

In Binghamton, spiedies are the rage

By MIKE MOORE
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BINGHAMTON, N.Y. — Buffalo has its chicken wings. Philadelphia has cheese steaks. Baltimore has crab cakes. Binghamton has the spiedie.

This local delicacy (pronounced "speedy") is sold in dozens of restaurants and supermarkets in this city of 52,000 about 200 miles northwest of New York City. And every family, it seems, has its own secret recipe.

A spiedie consists of marinated chunks of meat — lamb, pork, chicken or beef — skewered, grilled and served on a slice of Italian bread. But spiedies resemble shish kebabs about as much as Champagne resembles grape juice. The marination and seasoning make all the difference.

Spiedies make Binghamtonians wax poetic. "When it's just right, it's like eating butter," said Joseph Slavik, who's been eating spiedies most of his 41 years. "The meat's been marinated so long it just melts in your mouth. Oh man, delicious!"

And spiedies are a matter of civic pride. "Growing up here, I was shocked to find out that people elsewhere didn't know what a spiedie was," said Juanita Crabb, who has been mayor of Binghamton for the last nine years. "Actually, it's such a tasty morsel, I'm surprised it hasn't spread. But if Binghamton is going to be famous for anything, it might as well be the spiedie."

The word spiedie derives from the Italian word "spiedo," meaning "spit." The concept is ancient.

"It's what the Roman legions ate along the route of battle," said Rob Salamida, who bottles and sells a spiedie sauce. "Every country has its variation. My mother was in Russia and photographed a man there selling meat roasted on a skewer."

The man most frequently credited for bringing the spiedie to the Triple Cities of Binghamton, Endicott and Johnson City is Augustino Iacovelli.

Born in the Abruzzi region of Italy, he emigrated to the United States in 1929 and worked for Endicott-Johnson, the shoe manufacturer that was then the area's largest employer.

By 1939, he opened Augie's, a restaurant on the north side of Endicott. Iacovelli grilled his spiedies on a porch that faced a park. The smells drifted over during fireworks displays and picnics, the story goes, and the smitten crowds flocked to Augie's.

The dish caught on. Retired workers set up portable grills in front of bars and sold their own versions of the spiedie. "It was a great symbiotic relationship," said Salamida, who used to sell them. "You eat a spiedie, you want a beer."

Iacovelli's son, Guido, now runs a mini-conglomerate of 26 restaurants from Rochester to King of Prussia, Pa.

"The original spiedie was made on a special skewer by shepherds," he said. "The stick was picked green, peeled, then dried. The flavor of the stick permeated the meat, so you had a combination of the flavor of the stick with the meat and the charcoal."

The meat is not marinated in Italy; a finishing sauce is used instead. "Even today you can get one in Abruzzi," Guido Iacovelli

said. "The spiedie meat there is different. It has a small piece of bone in it, about the size of your finger tip."

Frugal immigrants introduced marination. "Because it's marinated, you can use very cheap cuts of meat," said Donnamarie D. Battisti, an instructor in Hospitality Management at Broome County Community College here. "I hear of people using pork tenderloin and I think, what a disgrace to do that to a tenderloin."

She is one of the few spiedie makers who reveal sauce secrets. "To a red-wine vinegar and olive oil base," she said, "you add lemon juice, basil and parsley, a lot of mint, a little bit of chives, some cilantro, thyme — fresh thyme from the garden — fresh rosemary and fresh oregano. I crush up cloves of garlic and put in pieces of the lemon rind. And as I baste it on the grill, I use a whole sprig of wild mint as a basting brush."

Battisti is co-chairwoman of an annual spiedie cooking contest that has attracted an array of variations. "We've had fish spiedies with shark or swordfish or tuna. We've had tofu spiedies. We've had the most off-the-wall spiedies you can think of."

Once a contestant used peanut butter in the sauce. "Everyone thought that was weird, but I thought it was great," Battisti said. "Peanut butter is used often in Oriental cooking. When you add peanut butter, it helps the marinade cling to the meat."

Spiediefest, held the first week of each August, has grown from a simple contest into a three-day fiesta in Otsiningo Park in nearby Dickinson.

Last year, 95,000 people attended, raising \$35,000 for three local charities, said Slavik, the general chairman of the event. Besides the cook-off, there is a hot-air balloon rally, an antique car show, a crafts fair and live entertainment.

Forty-eight contestants lined up their grills under a tent because of rain. When the master of ceremonies issued the traditional "Ladies and gentlemen, start your fires!" gallons of lighter fluid were doused onto briquettes and clouds of smoke soon filled the tent.

Entries were judged for taste, appearance, juiciness and tenderness. Terry Silvestri, who retired after four straight victories, was head judge.

Silvestri, who asserts that his spiedie sauce of mint, garlic, carrots and peppers is still the best, uses pork shoulder marinated three days for his spiedies. He gave the top prize to the beef spiedie of a first-time entrant, William Hudanich, a 39-year-old native of the area who now lives in Penn Argyl, Pa.

Sam Lupo sells more spiedies than anybody. His four restaurants, called Lupo's, sell 80,000 to 90,000 pounds of spiedies a week in the peak summer months.

Lupo's sells uncooked marinated meat for home grills at the restaurants and by mail. Prices range from \$4.29 a pound for pork to \$4.99 a pound for chicken breast or leg or lamb, plus shipping. (Information: (607) 785-3220.)

Salamida's mission has been to take the spiedie beyond the Triple Cities. At the age of 15, Salamida was selling spiedies in front of a bar. At 19, he had the first spiedie stand at the New York State Fair in Syracuse.

On the first day of the 1975 State Fair, "a horrendous storm blew up," said Salamida, who is now 39. "The wind was so ferocious, it began to lift my whole stand up into the air, like the Wizard of Oz. As my friends and I were hanging onto it, trying to keep it on the ground, I kept thinking, there's got to be a better way."

"It was like 'Field of Dreams.' I hear this voice in my mind that says, 'Bottle the Sandwich.'"

Working on a pool table in his parents' basement in 1976, Salamida created State Fair Spiedie Sauce and began peddling it to local supermarkets. Now, his nine full-time employees produce two million bottles of marinade a year.

Salamida keeps a stack of letters, many of which begin something like, "Help, I'm away from Binghamton and I must have a spiedie."

He created a Spiedie Survival Kit, containing two bottles of spiedie sauce, his special chicken basting sauce, four metal skewers and two shakers of his Italian spice blend. The cost, including shipping, is \$18.95.

His SOS (send only sauce) kit contains three 16-ounce bottles of spiedie sauce or chicken sauce for \$15.95, including shipping. A case of 12 bottles costs \$35.95 (Information: (800) 545-5072.)

Beef spiedies
(Adapted from William Hudanich)

Total time: 30 minutes, plus at least 4 hours for marination
8 tablespoons margarine, melted
1 cup olive oil
1 cup cider vinegar
10 tablespoons lime juice
3 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
3 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon white pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 clove garlic, peeled and chopped
1 teaspoon dried mint
4 pounds boneless top sirloin, trimmed and cut into 2-inch cubes.

1. Mix all ingredients and marinate the meat at least four hours in a nonreactive container in refrigerator.

2. Preheat broiler. Thread cubes onto 16 metal or bamboo skewers. Reserve marinade.

3. Broil five minutes. Baste with marinade, turn and broil another five minutes for medium. Serve on Italian bread. A sandwich is created by pulling skewer from meat.

Yield: 8 servings.

Lamb spiedies
(Adapted from Gloria Sullivan)

Total time: 40 minutes, plus at least 4 hours for marination
1 cup red-wine vinegar

1 cup olive oil
3 tablespoons dried oregano
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
1 clove garlic, chopped
2 tablespoons dried basil
4 tablespoons chopped fresh mint

2 tablespoons lemon pepper

Salt and pepper to taste

3 pounds boneless leg of lamb, cut into 1-inch cubes.

1. Mix all ingredients and marinate the meat at least four hours in a nonreactive container in refrigerator.

2. Preheat broiler. Thread cubes onto 12 metal or bamboo skewers. Reserve marinade.

3. Broil four minutes. Baste with marinade, turn and broil another four minutes for medium. Serve on Italian bread.

Yield: 6 servings.

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