



A Taste of Puglia

Charles Scicolone (February 20, 2008)



Orecchiette with Broccoli Rabe is one of the iconic dishes of Puglia

Paris was wonderful: the food; the wine; and for once, the weather. It was like April in Paris in February. But after the foie gras, the croissants, the sauces, and the pastries all that we could think about on the plane home was a simple plate of pasta!

We both agreed that we wanted orecchiette and broccoli rabe. Orecchiette means “little



ears” and in Puglia, this pasta is made with a simple semolina flour and water dough. It is typically paired with broccoli rabe. With its pleasantly bitter flavor, it seemed like the perfect antidote to all that rich food we had eaten in Paris.

When I was working at I Trulli Restaurant (named for the beehive shaped stone houses in Puglia), I would watch the owner’s mother Dora, make fresh pasta every day. Signora Marzovilla is over 70 years old now, but she came to this country with her family from Rutigliano in Puglia as a young woman. She would also make gnocchi, cavatelli, and ravioli but her specialty was orecchiette. Once Michele gave her a pasta machine to try, thinking it might make her job easier, but she returned it complaining that it was too time consuming to make it by machine. For lunch in the restaurant almost every day, I would have the orecchiette and broccoli rabe topped with toasted chopped almonds.

In September we spent ten days in Puglia with our tour group Tour de Forks (www.tourdeforks.com [2]). One of the highlights of the trip was a hands-on cooking class at a typical masseria, an old farmhouse now restored as a beautiful inn. Since orecchiette with broccoli rabe is the iconic Pugliese pasta, we requested that recipe be included in the lesson. Two young culinary school grads taught the class and everything was going just fine until it was time to make the orecchiette. Though they had trained as chefs, it looked as if no one had taught them how to make this pasta. Michele, who acts as the culinary guide on our tours, took over and showed them how it was done. However, we were going to eat what we were cooking and Michele could not make enough pasta for ten people in time for lunch. The two chefs had a short conversation and one of them left returning a few minutes later with two of the cleaning women. They washed their hands, rolled up their sleeves and began to make the orecchiette. They worked so quickly that we had time to relax before lunch. Everyone agreed that the best part of the meal was the pasta!

With orecchiette and broccoli rabe I like to drink a white wine called Locorotondo from the town of the same name located in the heart of the trulli country in Puglia. It is produced by the Cantina Sociale Locorotondo, the oldest wine cooperative in Puglia. The wine is made from Verdeca and Bianco d’Alessano grapes. It is a good match for the bitter taste of the broccoli rabe.

Up until a few years ago it was difficult to find broccoli rabe in this country. Now it can be found almost anywhere year round but it is at its best in the spring and fall. It is also called broccoli raab or rape or rapini.

Here is the recipe for Orecchiette and broccoli rabe from Michele’s book 1,000 Italian Recipes (Wiley). She recommends that if you don’t have time to make your own fresh orecchiette, you look for an artisan brand imported from Italy. They are available in many Italian specialty stores. And if you would like lessons on how to make them yourself, please join us on our next tour to Puglia!

Orecchiette with Broccoli Rabe

Orecchiette con Cime di Rape

Makes 4 to 6 servings

This is practically the official dish of Puglia, and nowhere will you find it more delicious. It calls for broccoli rabe, sometimes called rapini, though turnip greens, mustard, kale, or regular broccoli can also be used. Broccoli rabe has long stems and leaves and a pleasantly bitter flavor, though boiling it tames some of the bitterness and makes it tender.



If you prefer not to use the anchovies, you can leave them out. Also, try some of the variations that follow.

1 bunch broccoli rabe (about 1 1/2 pounds), rinsed

Salt

1/3 cup olive oil

4 garlic cloves

8 anchovy fillets

Pinch of crushed red pepper

1 pound fresh orecchiette or cavatelli

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add the broccoli rabe and salt to taste. Cook the broccoli rabe 5 minutes, then drain it. It should still be firm.

2. Dry the pot. Heat the oil with the garlic over medium-low heat. Add the anchovies and red pepper. When the garlic is golden, add the broccoli rabe. Cook, stirring well to coat the broccoli with the oil, until very tender, about 5 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, bring at least 4 quarts of water to a boil. Add the pasta and salt to taste. Stir well. Cook over high heat, stirring frequently, until the pasta is al dente, tender yet still firm to the bite. Drain the pasta, reserving some of the cooking water.

4. Add the pasta to the broccoli rabe. Cook, stirring, for 1 minute or until the pasta is well blended. Add a little of the cooking water if necessary.

Variation: Eliminate the anchovies. Serve the pasta sprinkled with chopped toasted almonds or grated Pecorino Romano.

Variation: Eliminate the anchovies. Remove the casings from 2 Italian sausages. Chop the meat and cook it with the garlic, hot pepper, and broccoli rabe. Serve sprinkled with Pecorino Romano.

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