



330-666-6158 • 1000 Ghent Road • Akron, OH 44333  
www.vaccarostrattoria.com

# World's Fare series tells you how to make Italian Wedding Soup. (Knight Ridder Newspapers )

*Date: 3/26/2001; Publication: Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service; Author: Snow, Jane*



We're in the steamy kitchen at Vaccaro's Trattoria near Akron, Ohio. A perpetually bubbling stockpot and a broiler that never sleeps have pushed the temperature to about 110 degrees. We need some comfort in a hurry. Raphael Vaccaro is working on it. He and his new chef, Mickey DeAngelo, are making Italian wedding soup, the restaurant's specialty. When it comes to the table, the soup will be a golden broth loaded with tiny pinpoints of pasta, ribbons of wilted escarole and spinach, carrots and tender little meatballs. Vaccaro's Italian wedding soup is the yardstick by which all others are measured. It is as softly colorful as an Impressionist painting and as sustaining as Mother's embrace. But right now it is a work in progress, and the scene isn't pretty. I'm underfoot with notepad and pen. A photographer and videographer slither in and out of the 3-foot-square space that is filled with three people. But I'm determined to find out how to make Vaccaro's incredible soup. "We always have wedding soup here," Vaccaro says. "If we don't. . . ." The consequences hang unspoken in the air. "It's to the point now that we have people bringing in their own containers." Vaccaro and DeAngelo take turns tossing ingredients into the pot. DeAngelo has been on the job for just one month. The two men have never made the soup together. They begin to disagree. Vaccaro adds egg to the meatball mixture. DeAngelo doesn't. Vaccaro uses the tiny round pasta, "acini di pepe." DeAngelo uses the equally tiny pastina. "At age 35, I still get grounded if I don't use acini de pepe," Vaccaro says as DeAngelo frowns with disapproval. Both guys are Italian. Both have grandmothers. Of course they disagree. But the recipe is from Vaccaro's mother and grandmother, modified over the years for the restaurant, so Vaccaro's version prevails. And it's a honey. The soup is simply terrific. It isn't hard to make, either, although there are a few tricks that Vaccaro shared. For starters, the greens are added to the broth at the beginning, not at the end of the simmering time, as some cookbooks suggest. The greens actually impart flavor to the broth and require at least 30 minutes of simmering to do so. "You want the flavor of the greens in the soup. It's just as

important as the chicken," Vaccaro says. Start with good, homemade chicken stock or at least canned chicken broth, Vaccaro says. Never use bouillon cubes, which taste fake. The restaurant makes the tiny meatballs in big batches and freezes them for use later in the soup. At home, Vaccaro makes the meatballs from veal and pork. At the restaurant, he uses ground chuck and pork. The choice yours. You can even buy frozen meatballs, Vaccaro says, and cut them into half-inch pieces. When the meatballs are made from scratch, they are cooked before they're added to the soup. Vaccaro bakes the meatballs on baking sheets for 10 to 12 minutes. Be sure to use imported Pecorino Romano cheese in the meatballs, not Parmesan or domestic Romano, Vaccaro cautions. Romano has a more pronounced flavor than Parmesan, and imported Romano has the most pungent flavor of all. It is aged, whereas domestic Romano often is not. Buy a wedge of cheese and grate it yourself on a hand grater or in a food processor. Freshly grated cheese has a more intense flavor than pre-grated. "I think (cheese) that's already grated is completely different from cheese that comes in a wheel," Vaccaro says. Like the meatballs, the pasta is cooked in advance. It is simmered briefly until al dente \_ slightly firm to the bite \_ and added to the soup off the heat, immediately before serving. This warms it without overcooking it. "The sign of good wedding soup is the pasta is al dente," Vaccaro says. However, the real secret of great wedding soup is the Romano cheese and egg mixture that is added to the broth. When cooked properly, the cheese mixture separates into chewy clumps that add texture and a deep, good-to-the-bone flavor to the soup. The trick is to cook the cheese mixture properly. Vaccaro demonstrates by adding the mixture in a lump to the simmering pot of broth and vegetables. He does not stir. He allows it to simmer in a clump, lifting it gently from the bottom of the pan now and then with a slotted spoon so that it doesn't scorch. If the cheese is stirred, it will form ribbons like those in egg-drop soup. If it is cooked too rapidly, it will stick to the bottom of the pan and scorch. "Don't walk away," Vaccaro warns. "Make sure it doesn't stick."

The soup goes together quickly once the individual ingredients are prepared and lined up on the counter. Vaccaro and DeAngelo both recommend that those making the soup at home line up the ingredients in the order they'll be used before turning on the burner. Note that no salt is added to the soup. The salty Romano cheese is seasoning enough. Steam rises from the chunky soup as Vaccaro ladles out a bowl and carries it to the table. In Italian, the soup is called "spezzato," he says. It's called wedding soup here because it was traditionally served to the bridal party at weddings. "We always had it at holiday dinners," Vaccaro recalls. He inhales the rich aroma. "I never get tired of this soup."

### **Equipment**

To make this soup you will need:

- A soup kettle. Use a pan that holds at least 1 gallon. Ideally, it should be made from aluminum at least one-fourth-inch thick. The thick aluminum conducts heat evenly. If using a thin pan, lower the heat after you add the cheese mixture, and watch it carefully to prevent burning.
- A cheese grater. Either a hand-held grater or a food processor will do. With the hand-held grater, use the finest holes. With the food processor, cut the cheese into 1-inch chunks before adding it to the bowl. Process with the steel blade until the cheese is very finely ground.
- A slotted spoon.
- Special ingredients
- Ground beef and pork. Vaccaro uses regular ground chuck and bulk ground pork for the meatballs. Both are available at any supermarket.
- Dry, seasoned bread crumbs. Make your own, adding a few dashes of Italian herb mix. Or buy a shaker can of dry bread crumbs with Italian seasonings.
- Acini di pepe. This small, round pasta (about the size of a small caper) can be bought in most supermarkets. If your store is out, substitute orzo or pastina.
- Pecorino Romano cheese. Buy imported Romano, not domestic. The imported cheese is aged, which gives it

a more pronounced flavor. Buy a small wedge of the cheese and grate it yourself at home. Vaccaro's techniques

- Precook the pasta until al dente in boiling, salted water. Cook it until it is tender but still slightly firm to the bite. Rinse it under cold water and set it aside. The pasta is added to the soup off the heat, immediately before serving, to prevent the pasta from overcooking.
- Use homemade chicken stock or canned broth, not bouillon cubes.
- Add the cheese-egg mixture all at once to the soup. Do not stir it at this point or it will separate into strands. Allow the cheese-egg mixture to cook in the simmering soup until the egg is no longer runny. This should take 2 to 3 minutes.
- While the cheese-egg mixture cooks, lift it occasionally from the bottom of the pan with a slotted spoon, being careful not to stir. This prevents it from scorching.
- The cheese-egg mixture is stirred only after it has cooked completely through, and the top appears firm.

### **Meatballs**

1 pound ground veal or chuck

1 pound ground pork

3 eggs

1 teaspoon pepper

Pinch of salt

2 cups Pecorino Romano cheese

1 cup chopped fresh parsley

Seasoned bread crumbs

Gently mix together veal or chuck and pork. Add eggs, pepper, salt, cheese and parsley and mix lightly but well. Gently work in enough seasoned bread crumbs to make a firm mixture. Roll into meat balls the size of grapes.

Place on baking sheets with sides and bake at 350 degrees for 10 to 12 minutes. Meatballs may be cooled, then frozen. Use directly from the freezer.

Wedding Soup

3 quarts chicken stock or broth

1 cup finely chopped carrots

1 cup finely chopped celery  
1/2 cup finely chopped onions  
2 cups finely chopped endive or escarole  
2 cups finely chopped fresh spinach  
2 cups tiny meatballs  
4 eggs  
2 cups grated Pecorino Romano cheese  
1 cup of Acini di Pepe pasta, cooked al dente  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Measure all ingredients and place them in bowls on the counter, in the order they will be used.

Bring broth to a simmer in a large soup pot. Add carrots, celery, onions, endive and spinach. Add the meatballs. Simmer uncovered for about 30 minutes, until carrots are tender.

In a medium bowl, combine cheese and egg and mix well. Scrape mixture in a lump into the center of the simmering soup. Let simmer for 2 to 3 minutes without stirring. Lift the mass occasionally with a slotted spoon to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pan. The soup is done when the egg-cheese mixture looks firm. Gently break apart with a spoon. Remove soup from heat. Stir in the pasta. Season to taste with freshly ground pepper. Serve hot.  
Makes 10 to 12 servings.