

Timballo di anelli siciliano Anelli baked with tomato, eggplant and cheese

Serves 6

Timballo is also a name for a drum. In Sicily this *timballo* is traditionally made on the 15th of August, Ferragosto, the workers' holiday that dates back to Emperor Augustus's *Feriae Augusti*, and to the Assumption of the Virgin. Often, it is taken to the beach along with a whole watermelon that is buried in the sand near the water to keep cool. By Sicilian standards this is a modest *timballo*. It can be embellished, the tomato replaced with meat *ragù*, bolstered with tiny meatballs or crumbled sausage, and you could add peas or the Sicilian favorite—slices of hard-boiled egg. However you make it, season generously at every stage. You can make individual servings, known as *sformati* for their easygoing form, the benefit of which is a high proportion of edges and crust.

1 onion, peeled and small diced
salt and black pepper
½ cup olive oil
1 (14.5 oz/411g) can whole peeled tomatoes
1 lb (500g) tomatoes
a pinch of red pepper flakes
a handful of fresh basil
1 large eggplant (plus oil for frying)
14 oz (400g) anelli, alternatively ditalini, tubetti, mezze penne
4¼ oz (120g) Parmesan or caciocavallo, grated
butter
fine breadcrumbs
14 oz (400g) mozzarella or scamorza, diced or ripped into little pieces

You will need an 11-inch round baking pan 4 inches deep—ideally with a removable bottom—or a bundt pan. Or 6 small dishes, or—as is typical in Sicilian *rosticceria*—aluminum trays.

First make the sauce. In a large heavy-bottomed pan, fry the onion and a pinch of salt in the olive oil over medium-low heat until soft and translucent.

Use scissors to chop the canned tomatoes. Peel the fresh ones by plunging them into boiling water for 60 seconds, then into cold water, at which point the skins should split and slip away easily. Chop the tomatoes roughly, separating away most of the seeds, then add to the pan, along with a good pinch of salt, pepper flakes, and a sprig of basil. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes. Allow to cool a little.

Cut the eggplant into ½-inch cubes. Either rub with oil and bake in the oven (set to 400°F), or deep-fry in a few inches of hot oil, then drain on paper towels and sprinkle with salt.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add salt, stir, then add the anelli and cook until *al dente*. Drain.

Mix the pasta with the sauce, eggplant, half the Parmesan and a few grinds of black pepper.

Butter the baking pan, then dust carefully with breadcrumbs. Half fill the pan with pasta and sauce, then make a layer of mozzarella or scamorza, pressing them into the pasta. Arrange a few leaves of basil on top and sprinkle with the remaining Parmesan, then cover with the rest of the pasta and press down firmly.

Dust the surface with more crumbs and dot with butter. Bake at 350°F in the middle of the oven for 30 minutes for a single *timballo* or 12 minutes for smaller ones, or until the crumbs are golden and the top is bubbling. Wait 10 minutes before inverting the large *timballo* onto a serving plate.