

BUONA DOMENICA

Minestra di Riso e Cicoria

Here's a tip: If you ever buy produce at a farmers' market in Italy—or anywhere, I guess—be sure to ask the farmer or purveyor how they like to cook or serve it. This tactic has served me well. Recently, I picked up a head of chicory at the market in Penne, the kind with long white stalks topped with thin, spiky dark green leaves known as Catalonia chicory. and Signore Nevio—the same gentleman who demonstrated how to trim an artichoke—suggested I use it to make “*riso e cicoria come una volta*,” an old-fashioned, gentle dish somewhere between a soup and a porridge. It requires a few steps, all of them easy, and it hits the spot on a cool evening in early summer. If chicory is not available, you can substitute escarole or Swiss chard.

Makes 2 to 3 servings (can be doubled)

INGREDIENTS

1 bunch chicory, such as Catalogna; about 1 lb (454 g)
Sea salt
2 cloves garlic, lightly crushed
Extra-virgin olive oil
Peperoncino (chili pepper, either fresh or dried); optional
3/4 cup (150 g) Carnaroli rice
1 1/2 to 2 cups (355-470 ml) water

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Lop off the end of the chicory and separate the stalks; discard any that aren't fresh. Wash well to remove any dirt and grit. If the stalks are especially long, cut them in half crosswise.
2. Put a pot of water on to boil and salt it (not too generously). Submerge the chicory—you may need to cut the stalks in half crosswise if they are too long. Once the water returns to a boil, cook for 5 to 8 minutes, until the stalks are wilted and just tender. Using tongs, transfer the chicory to a bowl to cool—no need to drain in a colander. When cool enough to handle, chop into bite-sized pieces.

3. Place the garlic and 4 to 5 tablespoons of olive oil in a skillet or sauté pan and set it over medium-low heat. Add the peperoncino, if using. Press down on the garlic with a wooden spoon to release its flavor and cook without letting it brown until it has begun to soften, about 5 minutes. Tip in the chicory and stir to coat it well with oil. Cook on medium heat—the chicory should sizzle just a bit—for about 5 minutes, turning it around in the oil with the spoon. Turn off the heat. At this point, what you have is *cicoria ripassata*, or twice-cooked chicory, a classic spring side dish in Rome (Lazio, the region that contains Rome, and Abruzzo are neighbors so there is some overlap with regional dishes).

4. Cook the rice (you can do this while you're also cooking the chicory since it's a hands-off process). Bring 1 1/2 cups water to a boil in a saucepan and add a pinch of salt. Pour in the rice and bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring it once or twice. Lower the heat to maintain a bare simmer, cover, and cook until the rice is tender, about 20 minutes. It should be somewhat soupy at the end of cooking; if it's too dense, add more water.

5. Pour the rice into the pan with the chicory, or vice versa; in any case, merge the two. Cook for a few minutes more, enough time to blend everything together nicely. Serve hot or warm and resist the urge to sprinkle cheese on top. But do drizzle good olive oil over each serving.

NOTE: For a slightly different version, add a few spoonfuls of chopped tomatoes to the rice at the beginning of cooking.