

COOKING WITH TONY

By Tim Hoey, photos by David Verdini

Autumn's Harvest

From Italy's varied regions to our suburban New Jersey homes, autumn's harvest creates exciting dining possibilities for our enjoyment. Hearty foods, including freshly picked forest mushrooms and flavorful game birds, return to the table. Wine choices shift from summer's crisp whites to more robust reds. Local apples and other fresh fruit help deliver the dietary balance central to a healthy lifestyle. These and other culinary highlights make fall cooking a welcome treat.

Italian risotto dishes are an ideal means to enjoy this season's bounty. For home cooks, risotto recipes are among the most approachable, flexible and delicious in the entire repertoire of Italian cooking. The essential quality of the dish—its slightly chewy bite—reflects the essence of al dente sensibility. Its preparations respect the fall harvest's incomparable quality. And the rich cooking mixture adds soulful heft and nutritious benefits entirely in harmony with the season's spirit.

Tony Grande's excellent risotto preparations provide a delightful "way in" to appreciating their taste and style. We recently spoke with him at Il Capriccio about these uniquely Italian dishes.



Tim: Autumn is a wonderful time to prepare risotto.

Tony: Once the summer is over, people are in the mood to eat something a little heavier. The cooler fall temperatures encourage more stovetop cooking. And risotto provides many delicious and healthy options along those lines.

Tim: The seasonal aspect of your risotto con zucca e salciccia recipe is very appealing. I especially liked the addition of butternut squash.

Tony: The vegetable tastes like the season. Butternut squash has an earthy flavor I

enjoy. Its smooth texture adds richness to any dish, and harmonizes very nicely with Italian rice.

Tim: Butternut squash also pairs well with milder sausage and its characteristic range of spices and herbs.

Tony: Another advantage to sausage is that the rendered fat adds a little extra flavor to the rice. Like many Italian ways of doing things, using sausage fat respects the idea that nothing should be wasted. It's a thrifty way to live, which helps preserve and honor what Nature gives us.

Tim: How easy is Italian rice to obtain?

Tony: Authentic, high-quality Italian rice is increasingly available in our area. Our store in Mendham, La Famiglia, sells the two varieties of Italian rice—Arborio and Carnaroli—that can be used in the recipe. Risotto dishes should only use Italian rice; no other rice is suitable for them.

Tim: What's the difference between the two Italian varieties?

Tony: Both are short-grained rice native to northern Italy. Carnaroli's grain is a little longer and its texture a little firmer than Arborio's. Either variety is a good choice for risotto dishes, and work very well in my risotto recipe.

Tim: Are there any tips home cooks should

know about preparing risotto?

Tony: Yes. The broth should be homemade, if possible, as it brings much more flavor to the dish. Preparing broth also requires a certain amount of love, which means the quality of the ingredients matters. Buy good-quality sausage and not inferior, mass-produced meat. Try and get organically grown butternut squash.

Tim: Everything should be as natural as possible.

Tony: Exactly. Remember, the Italian way of cooking is more than just eating. What we eat and how we cook reflects our connection with ourselves, to the natural world around us, and our desire to harmonize with it.

Tim: That's an interesting observation, because risotto dishes, while taking only 20 minutes cooking time, require a certain amount of patience to produce.

Tony: The patience is part of the love. Risotto also requires attention, as the broth is added slowly to the rice. Whatever you do, don't overcook the rice. Also, don't wash the rice before cooking, as that removes starches essential to the dish's character.

Tim: I'm looking forward to preparing this risotto dish. Thanks for suggesting it, Tony. ▲

Risotto Con Zucca e Salciccia

Italian rice with butternut squash and sausage

Serves four

INGREDIENTS:

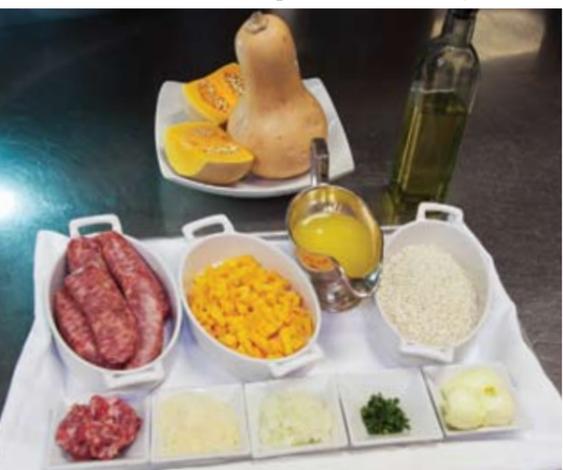
1 lb. Arborio or Carnaroli rice (4 oz. per serving)	2 oz. whole butter, unsalted and unclarified
12 oz. butternut squash, cut in 1/16" cubes	4 oz. extra virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped	5 oz. white wine
10 oz. Italian sweet sausage	1 teaspoon chopped garlic
4 cups of chicken broth	6 tablespoons Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon chopped fresh Italian parsley	Pinch of salt
	Black pepper to taste

PREPARING THE DISH:

Heat the chicken broth so that it is hot, but not boiling.

Meanwhile, put the extra virgin olive oil in a high-sided skillet at medium heat. Once the oil is hot, take the sausage out of its casings and into the pan. Gently break up the sausage with a fork. Cook for a couple of minutes, then add the onion. Once the onion reaches a light golden color, put in the rice. Stir with a wooden spoon for three minutes. After that, add the white wine. Cook until the alcohol evaporates, about two minutes. After that, add a ladleful of the chicken broth. Make sure the rice has absorbed the liquid, and then repeat the process. After ten minutes, include the butternut squash. Continue cooking and gently adding chicken broth by the ladleful, without making the mixture too watery.

After 16 to 17 minutes total cooking, add parsley, butter and cheese. Mix well for a couple of minutes, until the risotto reaches a consistency that's not too thick and not too dry. Add salt and pepper to taste and serve.



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