

# Show some leg

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**Octopus has shed its exotic image to become a menu mainstay, writes STEVE MANFREDI.**

Among the challenges when we opened our first restaurant in 1983 was introducing our Australian guests to foods that were "different" from a cultural perspective. Polenta was one.

This cornmeal porridge was a staple of northern Italy, where my family comes from. It's an acquired taste but it appears to have been embraced by Australians, if the packets of instant polenta in supermarkets are any guide.

On our first menu, the use of local seafood considered strange was just as challenging.

Octopus was certainly in this category. A favourite with coastal-dwelling Aboriginal people, it had been shunned by settlers since the First Fleet.

It's taken the arrival of post-war migrants, predominantly from Mediterranean countries, to make octopus mildly respectable. Later waves of migration from South-East Asia brought a new swag of octopus dishes, making it a consistent presence on restaurant menus.

And here's the point. Australian eating habits have been influenced - and continue to be - by what is introduced through its restaurants. From the restaurant menu, a dish or a product makes its way into homes via magazines, books and other media.

Yesterday's octopus is today's burrata - a buffalo milk cheese that's made in small quantities in Queensland.

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## **SLOW-COOKED OCTOPUS AND POTATO SALAD**

This recipe calls for Taggiasca olives. These are the small Ligurian olives available from good providers. Substitute a firm-fleshed green olive if these are not available.

**1 brown onion, peeled and halved**

**1 celery stalk, roughly chopped**

**1 carrot, peeled and chopped into 2cm-thick rounds**

**2 bay leaves**

**1 small bunch parsley, stalks and leaves separated**

**1.5kg large octopus, cleaned**

**800g waxy potatoes**

**4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil**

**Juice of 2 lemons**

**50g capers, chopped**

**100g Taggiasca olives, pitted and roughly**

**chopped**

**Salt and black pepper**

**2 tbsp mixed young herb leaves, such as beet, coriander and basil**

Bring a large pot of water to the boil with onion, celery, carrot, bay leaf and parsley stalks. When boiling, add octopus and simmer gently for 40 minutes to 50 minutes, then cool in the same water.

Cut potatoes in 1cm cubes and boil in salted water until tender but still a little firm. Chop octopus into bite-sized pieces and mix together with



Slow-cooked octopus and potato salad. Photo: Marco Del Grande

potatoes. Dress with some oil, lemon juice, chopped parsley and capers. Add olives, salt and pepper and mix well.

Set on serving plates and finish with some herb leaves.

**Serves 6 as a first course**

**Wine** Semillon-sauvignon blanc blend

### **OCTOPUS AGLIATA**

**2kg large octopus, cleaned**

**2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil**

**1 head garlic, peeled and minced**

**10 dried tomatoes, finely chopped**

**4 tbsp white wine vinegar**

**2kg peeled ripe tomatoes (or good quality canned), pureed**

**½ tsp chilli powder**

**3 tbsp finely chopped parsley**

**Salt and black pepper**

Place octopus in a large pot and cover with water to about 10cm over the mollusc. Bring to the boil, then reduce heat to a simmer for 40-50 minutes. Remove from heat and allow to cool in the same water. Heat oil in a pan and fry minced garlic and dried tomatoes for about 10 minutes. Add vinegar and bring to the boil until liquid evaporates. Add pureed tomatoes and simmer gently, stirring occasionally, for 60-90 minutes, until the consistency is thick, with most of the water gone. Remove cooled octopus from water and chop into bite-sized pieces. Add to the tomato in the pan and keep simmering for 2 minutes to 3 minutes more. Add chilli, parsley, salt and pepper to taste. Cool for 20 minutes, then serve with bread and salad.

**Serves 6 as a first course**

**Wine** Light red such as rosé or unwooded pinot noir