

Where Pork is King

by Mary Ann Esposito



Mary Ann Esposito's new cookbook, "Ciao Italia Slow and Easy," is available at a book store near you.

What would the region of Umbria be without its *porchetta*, its *salsicce*, its *prosciutti*, and *salame locale*? These are all pork products, and along with creamy lentils and black truffles are the identity cards for the region. In fact, pork

(*maiale*) is a gastronomic symbol of the region, recognized for its superior quality worldwide.

Porchetta alla griglia, (grilled pork), *allo spiedo* (on the spit), and *insaccati* (cured pork products



Salsiccia all' Uve

stuffed into natural casings) are made in Umbria by experts called *norcini* or pork butchers. The tradition has been going on since the 17th century, especially in the rugged mountain town of Norcia, located in the southeastern part of Umbria.

Norcia is an ancient Sabine settlement whose name means fortune, and is appropriate for one of Italy's culinary capitals; it is the indisputable center for pork. A stop there is a must for anyone serious about Umbrian foods. The minute you walk into a *norcineria* (a pork butcher's shop), the soothing smell of naturally spiced, cured meats can easily overtake your senses.

Cured pork includes some of my favorites like *la coppa*, which is cooked and air dried boneless pork made from the neck area of the pig that is stuffed into a casing; there are spicy and mild versions of *salumi*, a name meaning cured meats, stacked high on countertops that make great lunch fare or an *antipasto*, and there are the *prosciutti*, the locally salt- and air-dried hams dangling at the end of long strings strung from the ceiling. There are huge cooked sausages of finely ground pork called *mortadella* blended with spices that are totally different from the famous *mortadella* of Bologna, which is studded with pistachio nuts or cubes of creamy white lard. You might be tempted to call it baloney but it bears no resemblance to that placid cold cut from the supermarket.

Not to be slighted are the non-cured fresh pork products ready for the grill like *salsicce*, fresh sausages, and juicy pork chops. Looking at the coiled sausages reminds me of my own sausage making and how superior in taste homemade can be. The work of the *norcini* is laborious, and if you come to Norcia in the wintertime when pigs are butchered you will see that nothing is wasted. All parts of the pig are utilized, including the blood which is cooked into something called *sanguinacci* or blood pudding. The innards of the animal including the heart, liver, and intestines are made into *padellaccia*, meaning that the organs are all chopped together and cooked quickly in a skillet with olive oil, spices, and wine.

A trip to the *norcineria* is a reminder that this artisanal craft is part of what identifies Norcia, a tradition that has been passed down for centuries by *Norcini* who have put this mountain land squarely at the center of Umbrian gastronomy. ➤

Salsiccia Fresca Fresh Pork Sausage

Makes 5 pounds

- 1 package natural hog casings available in the deli section of your grocery store
- 5 pounds boneless pork butt ground once on coarse and once on medium grind
- 2 tablespoons coarse salt or more
- 2 tablespoons coarse ground pepper or more
- 3 tablespoons fennel seeds

Soak 4 casings in a bowl in several changes of cold water to get rid of the salt. Cut the casings with scissors into 12- to 14-inch lengths. Keep the rest of the casings in the refrigerator; they will last several weeks.

Slip one end of the casing opening onto the throat of a sausage funnel and slide the casing all the way up onto the funnel, leaving about 3 inches free at the end. Tie a knot at the end.

Combine the pork with all the seasonings in a bowl. I test for taste by frying a small amount in a sauté pan; add more seasonings if you wish.

Push small amounts of the pork through the casing with your thumb and continue filling the casing all the way leaving about 2 inches free at the top. Slip the top of the casing off the funnel and tie a knot. Use a fork or toothpick to poke holes all over the sausage; this will allow fat to escape during cooking.

Continue making sausage until all the pork mixture is used. Sausages can be frozen, well wrapped, for up to 1 year.

Variation: For hot sausage add 2 tablespoons or more of hot red pepper flakes when preparing the sausage mixture.



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Salsiccia all' Uve Pork Sausage with Grapes

Two ingredients, sweet pork sausage and grapes, are all you need to prepare this impressive-looking dish for company. Use good sweet or hot sausage; both are good with sugary grapes.

Serves 4

- 1 pound homemade or store-bought Italian sausage
- 2 cups mixed seedless red and green grapes, cut in half

Poke the sausages with a fork and put them in a sauté pan with 1/2 cup of water. Cook the sausages uncovered over medium heat until they turn gray. Drain off the water.

Allow the sausages to brown in their own fat, turning them once or twice. If they are very lean, add a tablespoon of olive oil to the pan.

Five minutes before the sausage is cooked, add the grapes to the pan and cook for 2 or 3 minutes longer. Transfer to a serving dish.

Serve very hot.

Recipe courtesy of "Ciao Italia in Tuscany," by Mary Ann Esposito