

DUCK, BLACK OLIVE & TOMATO RAGÙ

There is a meat restaurant in Venice called La Bitta. The owner, Debora, takes its mission very seriously; 'No Fish' she declares proudly on the menus and business cards. This dish was inspired by something very similar that our head chef Tom and I had there. I remember we had a bottle of Amarone della Valpolicella, too, and it was a worthy companion.

Duck legs are the tastiest part of the bird and have a deep, smoky flavour. This dish doesn't suffer from shyness and the combination of tomatoes and black olives helps the duck deliver intensity and gaminess. You can eat this on its own but it goes very well with polenta or potato gnocchi.

For four to six:

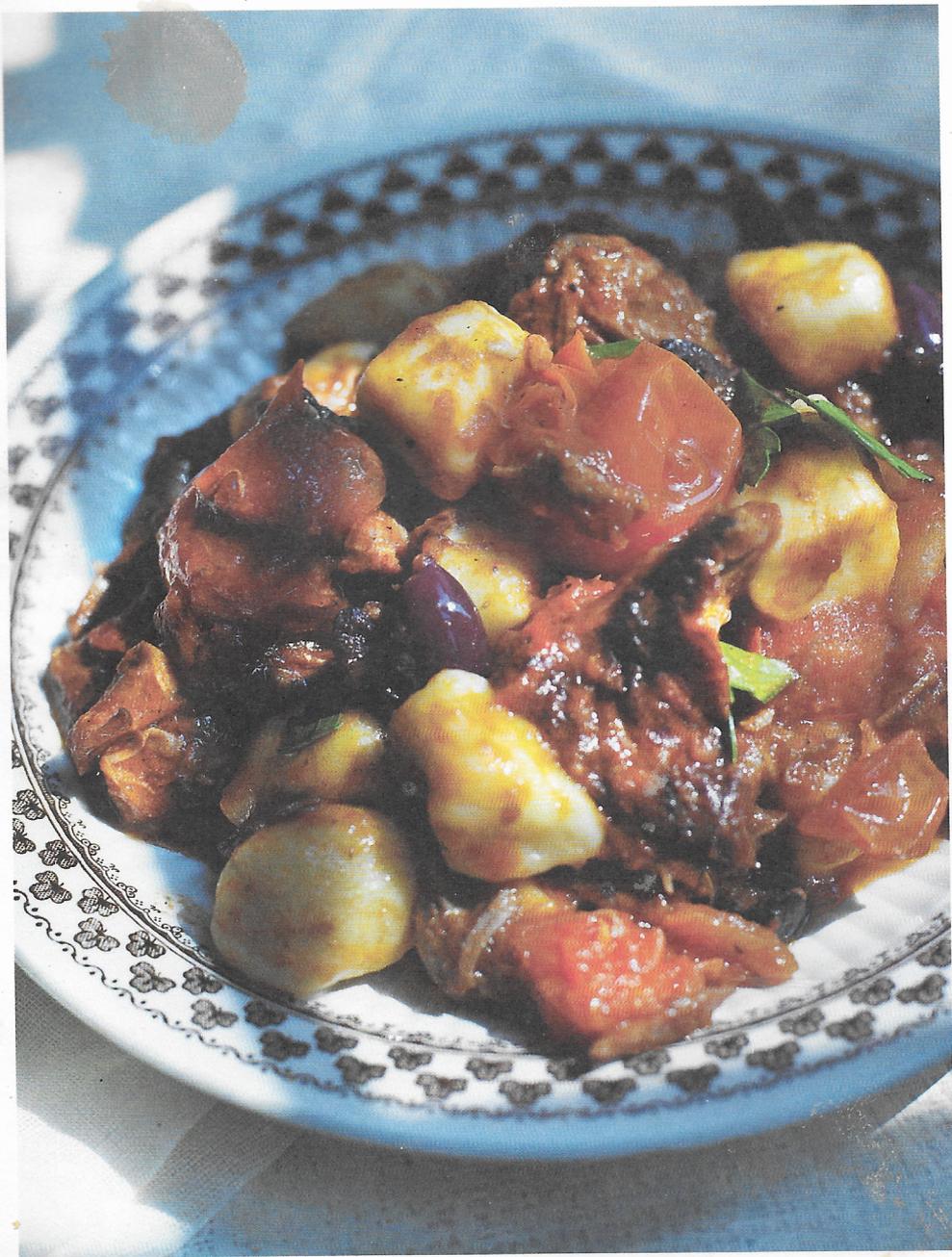
300g cherry tomatoes, halved
Flaky sea salt and black pepper
Extra virgin olive oil
5 duck legs
1.5 litres tomato sauce – see page 149
1 large handful of good-quality black olives, stoned
1 large handful of green peppercorns
Black pepper
1 small handful of flat parsley leaves, chopped, to serve
Polenta or Gnocchi, to serve – see page 204 or 194

Preheat the oven to 180°C/Gas 4. Season the halved cherry tomatoes. Shake on a few splashes of olive oil and place on a baking tray in the oven. Roast them until they blister and almost collapse (about 25–30 minutes). Remove and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 240°C/Gas 9. Take the duck legs, season, and roast until the skin is brown and crisp (about 10 minutes). Reduce the heat to 200°C/Gas 6 and continue to roast until the meat is tender (about 1 hour). Set aside and strain the cooking juices for use later.

By now, the duck legs will have cooled and you can pick the meat off the bone. Roughly chop the larger pieces and leave the smaller ones.

Put the tomato sauce in a large pan on a medium heat, add the olives, peppercorns, some ground pepper and about 150ml of the duck's roasting juices. Bring the sauce to a medium simmer for 30 minutes or so, until it is very thick and has no trace of water in it. Add the duck meat and continue cooking for 10 minutes. Just before you take the pan off the heat, add the oven-roasted tomatoes and a little parsley. Stir and serve.



BASIC TOMATO SAUCE

There was a time when Italian restaurants in London and New York tended to offer a very narrow version of Italian cooking. Often the menu would consist of a variety of pasta dishes with a small range of sauces, nearly all of them tomato-based. We have moved on from this simplistic notion of Italian cuisine but I still have a respectful admiration for the old-school approach of the traditional trattoria where tomato sauce is king. I also love the way New Yorkers refer to these places as 'red sauce joints'.

A good tomato sauce is such a useful commodity to have to hand and, although the convenience of tinned passata has made shortcuts incredibly tempting, I would still recommend that you make a big batch of this sauce and save what you don't use in the fridge. It will keep for up to a week. (In Italy it keeps longer – you simply scrape the mould off the top before using.)

For one and a half litres:

100ml extra virgin olive oil
1 onion, finely sliced
1 garlic clove, chopped
Scant ½ tablespoon fine salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
Small pinch of chilli flakes
750g fresh tomatoes, quartered
3 × 400g tins of chopped tomatoes
1 small handful of oregano, chopped
Caster sugar, if necessary

Heat half the oil in a saucepan on a medium-low flame and in it sweat the onion, garlic, salt, pepper and chilli for 15 minutes. When the onions are glossy and transparent, add the fresh tomatoes and the rest of the oil and cook gently for a further 15 minutes.

Add the tinned tomatoes, bring to a gentle bubble and then simmer on a very low heat for 1 hour.

Take the pan off the heat and add the chopped oregano. You can season the sauce with a little sugar, to taste – it will depend on how sweet your tomatoes are. Transfer to a food blender or use a hand-blender to blitz for a few minutes. If you like, pass through a fine sieve.