

*Ask a Professional Home Economist*

**For Immediate Release**

## **Pantry Staples Go Italian**

by Emily Richards, P.H.Ec.

Your pantry may already contain the perfect staples to make quick and healthy Italian meals.

Getting dinner on the table can be stressful with busy schedules and hungry families waiting in the wings. A well-stocked pantry can help. It can simplify your life and help ensure healthy eating. Even when a sit-down meal is not viable, a good supply of pantry items will help you prepare nutritious meals or snacks to eat on the run.

A well-planned pantry helps with habitual healthy eating habits at home. Eating smart is an important life-skill. As a parent or caregiver, you become the teacher and role model.

Professional Home Economist and cookbook author, Emily Richards, mother of two, understands mealtime challenges. Author of the cookbook, *Italian Express, 150 Fast and Easy Family Favourites*, HarperCollins, 2005, Emily shares her pantry secrets and her Italian flair.

### **Formula for Family Mealtime Success**

#### **Plan It**

- Sit down with pen and paper and make a plan, based on Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Ask your family what they like to eat.
- Check cookbooks and magazines to collect new and varied ideas.
- Choose a 'kids night to cook' for the family. Imagine the fun and the learning.

#### **Get It**

- Save time. Make your grocery list by following the same order as food is displayed in the aisles of your favourite store, e.g. start with produce, followed by breads, dairy, etc.
- Shop for staples instead of frozen entrees.
- Stock a pantry – not just a cupboard.

#### **Do It**

- Get organized. Follow your plan.
- Get into the kitchen and chop, slice and dice to create delicious and wholesome meals.
- By working together in the kitchen, quality family time is expanded and enhanced.

## Think Outside the Cupboard

A staple doesn't just mean that it comes in a can and is stored in the cupboard. Look outside the cupboard to your refrigerator, freezer and your counter for basic ingredients to make quick, creative and tasty meals.

### Italian Pantry Favourites

#### Cupboards/Counter

onions  
garlic  
dry seasoned breadcrumbs  
spices (mixtures)  
canned tomatoes  
pasta sauce  
stock/bouillon  
balsamic vinegar  
extra virgin olive oil  
rice  
canned beans/lentils  
dried porcini mushrooms  
marinated artichokes  
tomatoes  
roasted red peppers  
pastina  
cornmeal  
canned tuna  
potatoes

#### Refrigerator

cream cheese  
ricotta cheese  
peppers (variety)  
Italian parsley  
pesto  
eggs  
parmesan cheese  
milk  
prosciutto  
lettuce  
anchovy paste  
sun-dried tomatoes in oil  
rapini or other greens  
olives  
carrots  
light mayonnaise  
celery  
mushrooms

#### Freezer

chicken breasts  
chicken pieces  
sausages  
mixed vegetables  
pizza dough  
pork chops  
ground meats  
fresh breadcrumbs  
veal cutlets  
tortellini  
ravioli  
gnocchi

**Purchase** extra fresh vegetables for salads and fresh fruits for dessert or snacks.

**Dried Herbs** such as Italian seasoning mix (a blend of dried herbs such as basil, oregano and marjoram) are a great choice for a burst of flavour. By using such a blend, you can purchase one jar instead of many that you may not use up quickly.

**Canned Tomatoes** are nutritious and available whole, diced, stewed, crushed or pureed. Keep a variety in your pantry to create different dishes.

**Fresh Peppers** (red, green and yellow) keep well in your crisper drawer. Use them to add crunch and colour to a side dish or salad and additional nutrients to chicken cacciatore.

**Rapini** is a slightly bitter green that is excellent in soups and pasta dishes. Try other greens such as baby spinach, Swiss chard or broccoli, which also store well in your crisper.

**Gnocchi** are small, ripple-edged potato dumplings eaten like pasta

**Prosciutto** is an Italian word for thinly sliced cured ham, also known as Parma ham.

## **Bruschetta Ravioli**

*Bruschetta is a tomato mixture usually used as a topping for crusty bread. Here, it makes a light pasta sauce. Look for cheese-filled pasta or one filled with spinach and ricotta.*

2 tbsp (25 mL) extra virgin olive oil  
4 plum tomatoes, diced  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1 tbsp (15 mL) chopped fresh Italian parsley  
1/2 tsp (2 mL) dried oregano  
Pinch hot pepper flakes  
1/4 tsp (1 mL) salt  
12 oz (350 g) cheese ravioli or agnolotti  
1/4 cup (50 mL) freshly grated Parmesan cheese

In a large non-stick skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add tomatoes and garlic; cook, stirring, for about 4 minutes or until mixture becomes saucy. Add parsley, oregano and hot pepper flakes; cook, stirring occasionally, for about 8 minutes or until sauce thickens slightly. Add salt.

Meanwhile, in a large pot of boiling salted water, cook ravioli for about 6 minutes or until they float to the top and are tender. Drain, add to skillet and toss to combine. Transfer to warm serving bowl and sprinkle with cheese. Makes 3 to 4 servings.

## **Pesto Chicken and Asiago Baguette**

*The combination of chicken and pesto makes for a perfect summer sandwich, and the spicy Asiago adds just the right zing!*

4 boneless skinless chicken breasts (about 1 lb/500 g total)  
1 tbsp (15 mL) extra-virgin olive oil  
1/2 tsp (2 mL) dried oregano  
Pinch each salt and pepper  
1 cup (250mL) homemade or store-bought basil pesto  
2 French baguettes or Vienna loaves  
1 cup (250 mL) roasted garlic aioli (see recipe below)  
2 cups (500 mL) lightly packed fresh baby spinach  
1 1/2 cups (375 mL) shaved Asiago cheese  
1/2 cup (125 mL) slivered oil packed sundried tomatoes, drained

Slice chicken breasts in half horizontally. In a bowl, combine oil, oregano, salt and pepper. Add chicken and turn to coat evenly. Place on a greased grill over medium-high heat; brush with some of the pesto. Cook, for about 5 minutes, turning once or until no longer pink inside. Let cool.

Cut baguettes in half; then cut each half again horizontally. Spread cut sides with aioli. Place chicken on bottom halves of baguettes and spread with remaining pesto. Top with spinach, cheese and sundried tomatoes. Cover with top halves of baguettes. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 8 hours. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

## **Roasted Garlic Aioli**

*This is a garlicky mayonnaise sweet and delicious on hamburgers and sandwiches, or used as a dip for roasted potatoes.*

1 head roasted garlic  
1 cup (250 mL) mayonnaise

Squeeze garlic into bowl and mash with fork. Add mayonnaise and stir to combine. Makes 1 cup (250 mL).

To roast garlic, simply cut a little off the top of the head of garlic to expose cloves and place cut side down on a piece of aluminum foil with a drizzle of olive oil. Wrap and place in 400° F (200 C) oven for about 30 to 40 minutes or until soft when squeezed. Cool slightly, then squeeze out garlic.

**Tip:** You can roast a full baking sheet of garlic heads, all at once. Allow to cool. Place in airtight freezer bags or airtight containers and freeze up to 1 month. Let them come to room temperature before using or warm them in the microwave to soften.

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**Emily Richards** is a Professional Home Economist and newly-elected President of the Ontario Home Economics Association. She is author of *Italian Express, 150 Fast and Easy Family Favourites*. A co-host of the long-running TV show *Canadian Living Cooks* on Food Network Canada, Emily understands the importance of cooking from the pantry. She is a busy mother of two and enjoys sharing meals with her family.

*The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.*

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