





WORDS Lindy Schneider | PHOTOGRAPHY Nadia Fragnito*

La Vita Simpatico

WITH NADIA FRAGNITO OF
THE VEGAN ITALIAN KITCHEN

The word simpatico in Italian describes a mutual and reciprocal positive feeling. For Nadia Fragnito, it is a perfect word to capture the resonance between two defining aspects of her heart: Vegan life and Italian life. Born to an Italian Father (who emigrated to Australia as a nine-year-old) and Australian mother, Nadia's childhood is a postcard to the best of both worlds – an Australian upbringing infused with the vibrant southern Italian cultural influences of Campania. "My mum taught me cooking skills, but my dad and my nonna taught me about my heritage, the old recipes, the ways of the garden...and of comfort food. This is what I took into the world as an adult leaving home more than twenty years ago and has become increasingly important to me as I've become older. These traditions are part of who I am. Veganism is also part of who I am."

Compelled to veganism by a deep concern for animals and their suffering, Nadia adopted a vegan lifestyle at a time when cookbooks, and product options (and even the internet) were not readily available. "In those early years, I missed so many dishes from my childhood so it became a creative exploration to discover ways I could veganise the dishes I had grown up with."

**Additional images supplied are credited on the image*

In search of substitute ingredients and different ways of preparing food, Nadia found herself on a cross-cultural journey through the food halls of Asian markets, to health food shops and international delis and random places (where do you buy liquid smoke?), and what she discovered inspired a whole new way of thinking about her family's cuisine traditions. "I simply wanted to recreate food memories and embrace my heritage. But then I started a blog to share my recipe adaptations and people wanted more." To meet the growing interest, she self-published her first cookbook *Discovering Vegan Italian* in 2019.

Currently at home in the Dandenong Ranges, Nadia and Matthew Holmes, a film producer, first came to the Yarra Valley to Warburton with doggo Hugo in 2012, where they married, and embraced a lifestyle personified by slow living, a way of life they committed to follow for the rest of their lives. Surrounded by fresh air, amazing produce and community, creativity blossomed. In addition to Nadia's culinary pursuits, she also wrote an award-winning play about *Black Saturday* (The Colour of Fire produced by Exit Theatre and directed by John Wood), published a poetry book and was active in the local theatre community. Her background in acting, teaching and writing, and her natural talent and passion for her vegan Italian recipes saw her successfully audition for a place on SBS cooking show *The Chefs' Line* showcasing her veganised recipes against a team of qualified chefs. This provided a huge boost to her 'vegan Italian' profile, and she has since featured twice on the *Freshly Picked* TV program and is an in-demand presenter at cooking demonstrations.



Photo by Geena Glass Photography



Image: Nadia whips up her vegan Eggplant Parmigiana on SBS *The Chefs' Line*. Photo by SBS.



Living a vegan Italian life is a way of the heart for Nadia, but she is excited when people discover her recipes and simply enjoy them for what they are – delicious, wholesome and healthy. Her recent reconnaissance trip to Italy (pre-Covid) as research for her second cookbook (launching mid 2021, *A Vegan Summer in Southern Italy – Recipes and Stories from the South*) reinforced the unique relationship between the vegan way of life and the Italian way of life. Future trips will provide inspiration for further cookbooks exploring new regions and themes.

"In Southern Italy in particular, the diet is heavily plant based. There is so much homegrown produce and so many recipes that pack the flavour into vegetables. There is a phrase *cucina povera* that captures this idea – traditionally people didn't have much money, and eggs, meat and dairy were a luxury, so many recipes were developed without these ingredients. So much of the food was vegan already!"

"There is so much homegrown produce and so many recipes that pack the flavour into vegetables."

Opposite top: A cookbook that veganises the Italian classics. Book launch for Discovering Vegan Italian (2019). Left: Prickly pears in the summer sun, Castelmola, Sicily. Below: Taralli, a traditionally vegan snack from the region of Puglia.





Image: Nature's beauty at Campo de' Fiori markets in Rome.

Image: The importance of continuing family traditions.



On Nadia's tour she sampled vegan restaurants across Italy, meeting the chefs and discovering the innovations that were redefining vegan cooking. "In Italy, veganism is still an act of rebellion. Veganism is very much a moral or ethical imperative but that is changing."

People love trying new things and many will order a vegan meal to try something different or because it offers them healthy or allergy free options. "Today people with a dairy intolerance will be a 'sometimes vegan', or someone with cholesterol issues will seek a vegan option as a way of managing their health issues when dining out or cooking at home. A vegan meal has its own place and it's a growing exponentially."

In Australia similar patterns are emerging. There are dedicated vegan Italian restaurants and menu options that highlight vegan dishes. Shops and markets offer many substitute products and veganised versions of favourite ingredients. "I'm waiting patiently for the amazing vegan cheese that was so plentiful in Italy to be more widely available here. It's delicious in its own right."

"In Italy, veganism is still an act of rebellion. Veganism is very much a moral or ethical imperative but that is changing."



Image: Porta Palazzo in Turin, one of Europe's largest open markets.



Image: Growing up with tomatoes. Nadia at 10 years old, working in her family's glasshouses.



"That makes me happy. And I think it makes the planet and the animals happy too. That's simpatico."

"I've learnt you can love a culture even though you were not born there. You don't have to be Italian to have an Italian spirit or cook like an Italian. I've also learnt that you can live by your principles without feeling like you are missing out. There was a beautiful moment in Puglia when Matthew and I sat down to aperitivo (an afternoon drink and snack) and a bowl of taralli was put on the table. It was veganised and the excitement I felt when I saw I could enjoy it fuelled my passion all the more to share this with others...and let me tell you how delicious almond granita is, or sun-dried tomatoes in Sicily, or the pane e panelle in Palermo!"

Growing up Nadia recalls how her nonna, her main inspiration, would constantly drop food to her home; pizza tied up in tablecloth, baskets of zeppole, trays of her sweet rice pastry at Easter, pots of stuffed artichokes, potato and capsicum...and always taralli. Now Nadia experiences the joy of cooking vegan for her entire family. "Last Christmas, Dad went back for second helpings of my walnut ragu lasagne, and the entire bowl of vegan tiramisu was gone in minutes. That makes me happy. And I think it makes the planet and the animals happy too. That's simpatico." ■

Find Nadia's recipes and cookbooks online: www.theveganitaliankitchen.com

For cooking tips and recipes, see p.65



RECIPES & PHOTOGRAPHY | Nadia Fragnito

Warm Winter Feasting the Vegan Italian Way

TOP TIPS FOR 'VEGANISING' YOUR FAVOURITE DISHES

1. If you love ricotta, firm tofu is an excellent substitute.
2. You can whizz up cashew or walnuts, nutritional yeast and some seasonings for a vegan Parmesan to sprinkle over pasta.
3. For rich meaty mince or meatballs, you can't go past walnuts. A few dashes of liquid smoke and it goes next level. Find it near the BBQ sauce at your supermarket.
4. For desserts, instead of egg yolk, a pastry cream is easy using soy milk, corn flour, vegan butter and sugar.
5. Chickpea flour is a great egg substitute for egg in a frittata. Add a little kala namak – black salt – and it tastes like egg!
6. The water from a can of chickpeas – aquafaba – whips up just like egg whites. Great for tiramisu.
7. A tasty calamari substitute is king oyster mushrooms. Cut into rounds and marinate in vegan fish sauce, lemon juice and dried seaweed.
8. You can make wonderful fresh pasta with flour and water – no eggs required.
9. There are many vegan products at stores. If you're not an adventurous cook or are time poor, buy vegan parmesan, vegan mince, vegan cheeses, and much more.

Find Nadia's recipes and cookbooks online: www.theveganitaliankitchen.com

Try this four-course meal at home with ingredients from your pantry and local markets:



Bruschetta al Pomodoro e Ricotta

BRUSCHETTA WITH TOMATOES AND TOFU RICOTTA

Bruschetta is a classic starter to any Italian meal, but this recipe goes a step further with its creamy tofu ricotta layer. Sprinkle over a few fennel seeds and you have a unique flavour journey. Don't forget to finish with a generous drizzle of extra olive oil. You can also use the ricotta recipe for a multitude of Italian dishes.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 4 | 15 minutes

Tofu Ricotta

250g extra firm tofu
¼ cup soy milk
½ teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons vinegar
or lemon juice
½ tsp garlic powder
or ½ garlic clove

Tomato Bruschetta

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil + drizzling
2 garlic cloves
250g cherry tomatoes
cracked black pepper
½ teaspoon salt
Small loaf of crusty bread, such as ciabatta
1-2 teaspoons fennel seeds

METHOD

Tofu ricotta

Place all ingredients in a small food processor. Process until it reaches a ricotta consistency, smooth but with a touch of graininess. Refrigerate while you prepare the tomatoes.

Blistered tomatoes

Heat the olive oil in a frypan and add the tomatoes. Fry the tomatoes for 3-5 minutes until they soften and blister. Add the salt and cracked pepper.

Slice and lightly toast the bread. Cut the garlic cloves in half. Rub the cut side of the garlic clove over the surface of the bread slices. This will infuse a garlic flavour without being too overpowering.

Generously spread the tofu ricotta over the toast. Pile the tomatoes evenly on top and garnish with a sprinkling of fennel seeds. Serve with a drizzle of oil and cracked black pepper.



Gnocchi di Patate

POTATO GNOCCHI

Soft pillows of goodness proving once again that we don't need eggs to create fresh pasta. The trick here is to feel your way with the dough rather than stick to the set amount of flour as a hard and fast rule. Too sticky and wet and the gnocchi will disintegrate in the cooking process; too much flour and you will lose the flavour of the potatoes. If you don't have a potato ricer, you can use a grater.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 4 | 1 hour + cooling

1 kg starchy potatoes
1 tablespoon salt
1-2 cups plain flour
(approximately)



METHOD

Into a large saucepan of water, boil the potatoes whole in their skins for approximately 25-30 minutes or until easily pierced through with a skewer or sharp knife. Cooking time will depend on the size of your potatoes.

Drain potatoes and allow to cool enough to handle, about 20 minutes. Peel away the skins. Push the peeled potatoes through a potato ricer and onto a floured bench top or into a bowl. Sprinkle the salt over the potatoes. Sift half the flour over the potatoes and combine with a fork. Then with your hands, knead and form into a dough. You want a dough that is soft but not sticky, so add more flour as you go. Stop kneading after the dough is smooth and comes together, after a few minutes. You want to keep your gnocchi tender, so don't overwork the dough.

Divide the dough into 8 pieces. Dust your surface with flour. Working with one piece at a time, roll into a long sausage shape using the palms of your hands. Cut the sausage into gnocchi sized pieces approximately 2-3cm long. You can now create your desired shape by rolling it into a ball or making ridges with a fork or rolling down a wooden paddle (rigagnochchi). Place rolled gnocchi onto a tray lined with a towel to prevent from sticking. Repeat with the remaining dough. Sprinkle liberally with flour as you go.

Cook gnocchi in batches in a large saucepan of salted boiling water for about 1-2 minutes or until they float to the surface. Drain carefully with a slotted spoon and serve coated with your favourite sauce, such as a simple pomodoro or a creamy alla panna.



Polpette al Pomodoro Sugo

MEATBALLS WITH TOMATO SAUCE

Polpette (meatballs) are traditionally made with ground meat. Of course, you could use a store-bought vegan mince, but I love the rich and meaty texture of walnuts. Not only are these polpette simple to make, they're also nutritious and oil-free. If you'd like this to be a completely oil-free dish, cook the garlic in the passata instead of frying in oil beforehand. You will need a food processor. You can purchase liquid smoke at most gourmet grocers and vegan food stores.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 18-20 balls | 40 minutes

Walnut Polpette

2 cups walnuts
2 slices of bread (approximately 90g)
1 tablespoon 'beef' style stock powder
2 tablespoons nutritional yeast flakes
Few drops of liquid smoke
Handful of fresh parsley

Pomodoro Sauce

2 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, finely sliced
700g tomato passata
½ teaspoon salt
Few basil leaves

METHOD

Polpette

In a food processor, pulse walnuts and bread briefly.

Add remaining ingredients and process until it begins to resemble the texture and size of mince. With the processor still running, pour in ¼ cup of water. The mixture should now be moist and malleable.

Preheat oven to 180C.

Roll the mixture into balls the size of a walnut shell and place on a large oven tray lined with baking paper. Bake for 25 minutes and carefully turn over half way through.

Meanwhile, make the pomodoro sauce.

Pomodoro sauce

In a medium saucepan, heat the oil over a low-medium heat and add the garlic. Turn down the heat. Allow the garlic to infuse for 1-2 minutes, stirring often, ensuring it doesn't brown.

Stir through the passata, salt and basil leaves. Cover and simmer over a low heat for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Once out of the oven, drop the polpette gently into the pomodoro sauce and simmer on low for 5 minutes so the polpette soak up the liquid.

Remove from the heat and stir through your favourite pasta or enjoy on their own as a side or starter dish.

COOKING TIP: These can easily be made gluten free – just replace with slices of your favourite gluten free bread.

Pomodoro Zugo Polpette al

MEATBALLS WITH TOMATO SAUCE



Cannoncini

CUSTARD CREAM HORNS

For every family celebration my Zia Carmela would bring along a towering platter of these custard pastries in both chocolate and vanilla. Decades later I finally discovered her secret recipe and then veganised it. In some regions of Italy they are called cannoncini and in others, cannoli alla crema (not to be confused with the Sicilian deep fried and ricotta-filled cannoli). You will need 12 metal pastry horn moulds.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 12 cream horns | 35 minutes + cooling

Pastry Horns

2 sheets vegan puff pastry
vegan butter or coconut
oil for greasing

Pastry Cream

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup soy milk
1/3 cup cornflour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegan butter
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar
3 capfuls Strega liqueur (optional)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 tablespoon lemon zest
Light dash of turmeric powder
100g dark chocolate
(optional, see notes)
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegan chocolate hazelnut
spread (optional, see notes)
Icing sugar to serve

METHOD

Preheat oven to 200C

Pastry horns

Grease the outside of the cone moulds with butter or coconut oil.

Once pastry has thawed, cut long strips from the pastry, approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch thick. Feel free to vary the thickness.

Taking 1 strip of pastry at a time, begin at the bottom tip of the mould. First, enclose the end of the pastry dough around the tip. Then wind the pastry around the mould, overlapping the pastry layers slightly as you go. This may be a little fiddly at first, as the greased mould makes it slippery. But you'll get the hang of it. Depending on how wide your pastry strip is, you will need to wind a second strip of pastry around the mould. Stop before you get to the very top of the mould.

Repeat with the remaining strips of pastry until you have used up all the moulds or the pastry. Whichever comes first. Place the moulds on a tray lined with baking paper. Bake for 15 minutes or until golden.

Allow the pastry to cool slightly before gently removing from the moulds. They should slip out easily if greased. Cool pastry before filling with the cream.

Pastry cream

In a medium saucepan, pour in the soy milk and whisk in the corn flour immediately until dissolved. Add the remaining ingredients and stir to combine. Heat slowly over a medium heat, stirring often. Once it thickens, simmer and stir on low for a couple of minutes.

Take off the heat and allow the custard to cool or place the saucepan directly into a bowl or sink of cold water and continue to whisk briskly until it cools.

To fill the cream horns, transfer the cooled pastry cream to a piping bag or bottle. Squeeze the cream into the pastries until filled to the top of the horn.

Dust with icing sugar and serve immediately.

Chocolate Cream Horns

For chocolate cream horns, whisk 100g grated dark chocolate through the hot custard. It will melt easily when grated finely. For Nutella-style cream horns, stir in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegan choc-hazelnut spread through the hot custard until thoroughly combined.