



When food means something special . . .

Affordability . . . One Approach!

And so we begin anew . . . 2026! At the close of 2025, one often heard the term “affordability” in many conversations, political or otherwise. Well, there is going to be a lot more discussion in the new year ahead about the high cost of everything, especially how it relates to what we eat or are able to afford to eat.

Toward the close of the 2025 year I came across the following statement: “A large share of the food produced, processed, and distributed in the United States never gets eaten—it is lost or wasted. This not only means missed opportunities to alleviate hunger, but also wasted resources (water, energy, labor, land) and greater environmental impacts, as much of that food ends up in landfills, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and inefficient use of capital and natural resources.”

That was a stunning revelation, one that I wasn’t really cognizant of or perhaps, better said, paying any attention to.

Digging a little deeper in an effort to quantify that statement, some statistics provided by the USDA, FDA, and others between 2010 to 2023 added some additional context. Sadly, it has been estimated that 30 percent to 40 percent of the US food supply is wasted, which translates to 133 billion pounds or, on average, 6-1/2 cups of edible food per week per household.

How could this be, I thought? I live in one of the world’s richest countries and yet people still go hungry and we continue to waste too much. What is wrong with this picture? Why are we wasting so much food and yet complain, in many cases rightly so, about affordability?

One answer might be in how and what we are eating today, which makes our weekly spend on food higher than we are comfortable with.

It occurred to me that perhaps many people actually don’t know how to eat. Good, healthy, balanced meals, comprised mainly of fresh ingredients—yes, we have all heard that tune before. But knowing how to eat may be one way to push back

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against the high cost of feeding a family and at the same time reduce the overall food waste dilemma which is certainly a challenge but also a shared responsibility for all of us.

From my perspective when I am planning meals and deciding what to cook I often focus on the Italian phrase *la cucina povera*, which translates as “cooking of the poor,” or “peasant cooking.”

It is really a state of mind, common to many cultures, by making do with what is available or what you have on hand. A process of transforming humble ingredients into dishes that are delicious and nourishing.

Key to this approach is resourcefulness, where nothing is wasted; seasonality, where meals are based around what is in season; simplicity, where recipes are comprised of few ingredients and prepared in straightforward ways; and comfort-focused, where the dishes are hearty, comforting, and flavorful.

In this post I am sharing several recipes that I often serve at our weekly meals, that reflect my *la cucina povera* approach to cooking by using humble ingredients, with which you can prepare dishes that are easy to assemble, nourishing, delicious, as well as inexpensive.

So let's get started!

One of the most humble ingredients that plays a leading role in the *cucina povera* approach to cooking and meal planning is bread.

Bread is not just food—it's a foundation, something my grandfather often referred to as the “staff of life.”

It has historically been a daily staple around the world. Bread often accompanies meals in many different ways, becoming a base for numerous dishes.

For example, from an Italian culinary perspective, dishes such as an *Aqua sale* from Puglia, where bread is simply prepared with water, tomatoes, and olive oil; from Trentino-Alto Adige, dumplings known as *Canederli* are prepared from ground bread and usually served in a light broth; *Pappa al pomodoro*, a tomato and dried bread stew; *Panzanella*, a salad assembled with dried bread and juicy ripe tomatoes; or *Ribollita*, a soup from Tuscany which is thickened with dried bread.

There are many more examples, too numerous to name, not only from Italy, but other regions around the world. They all have a common thread though, important to the *cucina povera* approach, bread is never wasted!

I use leftover dried bread in my kitchen in many ways. To note a few examples, the breadcrumbs I keep in my larder are made from finely ground dried, leftover bread, keeping in mind that the better the bread, the better the crumbs.

Croutons are always on hand to toss into salads or float in soups, or toss a couple to my dogs for a treat!

Leftover bread slices often find their way into both savory and sweet dishes, as well as being a component for various stuffings.

I have shared a few recipes on this blog, with one of my favorites being a savory baked bread dish called a Strata, which I wrote about in April of 2020 in a post titled: S-T-R-E-T-C-H-I-N-G A Pantry Staple. Others were more about bread puddings, both sweet and savory.

After reading many recipe variations about this so-called Torta di Pane, the following is the one I like to prepare when I have an abundance of leftover, dried bread. It is easy to assemble, inexpensive, makes good use of what is on hand, and is satisfying served at the end of a meal or to accompany a cup of coffee any time of the day.

Torta di Pane . . . A Bread Cake

Ingredients

4 generous cups of day-old, dried bread, cut into cubes

3/4 cup cane sugar (honey can be substituted)

1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa

1 teaspoon cinnamon (mix with cocoa)

1 teaspoon espresso powder (optional)

1 cup dried figs, stemmed and roughly chopped

1/2 cup dried cranberries (raisins or currants can be used)

1/2 cup chopped hazelnuts (walnuts or pine nuts can be substituted)

2 cups Half&Half

3 eggs

4 tablespoons butter, melted

Butter to coat the baking pan and to dot the top of the cake for baking

Zest of 1 orange



Pane mise en place

Method

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

In a large glass or stainless work bowl, mix the bread cubes with the Half&Half, allowing them to soak, stirring occasionally until most all of the liquid is absorbed.

In another large work bowl mix together the cocoa, fruit, nuts, and the sugar and set aside.

In a small work bowl, whip the eggs with the orange zest and melted butter until well combined and set aside.

Generously coat a 9-inch springform pan with butter and lightly coat the pan with breadcrumbs, although breadcrumbs are an optional ingredient.

When the bread cubes have sufficiently absorbed the liquid, using a large spoon and rubber spatula, fold the dry ingredients and the egg mixture into the bread cube bowl until thoroughly combined.

Turn out the mixture into the prepared baking pan, flattening it out in the pan with the spatula and dotting the top with another tablespoon or two of butter.

Bake in the preheated oven for 35 to 40 minutes, until the cake is set and the top is toasted.

Allow the cake to cool in the baking pan for 20 to 30 minutes before removing it from the pan and placing it on a platter for slicing and serving.



Baked pane torta



Plated



Can there be any dish as versatile as a frittata? The Italian egg-based dish resembles a crustless quiche or a flat omelet, although is much simpler and less time-consuming to prepare. It is a good example in keeping with the *cucina povera* principle of using ingredients on hand.

I have prepared countless frittatas over the years because they are an excellent way to repurpose leftovers, since almost any combination of pre-cooked vegetables, meats, and cheeses can be used as fillings. It is a one-pan meal, can make a great sandwich filling, and can be served any time.

Frittatas are best served at room temperature, never cold, cooked slowly over moderate temperature before finishing in the oven, but other than that they serve as the blank canvas for you to creatively repurpose leftovers for a quick-to-assemble, inexpensive, and satisfying dish.

My preference is to prepare frittatas using leftover vegetables. In the recipe that follows I used the stems I set aside from a bunch of rainbow chard and assembled a frittata around that. Here is how I went about it.

Frittata . . . One Variation

Ingredients

5 large eggs (use 6 eggs if you want a thicker frittata)

1/4 cup Half&Half

Stems from a bunch of rainbow chard, trimmed

5 to 6 scallions, cut on the bias
Whole leaves from 5 to 6 sprigs of parsley
1 cup grated cheese (a sharp provolone was used)
Salt and pepper to your taste
Breadcrumbs to finish (optional)



Mise en place

Method

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

In the same ovenproof skillet you will use to cook the frittata, briefly sauté over a medium temperature, the chard stems and scallion slices in 2 tablespoons of butter, just until they soften.

Set the sauté aside, return the skillet to the stovetop adding 3 tablespoons of olive oil to heat over a medium-high temperature.

While the skillet and the oven are heating, whip the eggs with the Half&Half just to combine the yolks with the whites. Add the remaining ingredients, except the breadcrumbs if using, thoroughly dispersing the vegetables within the egg mixture.

Pour the whipped egg mixture across the pan, gently shaking the pan to evenly distribute the mix. Lower the stovetop burner temperature and slowly cook the frittata until it sets around the edges, moving the skillet back and forth to prevent the bottom from sticking.

Place the skillet into the preheated oven and allow the frittata to fully set and lightly brown around the edges.

If you choose to add the breadcrumbs, remove the frittata from the oven, lightly sprinkle the breadcrumbs over and around the top and place the skillet back in the oven under the broiler for a minute or two, just until the breadcrumbs are toasted.

Remove the finished dish from the oven and slide it onto a platter, using a rubber spatula if needed to loosen the frittata to easily slide onto the platter.



Out of the oven

Allow it to cool to room temperature before cutting and serving.



On a platter



Sliced



I think it is safe to say that a bunch of celery can most likely be found in the back of your refrigerator. Celery is another of those ingredients that is taken for granted, but is an indispensable flavor component for braises, sautés, stews, and stocks.

Included in the Creole Holy Trinity, the Italian Soffritto, and the French Mirepoix, celery plays an important supporting role in building the depth of flavor in many dishes of those cuisines.

It is also the perfect hydration vegetable—it is 95 percent water; approximately 1/2 cup of water is in every cup of celery. Celery juice is often recommended as a component in many vegetable juice drinks or natural tonics because it is so good for you.

I prefer to cook with it rather than drink celery juice, using the pronounced flavored outer ribs in cooked dishes while using the herbaceous, tender, leafy hearts as a raw component in cold salad recipes.

I wrote about cooking with celery in a post titled *An All Vegetable Perspective* where a cooked celery dish was featured, *Sedano in Umido* (January 2020), and back in November 2018, in a post titled *On the Bone . . . Oxtail*, celery was used extensively in that recipe.

The salad recipe that follows I included as part of a post written in April 2020, titled *Exploring Pantry Meals in the Age of the Coronavirus*. It is a dish I prepare often and offers one option for an easy, healthy, quickly assembled meal featuring celery as the main ingredient. Making a couple of minor adjustments to my original recipe, here is how I put it together now.

A Celery Salad

Ingredients (enough for two main dishes)

4 cups celery roughly chopped (consists of two outer ribs and most all the tender ribs and leaves of the celery heart)

1 tablespoon lemon juice

Salt

Dressing:

1/4 cup olive oil

Zest and juice of 1 lemon

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard (either smooth or whole grain)

1 finely minced shallot

1 teaspoon celery seeds, lightly crushed using a mortar and pestle

2 anchovy filets, mashed

Tender parsley stems, finely minced

Salt, pepper, chili flakes to taste

To finish: these are all optional ingredients which can be used singularly or in any combination that suits your taste.

Toasted walnuts, pistachios, or almonds, chopped

Whole parsley leaves

Cubed ricotta salata, a young pecorino, or mozzarella

Method

Prepare the four cups of celery, place in a glass or stainless bowl, toss with the lemon and salt, then chill for 1 hour.

While the celery is chilling, whisk together the dressing and set aside to macerate, allowing the flavors to blend.

When ready to serve, gather the ingredients together in the work bowl, toss and mound onto a lightly chilled serving plates.



Tossed on a plate

Spoon the dressing over and around, checking the seasoning and adding salt, pepper, and chili flakes to your taste. The result is a complete meal prepared from your pantry using celery as the main ingredient. A toasted baguette and a bottle of your favorite wine would round out the meal just right!



Dressed salad



I believe one can safely say that the onion is a fundamental cooking component in countless dishes prepared in many cuisines. You will always find onions of various kinds in my larder and I'm certain that you probably have a few stored away in yours as well.

Cooking from the *cucina povera* approach, onions are a staple because they are abundant, hardy, long-lasting, and inexpensive. With a little creativity and a few pantry staples, one can fashion an inexpensive and easy to prepare one-dish meal that is warm and satisfying, providing some relief from the cold temperatures we are currently experiencing.

The recipe that follows is for an onion soup. No, not the dark, cheesy French classic, often served in a crock right out of the oven, but a much lighter variation, using a vegetable stock, paired with crushed tomatoes, and when served, topped by an egg cooked your preferred way—runny yolk, firm yolk, or poached. Here you go...

An Onion Soup . . . A Variation with Tomato and Egg

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 4 to 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 large yellow or sweet onions, thinly sliced
- 3 garlic cloves, sliced
- 1 to 2 large thyme sprigs
- 14 oz can of chopped tomatoes, crushed by hand
- 4 cups vegetable stock
- Salt and pepper to your taste
- 1 large egg per person, prepared to your taste
- Thick slices of an artisan bread of your choice, toasted
- Minced parsley and more black pepper to serve



Mise en place

Method

Assemble and prepare the ingredients as noted above.

In a large stockpot with a lid, melt the butter in the olive oil over a medium temperature until it begins to sizzle but not brown.

Add the onions, garlic, and thyme, season with salt and pepper, and stir to coat and thoroughly combine the trimmed vegetables. Raise the temperature of the burner slightly.

Allow the vegetables to soften but not caramelize. Taste and correct the seasoning if needed.

Add the tomatoes and the stock, again stirring to thoroughly combine and check the seasoning once more.

Cover the pot and bring the soup to a simmer. Cook for another 10 minutes so the onions are tender but not too soft so as to fall apart. Keep the soup hot while cooking the eggs and toasting some bread slices to accompany.

Prepare the eggs in the manner you prefer, and once cooked, place them on top of the bowl of soup.

Drizzle a little olive oil on the bread slices (2 per person), and lightly toast under the broiler, careful not to burn them.

Ladle the soup into warm serving bowls, top with the cooked egg, and nestle two slices of bread alongside.

If you are using the minced parsley, sprinkle a little over the top of the bowl along with some freshly ground black pepper.



Plated and ready to serve



While we are cooking onions, this next recipe will illustrate how delicious onions can be when featured as a main ingredient and served as a main dish.

Again, working with ingredients on hand, five varieties of the allium family are assembled and paired with the popular kale, cavolo nero, slowly braised on the stovetop to yield a luscious all-vegetable dish.

It can be served as a one-dish meal spooned over rice, polenta, pasta (think farfalle), or even alongside a generous portion of garlic-smashed potatoes.

However, I chose a different approach this time and used this colorful vegetable braise to fill a crostata, where all that was required to complete the meal was to pour a glass of your favorite wine to accompany!

Here is how I got that done.

Mixed Onion and Cavolo Nero Braise

Ingredients

1/2 cup olive oil

2 large garlic cloves, thinly sliced

2 to 3 anchovy filets

1 teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed

2 shallots thinly sliced

1 red onion, thinly sliced

1 sweet or yellow onion, thinly sliced

1 large or 2 medium leeks, white and light green parts, thinly sliced

1 bunch scallions, white and light green parts, thinly sliced

1 large carrot, coarsely grated

Salt, pepper, chili flakes

1 cup vegetable stock

1/2 cup dry white wine (many options)

1 large bunch cavolo nero kale, tough center ribs and ends trimmed, larger leaves halved or cut into thirds

1/3 cup golden raisins

Optional ingredients:

Breadcrumbs and a grated cheese of your choice to scatter on the bottom of the crostata to absorb any excess moisture released during baking from the braised vegetable mix.



Mise en place

Method

In a large stockpot with a lid, heat the olive oil over medium-high temperature. When the oil is hot but not smoking, add the garlic, whole anchovy fillets, crushed fennel seeds, and a pinch of chili flakes.

When the sauté begins to sizzle, stir in all the prepared vegetables, along with the stock and wine. Season with salt, pepper, and additional chili flakes to your taste, and stir to thoroughly coat and combine all the ingredients.

Cover the stockpot, lower the temperature, and simmer for 7 to 10 minutes to soften the vegetable mix.

Finally add the cavolo nero and raisins, again stirring to combine. Check and adjust the seasoning to your taste, cover the pot, and slowly braise the vegetable mix for an hour while stirring occasionally.

After an hour to an hour and a half the onion mix should be unctuous and the kale leaves should be wilted and softened. Remove the lid and check both the tenderness of the vegetables and the overall seasoning.

If you plan on serving this vegetable braise over one of the starches I initially suggested, then keep the pot covered and over a very low temperature until you are ready to plate and serve.

If you decide to use the braised vegetables as a crostata filling (recipe follows), then keep the stockpot uncovered, and raise the temperature to gently cook off as much of the liquid as possible, then set aside as you prepare the crostata.

The crostata has been featured many times, both savory or sweet varieties, in this blog. In a post titled Making of a Crostata, written in September 2017, I presented the recipe I use to prepare the crostata pastry dough.

Below is that recipe and instructions for how I used it to bake a crostata filled with the Mixed Onion and Cavolo Nero Braise.

There were two small adjustments to the dough recipe in an effort to make it just a little more interesting. Finely ground with the flour is 1/2 cup of walnuts and the water was replaced with Half&Half.

Here is how that recipe came together.

A Savory Crostata Variation

Ingredients

Dough:

1-1/2 cups flour

1/2 cup walnuts, finely ground

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

8 tablespoons of cold butter, cut into small cubes

3 tablespoons whole milk, Greek-style yogurt

1 to 2 tablespoons Half&Half, as needed

1 egg used as a wash to coat the dough before baking

Sesame seeds sprinkled over the egg wash

Filling:

The mixed onion and cavolo nero braise was used.

Method

Preheat the oven to 375 to 400 degrees.

After finely grinding the walnuts, place all the dry ingredients in the work bowl of the food processor, pulsing a few times to mix. With the processor running slowly, drop the butter pieces in one by one until they begin to incorporate into the dry ingredients. Add the yogurt and gradually increase the speed until the dough begins to form.

If the mix seems too firm, add a tablespoon or two of Half&Half until the dough pulls away from the sides of the work bowl and all the butter is incorporated.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and form into a flattened disk. Wrap the dough in clear film and chill for 25 to 30 minutes.

Once chilled, unwrap and return the dough to the floured surface. Flour your hands and a rolling pin and gently roll out the dough to a round shape of approximately 14 to 15 inches. Place the rolled out dough on a sheet of baking parchment paper in a large sheet pan. If using, sprinkle some breadcrumbs, grated cheese, or both around the center of the flat pastry, leaving a 2-inch margin around.

Spoon the cooled filling braise onto the dough, working from the center out to the 2-inch margin.

Start folding the dough over and on itself around the tart until the filling is completely enclosed. Pinch or crease any of the seams so that the dough doesn't come apart during baking.

Using a pastry brush, spread the egg wash all over the folded dough which will insure a good seal on the seams. Sprinkle the sesame seeds on top of the egg wash to adhere during baking.

Place the sheet pan on the center rack of the preheated oven and bake for 35 to 40 minutes until the crust is nicely browned.



Ready to bake

Allow the crostata to rest just out of the oven, then slice and serve warm as a main course or as a vegetable side to accompany a roasted chicken or sausage, for example.



Baked, ready to slice



Since the weather has been so cold this month, the next two recipes are for hearty stews that not only keep you warm against the cold, but reflect that nothing wasted ethos of the *cucina povera* cooking style.

The first is a simple, inexpensive, nourishing and comforting stew using beans and tomatoes—ingredients most of us have on hand in some form in the household larder.

The second is a stew that I prepare from time to time, which transforms an often overlooked, inexpensive ingredient into a deeply flavorful dish when slowly cooked for several hours.

Similar to the initially suggested accompaniments in the previous recipe, both of these stew recipes lend themselves equally well when paired with any of those same accompaniments.

Let's take a look.

Cannellini Bean and Tomato Stew

Ingredients

For the soffritto, all vegetables are minced

1 medium onion

2 large garlic cloves

1 celery rib

1 carrot

2 fennel top stalks

For the stew:

1 14 oz can chopped tomatoes with juice

1 14 oz can cannellini beans, drained

2 cups vegetable stock

Olive oil and butter

Salt and pepper



Mise en place

Method

Prepare all the vegetables for the soffritto as noted.

In a large stockpot placed over medium-high temperature melt 2 tablespoons of butter in 3 tablespoons of olive oil. When the butter starts to sizzle and the olive oil is hot, start the sauté with the minced onion. Sweat the onion for 5 to 7 minutes to allow it to soften and become translucent. Add the remaining soffritto ingredients to the sauté and season with salt and pepper to your taste.

Stir the soffritto while it cooks for another 5 to 7 minutes before adding the tomatoes and the vegetable stock. Raise the stovetop temperature slightly allowing for a steady simmer, cooking the liquid down for 20 minutes.

After the liquid has been reduced and the flavors more concentrated, add the beans, thoroughly mixing them into the stew.

Lower the temperature and cook the stew for just another 10 minutes, allowing it to thicken further.

Check and correct the seasoning to your taste before removing the stockpot from the heated burner.

Soups and stews alike are always better served on the second day. When ready to eat this stew variation, gently reheat it and ladle it over one of the accompaniments suggested earlier. We chose rice cooked in vegetable stock as the base for this stew, garnished with minced parsley, and lightly drizzled with a good finishing olive oil.



Plated, ready to serve



This now brings us to my final recipe offering in our exploring the cucina povera approach to cooking.

Chicken gizzards, hearts, liver, necks, and wing tips, pieces of the bird generally used to make stock or simply discarded, can be transformed into flavorful dishes by combining them with other pantry ingredients and long slow cooking.

With this recipe I'm sharing how I prepared a deeply flavorful stew or sauce where the main ingredient is chicken gizzards.

Don't be squeamish, let's get started.

A Chicken Gizzard Stew or Sauce Variation

Ingredients

For the soffritto, all vegetables are minced

1 large onion

2 celery ribs

2 fennel top stalks

1 carrot

5 garlic cloves

For the stew:

4 slices pancetta or smoked bacon, diced

1-1/2 to 2# chicken gizzards

2 to 3 sprigs each, oregano, parsley, thyme, tied

2 bay leaves

1 teaspoon roasted ancho chili powder

14 oz can chunk tomato, crushed by hand

2 cups vegetable stock

1/2 cup dry red wine (many options)

Olive oil

Salt, pepper, chili flakes



Mise en place

Method

Prepare all the vegetables for the soffritto.

Wash and cut the gizzards into quarters, trimming any unwanted fat and connective tissue.

In a large stockpot with a lid or a Dutch oven, set over medium-high temperature, render the pancetta or bacon in 3 tablespoons of olive oil.

Add the soffritto ingredients, tied herb bundle, bay leaves, ancho chili powder, and season with salt, pepper and chili flakes to your taste.

Stir the sauté to thoroughly combine and allow it to cook for 7 to 10 minutes so that the vegetable mix begins to soften.

Add the tomatoes, vegetable stock, and wine. Bring the pot back to a simmer, stirring a few times, then add the gizzards.

Stir once again to thoroughly disperse the gizzards into the braise, lower the temperature to a slow simmer, check and correct the seasoning as needed, then cover the pot and simmer undisturbed for 2-1/2 to 3 hours.

At the end of the cooking time, test the tenderness of the gizzards and again test the seasoning.

Optionally, a ladle or two of the gizzard stew can be run through a food processor to finally mince and be added back to the pot to further thicken the final braise.



The sauce



Served

Serve this dish with one of the aforementioned accompaniments. We enjoyed ours over pasta garnished with minced parsley and grated pecorino.

Well, that brings this post to a conclusion. I am hopeful that my interpretation of the cucina povera approach to cooking influences your thinking about making the most of what you have on hand. Turning modest ingredients into something delicious and nourishing while reducing your overall cost of feeding your families is key.

Why not give one or more of the recipes featured here a try? Or better yet, let me know what you are already preparing so that I might have something new to explore in my kitchen.

Time heals, food comforts . . . keep cooking!

Best . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'AM'.

Eat well • Drink well • Be well

To know how to eat is to know enough!