baked with copious amounts of cream cheese and homemade egg noodles.

Milder Marzettis favored by school cafeterias decades later were made with beefy tomato sauces. Some added green peppers and/or mushrooms. A few included celery. And most came with a hefty hunk of garlic bread alongside. These are the sort served at

such Columbus spots as Nancy's Home Cooking, German Village Coffee Shop, Plank's Cafe, India Oak Bar & Grill and Tommy's Diner. At Tommy's, the Pappas family has been making Johnny Marzetti for 29 years (tomato sauce, paste, diced tomatoes and ground beef with green pepper and onions, no mushrooms.) At Plank's, cook Kelly Black has been making the dish for 32 years, from a recipe she got from previous cook Nelly Moore, who'd made it since the '30s. Plank's version is made with ground celery, onion and bell pepper, simmered for several hours in tomato puree and diced tomatoes. Tomato juice and browned ground beef are added later.

Accessibility is key, but the cooks who do these mild versions keep them from being boring by using spicier meat blends and sharper cheese. Some prefer red peppers over green because they're less bitter. Others add splashes of vinegar or Worcestershire sauce to cut the fat.

At Kolache Republic, baker of large, soft-bun Eastern European kolaches, Doug Sauer, Rick Jardiolin and Dusty Kotchou put Italian sausage in the Johnny Marzetti-stuffed version of their product. And for the Marzetti served at India Oak Bar & Grill, kitchen manager Dawn Hunt sidesteps Italian cheese in favor of sharp cheddar.

Paul Panzera, who came to Columbus from the Abruzzo region of Italy when he was 7, has been serving Johnny Marzetti at his restaurant Paul's Fifth Avenue as a weekly lunch special since he opened the place 52 years ago. Like Barua, Panzera creates two sauces that are combined in the dish — one with imported peeled plum tomatoes, peppers, onion, garlic and herbs and the other with

garlic, onion, crushed tomato, ground beef and Italian sausage. Also like Barua, Panzera prefers a noodle extruded through a bronze die, with ridges on the sides, "because those hold the sauce better."

If you really want to elevate the dish, "Make your sauce from scratch!" says Barua. To simplify the process, put the oven to work for you, roasting the tomatoes and onions to melting, caramelized sweetness as I've done in the recipe here. The resulting flavor is much deeper, richer and worthy of the memory of Columbus' favorite Johnnys.

Monica Kass Rogers is a freelance writer and photographer.



The tomatoes for the sauce are first roasted with garlic and thyme to deepen their flavor. (Monica Kass Rogers /Chicago Tribune)

Johnny Marzetti casserole

Prep: 1 hour, 30 minutes

This version of the dish, developed by Monica Kass Rogers, calls for roasting tomatoes and onions to deepen their flavor, then

combining them in the tomato sauce. The meat is cooked separately, then added to that tomato sauce. Finally, noodles are tossed with the sauce and Parmesan, studded with tiny mozzarella balls and baked until gooey and awesome.

Oven-roasted tomatoes and onions:

6 cloves garlic, peeled, minced

2 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves, minced (about 8 sprigs)

2 tablespoons olive oil, divided

4 large white or yellow onions, peeled, cut into rings

2 tablespoons olive oil

3 cloves garlic, peeled, minced, plus 6 cloves garlic, peeled, minced

1 tablespoons fresh minced oregano leaves

1 small can San Marzano tomato paste

1 teaspoon fresh cracked black pepper

1/2 pound fresh, mild Italian sausage, casings removed

1/2 pound ground round (beef)

1/2 green bell pepper, seeded, very finely chopped, optional

1 package (12 ounces) medium-wide curly egg noodles *or* substitute gigli noodles

1/2 pound Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, finely grated

1 1/2 cups fresh mozzarella pearls

1 For the tomatoes and onions: Heat oven to 375 degrees. Halve the tomatoes lengthwise. Scoop out the flesh and seeds from the inside; place these tomato innards in a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Set pan aside. Cover a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Place the Roma "shells," cut-side up, in rows on the baking sheet. Sprinkle with the garlic and thyme. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil. Set aside.

2 Place onions in a Dutch oven. Sprinkle with the water and remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil. Cover. Place the sheet of tomatoes and Dutch oven of onions in oven; roast, 40 minutes. Reduce heat to 350; remove the cover from the onions. Continue roasting onions and tomatoes until tomatoes are flattened and browned on the edges and the onions are cooked down and caramelized, another 40 minutes.

3 For the tomato sauce: While the vegetables are roasting, place the saucepan with the raw tomato innards on the stovetop over very low heat. Mash with a potato masher or partially blend with an immersion blender. Add the wine, 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, 3 cloves minced garlic and oregano; simmer, stirring occasionally, 40 minutes. Whisk in the tomato paste; continue simmering, 20 minutes. Add a bit more red wine or a bit of water if the sauce is too thick. Adjust seasoning to taste with salt and pepper; set aside.

4 In a large skillet over medium heat, cook the 6 cloves minced garlic in the remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil, adding the water to

prevent browning; cook until soft, 1 minute. Transfer the garlic to a bowl with a slotted spoon. Return the skillet to the stovetop over medium heat. Add the sausage and ground beef; cook, breaking up with a spatula, until browned and cooked through. Mix the garlic back into the meat. Set aside, covered.

5 When the Roma tomatoes and onions have finished roasting, leave the oven on, but remove the vegetables. Cool the tomatoes until they can be handled. Slip off the tomato skins. (Save them to eat later — they're good!) Chop the roasted tomato flesh; add to the tomato sauce in the saucepan. Chop and stir in the caramelized onions. Stir in the meats. Stir in the diced green pepper (if using.) Keep sauce warm.

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6 Cook and drain the noodles according to package directions.

7 Mix the cooked noodles with the sauce and the grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese; fill the casserole dish with the mixture. Dot the top with the mozzarella pearls. Bake in the 350

degree oven until the cheese has melted and casserole is hot and bubbly, 20 minutes. Serve hot with salad and garlic bread.

Nutrition information per serving: 596 calories, 32 g fat, 13 g saturated fat, 127 mg cholesterol, 48 g carbohydrates, 12 g sugar, 31 g protein, 1,006 mg sodium, 5 g fiber

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