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**FOOD & DRINK**  
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Roberto and Lucia Martella developed Grano restaurant, in Toronto, to have an identity of its own. Just like Lucia's tomato sauce.

**SIGNATURE DISH** - Sara Angel

## Slowly simmering with love

The secret to a great sugo di pomodoro is watching the pot as you would a baby

"Fresh olives!" Lucia Martella declares, sitting down to her morning coffee. "I hate that commercial!" It is at Grano, Toronto's most vibrant Italian eatery, where Lucia and her husband, Roberto, run the restaurant's chef and co-owner, has invited me to make tomato sauce. But first, a cardinal rule of successful Italian cooking.

"You have to know when to use products that are freshly harvested or newly made — like mozzarella — and when it's better to use ingredients that have been cured, bottled or canned — like Parmesan and preserves." At an age "somewhere over 40 and not yet 60," Lucia Martella has spent the better part of her career dispelling the myth that sugo di pomodoro, her signature dish, can be created from anything other than tomatoes out of a can.

Canned? I ask. "Canned," she replies, with complete assurance. Of course, there are exceptions, she adds. "Like my father. He had been a farmer in Italy, and came to Canada and planted our backyard with so many vegetables that there wasn't a hole of grass. He only made sauce from freshly picked fruit, but he thought, 'Why buy canned tomatoes from the supermarket when God gives each and me?' A little work turns it into tomato sauce."

Since the early 19th century, when European explorers first brought home the soft red fruit from South America, tomatoes have been divided over how to use them. The wisdom of Renaissance French and English kitchens was to leave the fruit — which some deemed poisonous — alone. This mindset would soon change, only until the 20th century, many countries regarded the tomato as

little more than a curiosity.

"But not in Italy!" Roberto Martella says as he joins us at the table. Lucia's husband, Grano's host and an impresario of all things Italian, Roberto speaks with the enthusiasm of a professor who is patient as he explains. "Along with garlic and olive oil, the tomato is a staple of the Italian low-fat diet with the paradox, Roberto stresses each phrase as if it were a delicious morsel. "In Italy, life is a never-ending meal. You don't ask anyone if they want to eat more than a couple of courses. You just eat."

Since Grano opened its doors in 1998, the Martellas have grown their restaurant where there is a distinction between the public and the private. When guests arrive, Roberto greets them with the warm "Buon giorno," of a man greeting his family. Then he escorts them to long, rustic tables where they will often be seated intimately close to other

and dousing it with olive oil. The next day, he also turned up the salt again, and Roberto's holiday ended for Lucia's mother. "Roberto said, 'If you're not going to eat, give it to me,'" Lucia says. "Now she has the olive oil, but she didn't chop it up on the stove. For the first time, we were thick soup because we lived together, without a second." Then, one day, she and Roberto summoned their families together. "Roberto said, 'If it pleases the family, Lucia and I have decided to get married.'" Recalling the moment, Lucia savors the story.

"There were, being in a country that was so different, we were brought back to tradition."

But Lucia says, "When she and Roberto decided to open Grano, they had no experience in the restaurant business. 'Our plan was more robust than culinary.' As children of Italian immigrant parents in Canada, Lucia and Roberto had each visited Italy as teenagers. Both had been struck by how different Italy was from their transplanted post-war Italian culture they'd grown up in. It was as if the North American version had been "freeze-dried," Lucia says, and had missed out on the incredible cultural boom of Italy in the 1960s. Moreover, the Italian culture that most North Americans had come to know was the culinary equivalent of frozen spaghetti sauce, a world away from sugo di pomodoro.

During a recent plum tomatoes into her pot, Lucia continues, "You can experience a culture and visit a country without knowing its language, but to really understand what's going on, you need to learn how to speak for yourself." It's just like making tomato sauce. To do it well, you need to consider every step and ingredient carefully but sometimes make the recipe unique to your own.

That's the approach the Martellas took when they started Grano. "We had a real idea what it was."

**'MAKING TOMATO SAUCE IS THERAPY'**

**ROBERTO DECLARED** would become," Lucia says. She and Roberto wanted to open a place that would not only serve classic Italian dishes — both traditional and modern — but also use the best of Italian food products. "If you were to go to a small town in Italy, you would go to a little place for coffee and another place for groceries. We wanted to mix it all together and give a taste of Italy that had been seen here yet."

As the sauce began to simmer, Lucia adds an unpeeled potato to her pot, her signature trick. "To absorb the acidity of the tomato and bring out the sweetest flavors. It also acts as a thickening agent." She thought tomato sauce was often sweetened with sugar — "a bad idea," Lucia says. "The perfect sauce is slow-cooked until the fruit's more evaporated and the tomato's pulp is fused with olive oil. That, she says, is the essential taste, marriage and outrage to getting thick and sticky again."

It takes two days, half hours to make tomato sauce, and must be monitored and stirred around the pot. The secret, Lucia says, is to

watch the pot "like a baby. You would want a child closer than your sauce the same way." She also suggests adding a hint of Grano. "Dadino or Prosciutto. Romano, halfway through the cooking time. It adds great flavor and also helps thicken the sauce."

As the Martella's business grew, so did their family. "We opened the restaurant in '96," Lucia says. "In '97, we had a child. In '98, we had a child. In 1999, we had a child. Then, the last one was '01." By 1996, the restaurant and shop had tripled in size.

"But by '01, we learned," Lucia says. "By '01, Grano developed an unmistakable personality of its own. And, by '01, Lucia's slowly simmering tomato sauce is developing its own inimitable flavor."

At this point, in some kitchens, my senses would be over. But now Roberto appears with plastic bags brimming with bread, wine and an enormous salami covered in spaghetti topped with sugo di pomodoro. "There will be more than anything, if you don't eat?" he says. Then, handling over the bags, he offers one last meditation. "Remember what Grano said: Live as if you'll die tomorrow. Study as if you'll live forever."

Perhaps the great man was sitting before a plate of pasta topped with the perfect sugo di pomodoro.

**LUCIA MARTELLA'S SUGO DI POMODORO (TWO-HOUR)**

- 1 1/2 cups canned plum tomatoes
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 lb 2 celery stalks with leaves, cut into 1/2 lengths
- 1 1/2 Spanish onion, cut into large wedges
- 1 lb 2 medium sized carrots, cut into 1/2 lengths
- 1 lb baking potato, washed, unpeeled and cut in half
- 1 lb small cans imported Italian tomato paste (Doppiozero — zero-Mealy, if possible)
- 1 lb 4 whole clove garlic
- 1 lb fresh ground beef (optional), hand tender in new separate location
- Salt and pepper to taste

1. In a heavy-bottomed pot, warm half of the olive oil (1/4 cup) and add the celery leaves, followed by the chopped celery. Saute for a few minutes, stirring occasionally until celery withers. Do not let the oil get too hot or smoky — if it does, lower the heat. Add the onions and continue to cook for a few minutes with the celery.
2. Add the tomato purée. Be careful! The hot oil may cause it to splatter. Then add carrots, the potato, garlic and one bouquet of herbs.
3. Cook over medium to medium-high heat for about 40 minutes, stirring regularly. Then add the remaining olive oil.
4. Continue to cook until a fork can easily pierce the potato and the sauce has reduced by about one-third. The sauce should be silky, aromatic and thick, not watery. Use a strainer to remove the vegetables and season with salt and pepper. Add the second bouquet of herbs to further infuse the sauce while it is cooking. Once it has cooled, unless you plan to use it immediately, pour the sauce into containers and freeze. Make it in 1/2 cup servings.

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# Grano Restaurant

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