

QUINN ON FOOD

Batter Up

Scripelle, delicate crepes made in northern Italy, elevate the simplest fillings to manna

BY JIM QUINN

“MY MOTHER, ANTONIETTA GIOVANNUCCI, IS A wonderful cook,” says Mariella Esposito, who is the manager of Fante’s Kitchen Wares Shop in South Philadelphia. “And she’s not like other great cooks—she’ll give you measurements in her recipes. But the trouble is, she doesn’t use measurements in her cooking. She always ‘adjusts a little.’ Every time I try to make something my mother makes, it’s never as good.”

I’m watching Antonietta, who is 76 years old, hold the hot iron handle of a crepe pan in one hand and remove a cooked crepe with the fingers of the other. It’s very quickly and delicately done, but it looks dangerous. I ask why she doesn’t burn herself.

“I burn my fingers a little bit every day,” Antonietta says. “My hands are used to it. I don’t feel the hot. What I feel is when all my family comes every day to dinner. I see them, I see my grandchildren, it’s the best thing I have in this world.”

Antonietta and her husband, Verino, met in 1945. Verino, a tailor from Abruzzi, in the south of Italy, was a soldier in the Italian army, serving in Greece. As the war was ending, the Italian army collapsed; the soldiers had no way to get home but by walking. Verino walked up through Albania and Yugoslavia until he got to Trieste, where Antonietta’s family hid him from German troops trying to force the Italians to keep fighting. Then the two got married, and Verino became a tailor in the north. In 1964, the family came to the States. Verino, now 84, got a job in a tailor shop, and because he had taught her all he knew, Antonietta worked as a tailor, too. Mariella and her brothers later took over Fante’s kitchen supply store, which opened in 1906 in South Philly’s Italian Market.

“Everything is different here,” Antonietta sighs of her adoptive country. “All the measurements for food, all the food. The eggs of Italy! I miss them. They pick them up fresh every day. Here, you buy them in the supermarket. So, they cook different.”



Kitchen Confidential: South Philadelphia’s Antonietta Giovannucci, petite and ladylike, is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to crepes.

We’re in Antonietta’s kitchen, so of course I’m eating a big plate of scripelle made into manicotti. Verino is explaining that in his Abruzzese dialect, not to be confused with several other Abruzzese dialects, “scripelle” means “popcorn.” In the Friulian dialect of

northern Italy around Trieste, where Antonietta grew up, “scripelle” are a kind of Italian crepe.

I’ve seen scripelle—the crepes, not the popcorn—made with apparently artless ease by Antonietta, and clumsily but not so badly by me. As extra insurance, this recipe comes with a can’t-fail version made with an electric crepe machine, which is no trouble at all even for ham-handed cooks (me again).

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"Eat up," says Antonietta. I eat. I watch a master cook make scripelle.

ELECTRIC SCRIPELLE

THIS IS THE EASY WAY. ELECTRIC crepe machines are available in any kitchen supply store or department store. Basically, this is a frying pan-like object that you plug in and heat. When it's hot, you dip it into crepe batter and lift it out. The batter that clings to the pan cooks almost instantly. You turn the crepe

over, with your fingers or a plastic flipper, and cook the other side slightly. There is no way to go wrong with these machines. If you've only had crepes in restaurants, you'll be surprised at how much more delicate homemade ones are.

SCRIPELLE ANTONIETTA'S WAY

ANTONIETTA'S WAY IS SLIGHTLY MORE tricky. Her crepe pan is sometimes called a French omelet pan. It is made of steel, with a very low lip instead of the deep

side of an American skillet, and has an iron handle too hot for me to hold without a mitt. You can find it in specialty kitchen supply stores for around \$15. Antonietta uses a four-inch pan "because it's easier for the arthritis in my hand." I've tried a six-inch pan, but the four-inch one is easier for me, too.

BATTER

(MAKES AROUND 14 SCRIPELLE)

4 eggs
3/4 cup milk
3/4 cup water
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 cups flour

Beat eggs, add milk and water and oil, and beat again. Last of all, gradually beat in the flour. Make sure the mixture is smooth. Antonietta does this with a fork. An electric beater works better for me. "It's good to put the batter in the refrigerator for one hour," says Antonietta.

"This is an old, old pan," she tells me. "I know this pan." You may have a little trouble getting to know yours. First, it must be seasoned. Using a pastry brush, paint the pan with Crisco, and heat over high flame till hot. Your pan is now seasoned. "Never wash the pan," says Antonietta. "Wash it and it sticks. You just let it cool, wipe it off with a paper towel, and put it in a plastic bag. You need the bag, because you don't want little dusts from the air to get to the pan. Next time you make scripelle, brush the pan again, very light, with Crisco. Put it on a burner, medium high."

Now comes the fun part. When the pan is hot enough, Antonietta lifts it off the heat, holds it tilted slightly upward, and puts a tablespoonful of batter at the top edge. It starts to run a little. She tilts the pan back and forth, encouraging the batter to cover the whole bottom while she adds two more tablespoonfuls to the oozing mass. The scripelle essentially cooks on the hot pan as it runs downhill. How does Antonietta know when the pan is hot enough? She holds the hot handle in her hand. An easier method: Throw a few drops of water on the pan; they'll sizzle when it's hot enough.

Unlike in any recipe for crepes I've ever seen, Antonietta doesn't turn hers to cook on both sides. "It would get brown, it would be not tidy-looking," she explains. You can use a standard American iron skillet for this dish, or a nonstick fry pan. Scripelle are only pancakes made with a very, very thin batter.

Antonietta lays the crepes out on a baking sheet covered with waxed paper. Crepes can be filled immediately, or covered with a towel and refrigerated for a day or two, or frozen. If you have them on hand, you can wrap them around any leftovers, or sautéed vegetables, or chicken or ham with mushrooms.

FILLING

Butter or olive oil

1 pound fresh spinach or 2 packages frozen spinach, thawed

1 bunch parsley leaves, chopped fine

1/4 cup grated parmesan cheese

1 egg

8 ounces mozzarella, cut in small dice

Salt and pepper—"A pinch"

Antonietta frequently substitutes diced tofu for half the mozzarella, which pleases her several vegetarian family members and still leaves lots of cheese taste. If using fresh spinach, wash it, then reduce it to bits in the food processor. For frozen, remove spinach from box and squeeze dry in your hands. In either case, cook the spinach in olive oil or butter. "I am from the north of Italy, I love butter," says Antonietta. Use two tablespoons at least. Let spinach cool. Add parsley. Whip the egg and parmesan. Add the mozzarella and spinach, then salt and pepper to taste.

Coat the bottom of a baking dish with homemade tomato sauce. Put two heaping tablespoons of filling near one end of a scripelle. Roll it up. It should look like a flabby fat cigar. Put it in the baking dish. Keep going till you fill the dish. Top with more sauce. "Not too much," Antonietta says. "Italians don't like to eat sloppy." Put in a 350-degree oven for about half an hour, until heated through.


SCRIPELLE SOUP

Clear chicken broth

Scripelle

Filling

Parmesan cheese

Same filling, but use only three-quarters of a tablespoon rolled up inside each scripelle. Put three or four scripelle in the bottom of a soup plate. Heat the broth to boiling, and pour over the scripelle. Serve immediately. They will cook in the broth. Top with parmesan. This is an extraordinary soup, one of those great combinations of undisguised flavors—chicken, mozzarella, parsley, spinach—that are the signature of Italian cuisine. 

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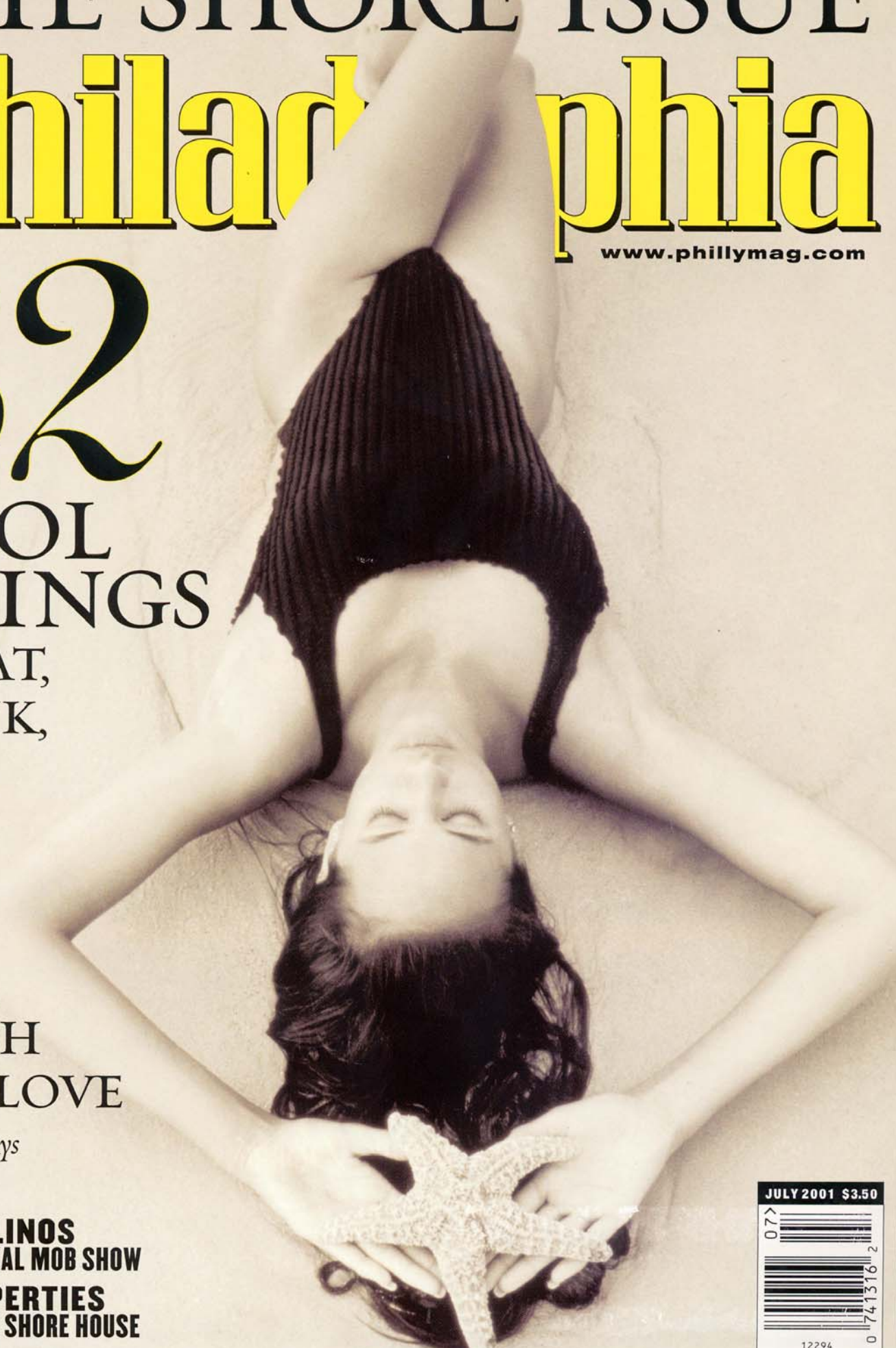
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