

want. If there is some raggedness to what you receive (never the case with Staubitz!), tie it into shape with cotton string, as with a tenderloin. If you cannot get eye round, try boned leg meat or loin, with some fat on it.

And then get to poaching. Alessandro Caporale, the chef at Casa Lever, first sears the meat in olive oil to seal in its juices, according to Guarducci, then submerges it in bubbling wine and stock until it is pink and ready, at which point he puts it in the refrigerator to chill and set. The vitello tonnato he makes from this is sublime: sweet and rich, the meat separated from its thick tuna sauce by an expanse of white china.

It is not strictly necessary to follow his lead in browning, however, at least according to the scholar-gentry class of European cookery. Elizabeth David, for example, did not call for browning the meat in her two recipes for vitello tonnato. Nor did Marcella Hazan, Craig Claiborne or Giuliano Bugiatti, whose 1982 treatise, "Classic Techniques of Italian Cooking," ought to be required reading for every American food nerd with a taste for olive oil.

Mark Ladner, the elaborately bespectacled chef at the plush and excellent Del Posto restaurant in Manhattan, does not take a position on searing. But he said in a telephone interview that he thought it crucial that the braising liquid for the veal include some best-quality jarred Italian tuna.

This was a tip he picked up, he said, at Ambasciata, a celebrated restaurant in Lombardy, south of Verona, that offers Italian food of the very oldest school. The flavor of the tuna leaches into the cellular structure of the meat (and vice versa) during the cooking, creating a taste-echo effect that works beautifully on the plate.

At Ambasciata, Ladner said, the braising sauce becomes so concentrated as to make using a thickening agent for it irrelevant.

This is undoubtedly the case. At my house, however, it results in a not-thick-if-fantastically-flavorful broth that I use to thin out a mayonnaise base that many modern Italians, including Caporale and Hazan, call for in the dish, along with anchovies and caper brine for salt and acidity.

Regardless of methodology, your tonnato sauce should not taste of mayonnaise. (If you start with store-bought mayonnaise, you are already sunk.) It should instead taste purely of tuna and the sea it emerged from, and have the texture almost of yogurt, or heavy farm-bought cream.

Now combine. Take your poached veal, cool and firm from the refrigerator and slice it as thinly as possible, then place on a platter above a thin schmear of the tuna sauce. Spoon over the top of the meat more tuna sauce, and yet more tuna sauce, until it is all on the platter, then cover with plastic wrap and return it to the refrigerator for the night or longer.

Eventually you will remove the plastic and smooth out the sauce with the back of a knife or a serving spoon. Garnish with fried capers, as Caporale does at Casa Lever, or fat caper berries and thinly sliced lemons, or quartered hard-boiled eggs or little cornichons, and scatter with parsley, then serve with a green salad and plenty of bread. It will taste of summer itself.

But endeavor to give the tuna time enough to infiltrate the veal, and for the veal to get to know the tuna.

"The longer this husbandry is practiced," Ladner said, "the better the funk."



Vitello Tonnato

For the veal:

- 2 pounds boned veal eye round
- 1 7-ounce container best-quality Italian tuna, shredded
- 1 medium-size yellow onion, peeled, chopped in quarters and stuck with 2 cloves
- 1 rib of celery, roughly chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 sprig of parsley
- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 1½ cups chicken broth, preferably low-sodium or homemade
- ½ teaspoon Kosher salt
- 10 black peppercorns, ground

For the tuna sauce:

- 2 egg yolks
- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 12-ounce container best-quality Italian tuna in olive oil, finely chopped, with its oil
- 2 anchovies, rinsed, dried and minced
- 1 tablespoon caper brine
- Lemon juice, veal broth (see above) and Kosher salt to taste.

1. If necessary, tie the veal with cotton string, so that it resembles a salami. Place the meat in a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven and cover with tuna, onion, celery, carrot, bay leaf, parsley, wine, broth, salt and pepper, then heat over a high flame until it comes to a boil. Immediately reduce heat to very low, cover and simmer for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the internal temperature of the veal reaches 130 degrees.

2. Remove meat to a large, nonreactive bowl, strain the broth over it, cover and allow the meat to cool in the refrigerator. (Discard solids.)

3. Meanwhile, put yolks in a medium bowl. Beat together with a wire whisk. Begin to add oil as you beat, a very little at a time, adding more as each bit is incorporated. When a thick emulsion forms, then you can add oil a little faster, but not much faster. The entire process should take roughly 5 to 7 minutes. (You may not need all the oil.)

4. Add tuna, anchovies and caper brine to the mixture, then beat to incorporate. Add a few tablespoons of the veal broth to thin the sauce slightly. Taste and adjust seasoning, adding lemon juice or more broth to taste. The sauce should not taste overly mayonnaisey but should lurk in the neighborhood.

5. Remove the cooled veal from its broth, untie and cut across the grain into very thin slices. Arrange these neatly on a platter with the edges of the slices overlapping, and spoon the tuna sauce over the top. Cover and return to refrigerator overnight or until ready to use. Garnish with capers or fried capers, lemon, hard-cooked egg wedges or sprigs of parsley. Serve with copious amounts of bread and a green salad, lightly dressed. Serves 4 to 6. ♦