

Carlo Distefano CUCINA DELLA NONNA

Sicilian restaurateur **Carlo Distefano** shares his favourite recipe for *melanzane al forno*, a dish his grandmother used to make for him every week as a child.

This recipe comes from Carlo Distefano, owner of authentic Italian restaurant chain San Carlo. Carlo opened his first restaurant in Birmingham in 1992, which proved so popular that new branches soon opened in Bristol, Leicester, Manchester and Liverpool (www.sancarlo.co.uk). Carlo also acquired Signor Sassi Italian restaurant in London in 2007 (www.signorsassi.co.uk).

In Sicily, after the war, meat was always scarce, so we ate a lot of vegetables and nothing went to waste. Every Friday, Nonna Michala would make us her own recipe for five-layered *melanzane al forno*. It quickly became my favourite dish and a very special treat. Lovingly crafted from scratch, I insisted my *nonna* taught my Mamma Conchetta how to make it so that my sister Lina and I would never be without it. I can still remember how we'd look forward to it coming around at the end of every week.

Years later I left Sicily for England where I opened my own authentic Italian restaurant in Birmingham called San Carlo; we now have six branches across the UK. Many of the dishes we serve in San Carlo, and in our Knightsbridge restaurant Signor Sassi, are our own family recipes, handed down from Nonna Michala to my Mamma Conchetta and now to myself and my sister. Nonna Michala's *melanzane al forno* has stood the test of time and continues to be one of our bestsellers. Now, nothing makes me happier than seeing a restaurant full of people enjoying the same dishes that brought me and my family such joy. **T**



Melanzane al forno

SERVES 6  Preparation 25 minutes plus draining  Cooking 1 hour

- 3 large aubergines
- 250g mozzarella, thinly sliced
- 700g tomato pulp, tinned or fresh
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled, finely chopped
- 4 basil leaves
- 50g Parmesan, grated
- olive oil
- flour, to dust
- salt and freshly ground black pepper



Cut the aubergines lengthways into 5mm thick slices, sprinkle with 1 tbsp salt, then place in a colander to drain for 1 hour. Place the slices on kitchen paper.

Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas Mark 6. Heat some oil in a large frying pan, then lightly dust the aubergine slices with flour and fry them in the oil, until golden on each side. Leave to drain on kitchen paper.

Heat 1 tbsp oil in a frying pan, then add the garlic. Add the tomato pulp and after 10 minutes when the pulp is no longer watery take the pan off the heat and press the mixture through a sieve. Add the basil and lightly season with salt and pepper.

Oil a large gratin dish or six individual gratin dishes. Place a layer of aubergine slices on the bottom of the dish, top with 2 tbsp tomato pulp, then sprinkle with a little Parmesan. Scatter the mozzarella on top. Continue creating layers in this way until all the ingredients are used up. Finish with tomato pulp, mozzarella and Parmesan, then cook in the oven for 20-30 minutes.