Recipes from an Italian Butcher

Roasting, Stewing, Braising
Lamb
Lamb, *agnello* in Italian, might not be the meat that first comes to mind when most people of other nations think of Italian food. Hams, beef ragù, veal saltimbocca, and even wild boar is more likely to occur. But Italy is diverse, mountainous, and green as well as arid and coastal, alpine as well as Mediterranean, and the cucine of Italy, which became one country only 150 years ago, are rich in their use of lamb.

Italian cucina, though, is one in its respect for ingredients and flavor—nothing is wasted, and every ingredient is used to maximum effect. If you buy the best quality lamb you can, the following recipes will bring the best out of it. The cuts of lamb stated in the following recipes are the cuts that would be used in Italy, and what will be available to buy, so if you buy the stated cuts you can use them according to the recipes with confidence—you can ask the butcher to remove the bone or trim the fat if that’s a bridge too far for you.

Milk-fed lamb is an animal that’s been fed only by its mother when it comes to slaughter. *Abbachio* is the Italian name for five- to six-week-old lamb, popular in the Lazio region. If it’s labeled “lamb” in the US, it’s usually six to eight months old, and no older than a year. No need to worry though, it will be young and mild enough in flavor to be used in any Italian recipe that calls for lamb, and will only need cooking for slightly longer than the recipe states if you’re substituting it for milk-fed (five more minutes) or ten more minutes for *abbachio*. This is because animals that graze, and therefore range, have better developed muscles that those that have been fed only on milk, and so will need longer cooking to break down their more developed muscle tissue. Mutton is over a year old and has a richer, gamier flavor and needs longer cooking still. It’s a niche meat in the US, so if you do find some, and you want to try it in a recipe, don’t cook a large batch if it’s your first encounter! It will take a lot longer to cook, and can be quite chewy even then, so be prepared.

Lamb is a very fatty meat, and will shrink as a result of that fat melting and the muscles contracting when you cook it, so you will need to buy a bit more than you would of an equivalent amount of beef or pork. But follow the recipes and you will be fine.
Roasting cuts

Leg is an excellent cut to feed a crowd, shoulder costs less, is fattier, and will take longer. Saddle is an impressive, lean, expensive cut that will serve eight to ten. Loin is fattier than leg but less so than shoulder and is excellent for stuffing when boned, as is breast, which is the fattiest joint but inexpensive. Rack of lamb or best end of neck is the choicest, most expensive cut and is lean, so will cook fast, and will serve two, as will chump (where the loin meets the leg), which is inexpensive and boneless.

Stewing and braising cuts

Any part of the lamb can be stewed or braised well, cut into chunks, but it makes sense to use less expensive cuts. Neck (scrag end) is a good option, which is tough but tastes great when cooked for a long time, or shanks, which become really tender with long, slow cooking. Shoulder needs to be trimmed of fat first, and skimmed as you cook, but gives excellent results, and chump provides great flavor when diced and cooked long and slow.
Preheat the oven to 475°F/240°C/Gas Mark 9. Combine the thyme, oregano, parsley, and rosemary in a bowl, add the oil and bread crumbs, season with salt and pepper, and mix well.

Place the lamb in a large roasting pan, spread the herb mixture over it, and roast for 15 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F/180°C/Gas Mark 4, add ⅔ cup (5 fl oz/150 ml) warm water to the roasting pan, and continue to roast for another 15 minutes. Remove the lamb from the pan, cover with kitchen foil, and let rest for 10 minutes. Carve the meat and place in a warm serving dish.

Note: For a side dish, halve and seed some tomatoes, fill with bread crumbs and chopped oregano, drizzle with olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and bake for 15 minutes.
Stinco di maiale al vino rosso con spinaci

**Pork Shanks in Red Wine with Spinach**

Serves 4
Preparation: 20 minutes, plus 7–8 hours marinating
Cooking: 2 hours 10 minutes

2 pork shanks
generous 2 cups (17 fl oz/500 ml) red wine
1 onion, ¼ sliced and ¼ finely chopped
4 juniper berries, crushed
1 bay leaf, shredded
2 sprigs parsley, leaves finely chopped and stalks reserved
1 sprig rosemary
2 sprigs thyme
2 sprigs marjoram
2–3 strips of unwaxed orange zest removed with a potato peeler
3 tablespoons butter
1 lb 5 oz/600 g spinach, washed
salt

Place the pork shanks in a large ovenproof dish, add the wine, the sliced onion, the crushed juniper berries, the shredded bay leaf, the parsley stalks, the other herbs, and orange zest. Cover with plastic wrap (clingfilm) and marinate in the refrigerator for 7–8 hours, turning the meat occasionally.

When ready to cook, preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C/Gas Mark 4. Remove the pork shanks from the marinade, pat dry with paper towels, then season with salt. Strain the marinade and set aside.

Melt the butter in a flameproof Dutch oven (casserole) over high heat and sear the pork shanks for 5–6 minutes, turning on all sides. Add the finely chopped onion, reduce the heat to medium, and cook for another 2–3 minutes. Pour the marinade around the meat and cook in the oven for 2 hours, basting the meat occasionally with the cooking juices. When the meat is cooked, remove from the Dutch oven, cover with foil, and rest for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, bring a pan of water to a boil and blanch the spinach for 2–3 minutes. Drain well. Place the Dutch oven on the heat with the pork cooking juices, add the spinach, and sauté for a few minutes until wilted. Transfer to a serving dish and place the pork shanks on top of the wilted spinach. Scatter with the chopped parsley leaves to serve.

Note: As an alternative, the pork shanks can be marinated in an aromatic white wine. A finely chopped carrot and stalk of celery, and ¼-inch/2-cm piece of grated fresh gingerroot can be added to the sautéed onion.
Season the meat with salt and pepper, brush it with oil, and cook in a pan for 20 minutes, or until cooked to your liking, turning frequently. Remove from the pan and let rest.

Prepare the pesto by blending the basil, parsley, pine nuts, garlic, a pinch of salt and enough oil to achieve a dense sauce in a blender or food processor.

Cut the beef into slices, place in a serving dish and top with the pesto sauce. Serve.

Note: When using a whole clove of garlic, cut it in half and remove the central core. This makes the garlic easier to digest.

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Soak the mushrooms in a bowl of lukewarm water for 20 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C/Gas Mark 4. Using a sharp knife, cut a long slit three-quarters of the way through the beef, then open it out and pound with a meat tenderizer until the slice is thin, long, and tenderized.

Drain the mushrooms and pat dry with paper towels. Chop the mushrooms and sprinkle over the meat. Place the prosciutto slices on top, along with the Parmesan shavings and the chopped rosemary. Roll the slice up lengthwise, tie with kitchen twine, and season with salt.

Heat the oil and butter in a roasting pan over medium heat, add the meat, and once it has turned golden brown, splash with wine and let evaporate. Transfer to the oven and cook for 25 minutes. Serve.
**Pollo alla cacciatora**

**Chicken Cacciatore**

Put the chicken in a flameproof Dutch oven (casserole) with the butter, oil, and onion and cook over medium heat, stirring and turning frequently, for about 15 minutes, or until browned all over. Add the tomatoes, carrot, and celery, pour in ⅔ cup (5 fl oz/150 ml) water, cover, and simmer for 45 minutes, until the chicken is tender and cooked through. Sprinkle with the parsley and season with salt and pepper.

Note: This is the simplest way to prepare chicken cacciatore. In some regions, more celery and carrots are added; in others, white wine is used instead of water or broth (stock); and in still others, sliced mushrooms are added.

**Petto di pollo in fricassee**

**Chicken Breast Fricassée**

Heat half the butter with the oil in a flameproof Dutch oven (casserole) over medium heat. Add the flour and stir. When it starts to brown, add the chopped parsley and vegetables, and cook for 5 minutes. Pour in the broth (stock), then add the diced chicken. Season with salt and pepper, cover with the lid, and cook for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Meanwhile, mix the egg yolks and lemon juice together in a bowl. Uncover the Dutch oven and pour in the egg and lemon mixture, stirring quickly so the sauce doesn’t become too thick. It should be creamy and lightly coat the meat. Transfer to a serving dish and serve.
Preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C/Gas Mark 4. Melt 2 teaspoons of the butter in a flameproof Dutch oven (casserole) over low heat. Add the leek and sausage and brown for 5–6 minutes. Add 2 sage leaves, then season with salt and pepper and let cool.

Add the bread crumbs and egg to the cooled leek mixture and mix together. Lay the butterflied turkey on a sheet of parchment paper, cover evenly with the mixture, roll it up, and tie the meat with kitchen twine.

Melt the remaining butter in a Dutch oven over high heat, add the turkey, and brown for 7–8 minutes, turning the meat until it is browned all over. Pour in the wine and let it evaporate gently. Add the carrots, hot broth (stock), and remaining sage leaves. Season with salt and cook in the oven for 40 minutes.

Remove the meat from the oven, let rest for 5–6 minutes, then remove the kitchen twine. Carve the meat into slices and serve with the carrots and cooking juices.

Note: If the turkey breast is more than ½ inch/1 cm thick, lay the meat between 2 sheets of parchment paper and pound with a meat tenderizer until a thinner, even slice is achieved.
First published in 1950, The Silver Spoon is the most successful cookbook in Italy, selling more than one million copies, and trusted to include the most authentic and traditional recipes from throughout the country.