

Making Stuffed Pasta

A step-by-step guide to preparing regional Italian dishes

BY DANIEL C. ROSATI

Flour, water, eggs, and oil. Combine these most basic ingredients and something amazing happens—you create pasta.

I grew up in an Italian-American household, and pasta was a major part of our weekly menu. As a child, I thought pasta came in two forms, the dry commercial style (or *maccherone* as we referred to all dry pasta) or frozen cavatelli and ravioli. It wasn't until I was seventeen, on a trip to Italy, that I encountered fresh pasta. Walking through the streets of Florence, I came upon three old women seated behind a makeshift table outside a rustic trattoria. From a distance, I thought they were shaping small figures out of clay. In fact, they were making tortellini. That inspired me to learn to make pasta myself. Later I was able to hone my skills during the seven years I spent as assistant to cooking authority Giuliano Bugialli, who's made a special study of regional Italian pasta dishes.

As a cooking instructor, most of the classes I teach are on authentic regional Italian cuisine, and the most commonly requested pasta dishes are stuffed pastas, or *pasta ripiena*, as they are known in Italy. Of the three I'm about to share with you, two come from neighboring provinces in the northern part of Italy's peninsula: *pansoti* (see photo on p. 24) from Liguria and *cappelletti* (as shown on p. 25) from Emilia-Romagna; the third, *culingiones* (pictured on p. 23), comes from the island of Sardinia, off the western coast in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Each is the most common stuffed pasta of its region. I've chosen them not only to show Italy's culinary diversity, but also to emphasize traditional Italian techniques, ones that I hope you will practice and enjoy in your kitchen.

Use fresh pasta. At left: Just-rolled dough is the best guarantee of a tight seal when making stuffed pasta. Work with a small amount of dough at a time to prevent drying. A fourth of the dough recipe yields a ribbon several feet long.



Liquid ingredients and flavorings go into a well made in the flour. Here, saffron threads ground to powder and mixed with warm water flavor the pasta for *culingiones*.

You'll notice that the sauces for these pastas are uncomplicated. Their purpose is to enhance, whereas the sauce for a dry pasta is meant to be a larger part of the final dish.

GROUND RULES FOR STUFFED PASTAS

Regardless of the shape of stuffed pasta you're making and its filling, observing the following guidelines will ensure your success.

Start with fresh pasta—When making these stuffed delicacies, I believe it's important to use

homemade pasta, rather than sheets bought from a pasta shop. You'll get a better seal with a just-stretched ribbon of dough that hasn't been allowed to dry.

To avoid excessive drying, work with only a quarter of the dough at a time. Have the filling and the sauce ready *before* making the pasta. Most fillings and sauces can be made a day ahead; this breaks up the work load considerably. Fillings should be cold when you use them, otherwise they'll soften the pasta.

Get a tight seal—Aim for a dough-to-dough seal, which is the best insurance against the pasta opening during cooking and spilling its contents into the boiling water. If you must moisten the pasta, don't paint water on with your finger—this gives a precarious seal at best. Instead, mist the pasta lightly with water from a spray bottle. Never use egg, as it has a large concentration of fat that inhibits a proper seal.

After stuffing, allow the pasta to dry on a floured cloth or paper towel for about twenty minutes, or until a leather-like skin forms. This keeps the pasta from sticking when it's cooking or in storage.

Freeze if you want, but not for long—You can freeze uncooked stuffed pasta for up to two weeks.

Thereafter, the pasta becomes very brittle and breaks apart when cooking. If I'm going to freeze pasta, I use a mixture of two parts all-purpose and one part durum (also called semolina) flours. The higher protein content of the durum flour creates a stronger dough that holds up better in storage. Freeze the pastas on trays, then store them in tightly sealed plastic bags.

Cook in plenty of salted water—Use an abundance of water, at least seven quarts per pound of pasta. Pasta, rice, and grains exude excess starch as they cook, and an insufficient amount of water leaves a gummy coating on the food. Foam rising to the surface indicates you haven't used enough water. Always start with cold water, since hot tap water can include a large amount of sediment and sour-tasting mineral deposits that accumulate in your water heater. Boiling the water for a long time also imparts an off taste.

When the water comes to a rolling boil, season it with about five tablespoons of coarse salt. This may sound like a lot, but remember, you're seasoning the *water*, not the pasta. Cooked in unsalted water, starch-based foods taste unappetizingly bland. If you're in doubt about the amount of salt, taste the water. It should taste salty, but not so much as to make your mouth pucker or tears spring to your eyes. I use kosher salt, which has a more subtle flavor than table salt. Never add oil to the cooking water or your sauce won't adhere to the pasta.

Adding the salt will momentarily halt the boiling. When the water returns to a rolling boil, add the pasta, stirring gently with a long-handled spoon to prevent it from settling on the bottom of the pot. Cook just until the edges of the pasta are tender, usually about four minutes after the water resumes boiling. Stuffed pasta is delicate, so don't dump it into a colander. Instead, retrieve the pasta with a wide hand-held strainer, shake gently to dispel excess water, sauce it, and serve.

MAKING THE DOUGH

I prefer to make pasta on a wooden pastry board or a pastry cloth (both readily available at houseware stores). It's easy to work dough on these surfaces because flour gets into the pores of the wood and the weave of the cloth, creating a nonstick surface. A plastic-laminate kitchen counter is fine, too, but



Wet ingredients are mixed together, and then flour is gradually pulled in from the sides of the well.



The goal is a dough that is elastic and smooth, no longer sticky but not yet stiff.



Before stretching the dough, carefully fold it to the exact width of the rollers and pass it through one last time on the widest setting.

you'll need to keep it lightly floured as you work.

From the time you start mixing the dough until you've completed the rolling, you're incorporating flour. How much flour you actually end up working into the dough depends on several variables: the humidity, the flour's moisture content, your method and speed of work. If you use up all the flour called for in the recipe, add small amounts to your work surface as needed.

Mixing the dough—I like to mix pasta the traditional way, right on my pastry board. Place the flour in a mound and make a well in the center that's large enough to hold the liquid ingredients. Pressing a one-cup measure into the flour and moving it around makes a deep, straight-sided well with an even layer of flour on the bottom. If a recipe calls for two types of flour, mix them together before forming the mound.

All the liquid ingredients go into the well, along with any flavorings or seasonings called for in the recipe (see photo on p. 21). Using a fork, slowly combine the liquid ingredients until the mixture resembles a thin, smooth batter. Next, begin bringing in flour from the sides of the well (see photo above). Don't rush this step. The more time you take, the more flour you'll incorporate; this not only makes the most of your ingredients but also results in a wonderfully smooth dough. Continue until you have a wet dough, and your fork is doing nothing but moving this mass around. Now you're ready to knead by hand.

Kneading by hand—Chances are, you'll have flour left on the board. Before proceeding, sift this remaining flour to clean it of dried dough particles, which make lumps in your pasta if not removed. To avoid incorporating air into the flour, which I believe can dry the dough out before it's taken up enough flour, I'm careful not to raise the sifter from the board. I simply move it from side to side.

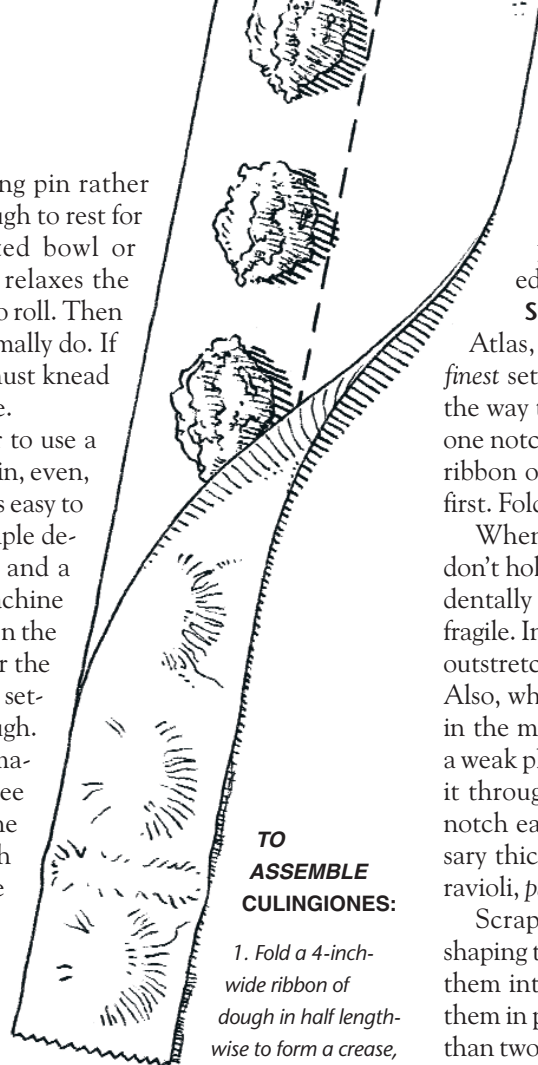
Place the soft dough so that half of it is on the cleaned flour. With a lightly floured palm, press the heel of your hand into the center of the dough. Fold the dough toward you and give it a quarter turn clockwise. Repeat this folding and turning until you have a smooth, elastic dough that's no longer sticky. When you can press a finger into the center of the dough and it springs back, hand-kneading is complete (see photo above, center).

If you stretch pasta with a rolling pin rather than a pasta machine, allow the dough to rest for fifteen minutes under an inverted bowl or wrapped in plastic film first. This relaxes the gluten and makes the dough easier to roll. Then proceed to roll the pasta as you normally do. If you're using a pasta machine, you must knead the dough a second time by machine.

Kneading by machine—I prefer to use a pasta machine because it makes a thin, even, nicely squared ribbon of dough that's easy to work with. A pasta machine is a simple device consisting of two steel rollers and a crank. A knob on one side of the machine controls the amount of space between the rollers. The widest setting is used for the second kneading, while the narrower settings are used for stretching the dough. Two brands of hand-cranked pasta machines are available in this country (see Resources, p. 25), the Atlas and the Imperia. I use an Imperia. They both work the same way, but there's one important difference. The Atlas has one more setting for stretching the dough, which I find too thin for making most stuffed pastas.

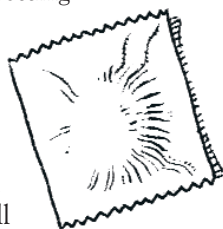
With the machine securely clamped to your counter or table, adjust the rollers to their widest setting. Work with a quarter of the dough at a time, and leave the rest wrapped securely in plastic to prevent it from drying.

Lightly flour the dough and crank it through the rollers. You'll have a wide, elongated ribbon of even thickness. Dredge one side through the remaining flour, place it on the board with narrow ends at left and right, and fold into thirds. This will give you a triple thickness of pasta with a light coating of flour all around and a thin layer of flour sandwiched in the center. Starting at the end nearest you, press the air out with your fingertips. Pass the dough through the machine narrow end first. In the beginning, the dough will have a sticky texture and a rough surface. Repeat until you have a smooth and very elastic dough. (Fold the dough in the same direction each time to ensure that with every run through the machine, a little more flour gets kneaded into the dough.) It may take anywhere from five to a dozen passes through the rollers for the pasta to reach the right consistency. It should feel velvety soft, just like a baby's skin. Fold the pasta into thirds again, making sure it is the same width as the ma-



TO ASSEMBLE CULINGIONES:

1. Fold a 4-inch-wide ribbon of dough in half lengthwise to form a crease, then unfold.
2. Place level tablespoons of the filling an inch apart along one side of the dough.
3. Fold the dough over to cover and press between each mound with a finger. Use a crimped pastry cutter to cut the filled dough into 2-inch squares.
4. Gently press the edges of each ravioli to ensure a proper seal.



chine's rollers, and pass it through one last time at the first setting (see bottom photo on opposite page). Now your kneaded dough is ready to be stretched.

Stretching the dough—If you're using an Atlas, stretch the dough only to the *next to the finest* setting. If you're using an Imperia, take it all the way to the finest setting. Tighten the rollers by one notch from the widest setting. Lightly flour the ribbon of dough and pass it through, narrow end first. Folding is no longer necessary.

When guiding the pasta through the machine, don't hold it with your fingertips, which could accidentally tear the dough as it gets thinner and more fragile. Instead, allow it to rest on the L shape of your outstretched hand between thumb and index finger. Also, while stretching the pasta, once the dough is in the machine, don't stop turning or you'll create a weak place. Continue to flour the pasta and crank it through the rollers, tightening the setting by a notch each time, until you've obtained the necessary thickness. At this point, it's time to form the ravioli, *pansoti*, or whatever it is you're making.

Scraps and trimmings of dough left over after shaping the stuffed pastas can be used in soups. I cut them into strips, dry them completely, then freeze them in plastic bags. Though pasta stored for longer than two weeks in the freezer may crack when cooking, in a soup broken pasta is fine.



Photo: Jon Brown

Culingiones are Sardinian ravioli stuffed with an eggplant-walnut filling and layered with chunky tomato sauce, cheese, and herbs. See the recipe on the next page.

CULINGIONES, OR RAVIOLI DI MELANZANE

(Sardinian eggplant-stuffed ravioli)

I first encountered this dish in a Sardinian cooking class taught by Giuliano Bugialli. Due to the diverse ancient cultures that occupied Sardinia, there are many different spellings for these ravioli, and certainly as many variations in how they're made. This recipe, from my friend Gianna Rosetti, whose family is from Sardinia, uses ricotta cheese and ground walnuts in the stuffing. *Serves four.*

FOR THE FILLING:

1 lb. eggplant, peeled and cut into ½-in. slices
Coarse salt (kosher is good)
1½ cups vegetable oil
¼ cup walnuts
1½ cups ricotta cheese
½ cup grated Fiore Sardo or Pecorino Romano cheese
2 large eggs
1 large egg yolk
5 large basil leaves, chopped coarse
10 mint leaves, chopped coarse
10 sprigs Italian parsley, leaves only, chopped coarse
Pepper

FOR THE SAUCE:

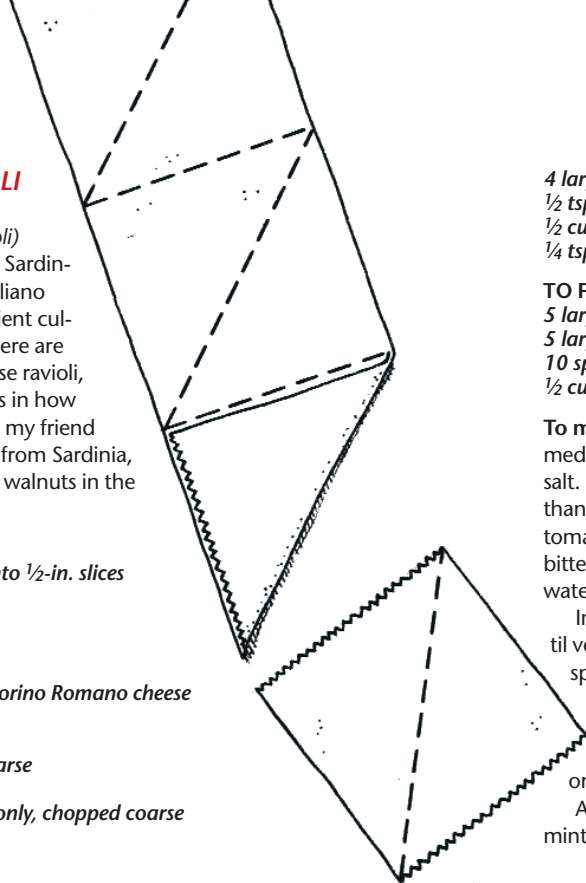
2 lb. Italian plum tomatoes, chopped
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, mashed
5 large basil leaves, chopped coarse
Salt and pepper

FOR THE PASTA:

2 cups unbleached flour
1 cup fine semolina flour



The pasta for pansoti is sometimes made with white wine, which gives it a delicate color and aroma. This Ligurian specialty is stuffed with a mixture of greens and cheese, and sauced with a pesto-like blend of walnuts and pine nuts.



TO ASSEMBLE PANSOTI:

1. Trim a ribbon of dough to 4 inches wide. Fold the bottom corner up and cut along the vertical leg of the triangle you've created.
2. Now unfold and cut the square diagonally to make two triangles.
3. Place a teaspoon of the filling in the center of each triangle. Fold the triangle in half, bringing the two ends of the longest side together. Press to seal all around.

4 large egg yolks
½ tsp. saffron threads, ground in a mortar
½ cup warm water
¼ tsp. table salt

TO FINISH:

5 large basil leaves, chopped coarse
5 large mint leaves, chopped coarse
10 sprigs Italian parsley, leaves only, chopped coarse
½ cup grated Fiore Sardo or Pecorino Romano cheese

To make the filling—Layer the eggplant slices in a medium-size bowl, sprinkling each layer well with coarse salt. On top of the eggplant, set a plate slightly smaller than the bowl and place a heavy object (like a large can of tomatoes) on the plate. Let stand for 20 min. to extract any bitter juices that may be in the eggplant. Rinse under cold water and pat dry. Cut into ½-inch cubes.

In a large frying pan, heat the oil over medium heat until very hot. Add the eggplant and toss constantly with a spoon until well browned. Remove the eggplant from the pan immediately and drain on a double layer of paper towels. Cool completely, and put in a large bowl. Grind the walnuts fine in a mortar and pestle or food processor.

Add the cheeses, walnuts, eggs and egg yolk, basil, mint, and parsley. Mix well and season with pepper.

Refrigerate at least 20 min.

To prepare the sauce—In a saucepan,

heat the oil over a low flame. Add the mashed garlic to the pan and sauté briefly, about 1 min. Do not allow the garlic to brown.

Add the chopped tomatoes and cook over low heat for 20 min. Add the basil leaves and season well with salt and pepper.

To finish—Fill and shape the pasta (see the illustration on p. 23). Cook in plenty of well-salted water. Chop the herbs coarse. Alternate layers of cooked pasta, sauce, herbs, and cheese.

PANSOTI IN SALSA DI NOCI

(Ligurian ravioli with walnut sauce)

In Ligurian dialect *pansoti* means potbellied. Traditionally, the filling is prepared with *preboggion*, a mixture of wild herbs and greens sold in bundles. A less common but equally authentic version is to use dry white wine as part of the liquid in the pasta. If you want to try this, substitute wine for up to half the amount of water. *Serves four.*

FOR THE FILLING:

2 lb. mixed greens (beet tops, spinach, watercress, Swiss chard, dandelion)
Coarse salt (kosher is good)
10 large basil leaves, chopped coarse
10 large borage leaves, chopped coarse (optional)
¼ cup fresh marjoram leaves, chopped coarse
2 cloves garlic, minced
¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
1 cup ricotta cheese
2 large eggs
½ cup fresh bread crumbs
Salt and pepper
Nutmeg

FOR THE PASTA:

3 cups unbleached flour
3 large eggs
1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
½ tsp. salt
½ cup cold water (or equal parts water and dry white wine)

FOR THE SAUCE:

1½ cups walnuts
 ½ cup pine nuts
 1 clove garlic
 ¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese
 20 sprigs Italian parsley, leaves only
 ¼ cup unsalted butter, softened
 1 cup heavy cream
 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
 Salt and pepper

To make the filling—Rinse and drain the greens, removing any large stems. In a large pot, bring to a boil 3 qt. water and season well with salt. Add the greens and cook just until wilted, about 4 min. Drain and then rinse under cold water until cooled. Squeeze out as much excess water as possible. Chop fine.

Put the greens in a large bowl and add the basil, borage, marjoram, garlic, cheeses, eggs, and bread crumbs. Mix well and season with salt, pepper, and freshly ground nutmeg. Refrigerate at least 20 min.

To prepare the sauce—Grind the walnuts and pine nuts fine in a large mortar and pestle or a food processor. Add the garlic and mash or process until well blended. Add the Parmesan and parsley and blend well. Transfer the mixture to a medium-size bowl. Add the butter, heavy cream, and olive oil and stir until smooth. Season with salt and pepper.

To finish—Fill and shape the pasta (see opposite page). Cook in plenty of well-salted water. Gently toss cooked pasta in the prepared sauce, and serve immediately.

CAPPELLETTI IN BRODO

(Cappelletti in broth)
 Cappelletti, or “little hats,”

are a bit larger north and west of the city of Bologna, where they are known as *tortellini*. Cappelletti are traditionally served on holidays or special occasions, when there are extra hands to help shape the pasta. If possible, use full-flavored, homemade broth. I prefer *parmigiano reggiano* to the domestic Parmesans. Serves four.

FOR THE FILLING:

2 cups chicken broth
 1 bay leaf
 Salt and pepper
 8 oz. boneless, skinless chicken breasts
 2 oz. prosciutto, in one piece
 2 oz. mortadella, in one piece
 6 Tbs. ricotta cheese
 ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
 1 large egg
 ⅛ tsp. freshly ground nutmeg

FOR THE PASTA:

3 cups unbleached flour
 3 large eggs
 3 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil
 ¼ tsp. salt

TO SERVE:

2 qt. chicken broth
 ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese

To make the filling—In a medium-size pot, bring to a simmer 2 cups of the chicken broth. Add the bay leaf, season with salt and pepper and simmer 5 min. Add the chicken

and simmer 20 min. Remove the chicken from the broth and cool completely. Mince the chicken, prosciutto, and mortadella and put in a large bowl. Add the cheeses and the egg. Mix well and season with pepper and nutmeg.

To serve—Fill and shape the *cappelletti* (see illustration at left). Cook in the remaining chicken broth (do not add salt). Serve in soup bowls with some of the broth and a tablespoon of freshly grated Parmesan over each serving.

RESOURCES

The Atlas pasta machine is available at well-stocked kitchen shops. The following stores also sell the Imperia and will ship:

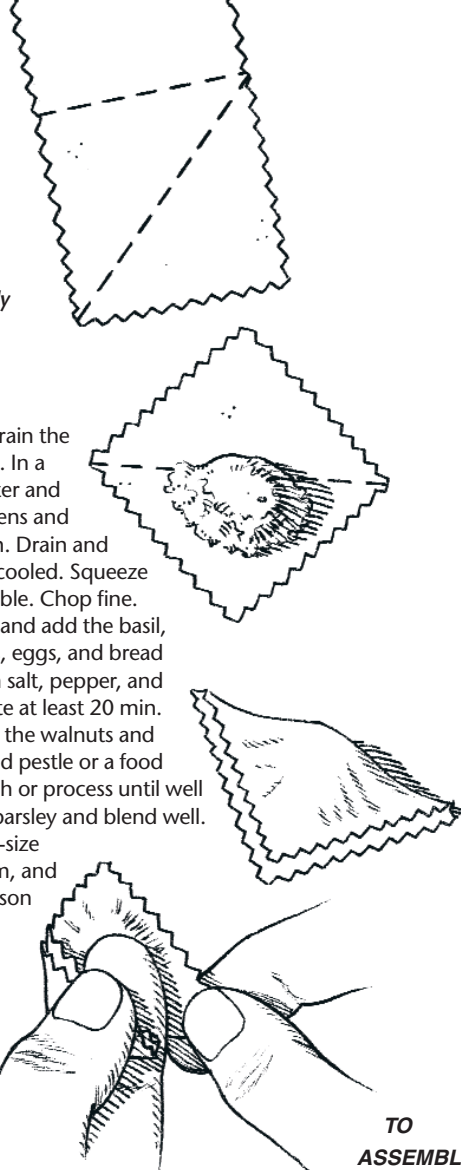
Bridge Kitchenware, 214 East 52nd St., New York, NY 10022; 800/274-3435. Catalog \$3.

Cook's Nook/Epicurean, 237 Hullen Mall, Fort Worth, TX 76132; 817/292-7213. No catalog.

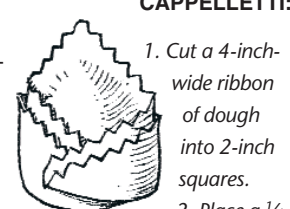
Fante's, 1006 S. 9th St., Philadelphia, PA 19147; 800/878-5557. No catalog.

European Gift & Housewares (718/325-5597) imports the Imperia and can direct you to the store nearest you.

Daniel C. Rosati teaches classes in regional Italian cooking at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He spent seven years as assistant to Italian cooking authority Giuliano Bugialli, both in New York and in Florence, Italy. ♦



TO ASSEMBLE CAPPELLETTI:



1. Cut a 4-inch-wide ribbon of dough into 2-inch squares.
2. Place a ¼ teaspoon of the filling in the center of each square. Fold the square in half so that two opposite corners almost meet. They should miss by ⅛ inch. Press to seal all around.
3. With the folded edge as your base, wrap the triangle around the tip of your index finger.
4. Overlap the two base corners and press to seal.



Cappelletti are cooked and served in rich chicken broth. A wide skimmer does a gentle job of easing stuffed pastas into the pot and retrieving them three minutes later.