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RECIPE FOR AN AUTHENTIC RAGÙ BOLOGNESE

I found this recipe in a book I borrowed from the Ottawa Public Library in the late 1980s or the early 1990s. I have never, since then, found a better recipe for a *ragù bolognese*, even on the Internet in the Italian-language recipes there. (There is no such thing as a *standard* recipe for a *ragù bolognese*). I have made it many times and it has always been a hit. You can make a large batch and freeze portions; it keeps well in the freezer for several months. I reproduce it here from memory, with some small changes I made to the recipe which, I believe, make it better. You don't have to be exact with the quantities, or even with the exact ingredients: it's *very* flexible. Be forewarned, though: it takes quite a bit of time to make, and a whole *day* to bake!

INGREDIENTS

About 1 pound (or about 500 grams) each of beef, pork belly and chicken livers
(You can also add about a pound — or about 500 grams — of veal, if you want: it's optional)

About 1 pound (or about 500 grams) of chopped yellow or white (not red) onions
(You can also add about half a pound each of chopped carrots and celery — again, it's optional)

About 1 ounce (about 30 grams, or four of five cloves) of chopped garlic — you can add more if you're into the garlic flavour

About 1/4 cup of extra virgin olive oil, or about the same amount of butter plus extra virgin olive oil
(You can add a fistful — or a cupful — of fresh oregano leaves, or about 1 tablespoonful of dried oregano; it's optional)

Two or three cloves of nutmeg

About 1 cup (or about one large can or two small cans) of concentrated tomato paste
(You can also add about 30 ounces (or about 1 kilogram) of fresh or canned, skinned and diced tomatoes — it's optional)

About 1 tablespoon of freshly crushed pepper

About 1/2 tablespoon of coarse sea salt or ordinary table salt — sea salt is, I think, better

About a tablespoon brown or white sugar — more if you're using the tomatoes, less if you're not

Between 1/2 and 1 bottle (by which I mean, a 750 ml bottle) of any decent dry red wine, preferably Italian
(You can also add about 500 ml — or a pint — of milk, or milk plus cream in any proportion you like — it's optional)

About 1 cupful or fistful of fresh basil leaves

1 lemon for its zest (you will use the zest of the lemon only — save the rest of the lemon for something else)

Water and/or meat broth (chicken or beef), as needed

PREPARATION

Chop up the meats with a cleaver — or, if you have them, with two cleavers, one in each hand — until the meats are chopped into the smallest chunks you can manage without over-stressing yourself. (I find that partially — but not totally — freezing the meats makes them easier to chop.)

Preheat the oven to about 350 degrees F (which is to say, about 180 degrees C).

Take a large oven-proof metal or ceramic pot and put it on the stove at medium-high heat. Fry the onions — and also the carrots and celery if you're using them — in about half the olive oil (or in olive oil plus butter) until translucent, stirring constantly, and then add the garlic. Keep stirring for a few minutes more till the garlic bits brown lightly. Remove from the pot and keep aside.

Add more of the olive oil (or butter plus olive oil) and fry the meats in 3 or 4 small batches, stirring constantly, about 15 minutes per batch, until all the meat bits separate from each other and they start to brown a little bit. (If you add all the meat at once, the meat won't brown.) Grate the nutmeg into the meat. Put all the meats back in the pot, which must be still on a medium-high heat.

Add the previously-fried chopped-onion-and-garlic mixture (plus other chopped vegetables if using them) to the meats, and pour in the wine; also add the milk or milk+cream mixture if you're using it. Keep stirring until at least half the added liquid has evaporated.

Add the tomato paste, the diced tomatoes if you're using them, the oregano, the sugar, the salt and the pepper. Stir thoroughly till the sauce boils again. Cover the pot and bake it in the oven for a minimum of 12 hours, preferably closer to 24. Keep checking the sauce every couple of hours or thereabouts to see if it has dried out; if it has, stir in some water and/or meat both. Also stir in the browned and blackened stuff that sticks to the side of the pot over time: it adds flavour. (You can turn the oven off overnight and put it back on again when you wake up, to save you the hassle of checking the sauce at night.) Eventually the *ragù* should turn into a rich, mahogany-coloured pasta sauce of the right consistency; almost all the chunks of meat will have broken down into a kind of mush. Make sure the *ragù* isn't too dry. Taste it to see if needs more salt, and if necessary, add some.

Just before serving, chop the basil and zest the lemon, and add them to the *ragù*. Stir thoroughly. Serve on fresh *tagliatelle* (not on spaghetti!) in shallow bowls or soup plates, to which have been added a few tablespoonfuls of the water in which the pasta was boiled. You don't need a lot of sauce per plate: it's extraordinarily rich and filling. Grate a good quality parmesan cheese over it, add a dollop of butter, and enjoy! (A decent Italian dry red wine makes a perfect accompaniment.)