

Aglione della Valdichiana

The Gentle Giant

The aglione, which resembles a giant garlic, has all the benefits of garlic without any of its drawbacks.



The Valdichiana is rich in biodiversity and is home to an ancient plant known as *aglione*, which was in danger of extinction. Over the recent years, however, a collective movement has been working hard to bring attention to this endangered heirloom plant.

The *Aglione* della Valdichiana is today among the products collected by Slow Food in the Ark of Taste with the objective of preserving them and raising awareness, however it is still very little known outside the Valdichiana, and not easy to find. Professional chefs constitute the main source of demand for this unusual and delicious food.

The *aglione*, which belongs to the same family as garlic, has almost magical properties, as it affords all the benefits of garlic in terms of flavour and aroma, without any of the drawbacks. Its taste is somewhat milder and slightly sweeter than that of

garlic, but all the same quite powerful, and its scent is so full of sun, and summer, and open countryside, it just blows you away... The amazing thing is that it does not have any of the unpleasant side effects of its smaller cousin: as it lacks alliin (a sulfoxide that is a natural constituent of fresh garlic and which is responsible for its smell) and it is low in sulfur compounds, it is easily digestible, it leaves no aftertaste, and no heavy breath. With typically three to six cloves, each head can weigh up to 800-900 grammes.

Although best known today as the star of the local recipe *pici all'aglione*, it can be used with awesome results as a replacement for garlic in virtually any recipe where this ingredient is needed, from pesto to hummous, from tsatsiki to bruschetta.

Pici all'Aglione is one of the great classics. *Pici*, a *cucina povera*, no-egg pasta rolled out by hand, is served with a sauce made from the gently cooked *aglione* mixed with ripe tomatoes. Unfortunately, because of the scarcity of *aglione*, this dish is often prepared with just a lot of normal garlic, making it harsh and heavy on the stomach. But here is our very own version of the recipe. We'll promise you will not be disappointed!

Podere Marella's recipe of *Pici all'Aglione*

INGREDIENTS for 6 people

600 grams of fresh *pici* (best if made by hand with flour and water only), or 500 grams of dried *pici*
2 large cloves of *aglione*, or 3 medium cloves, peeled and very finely chopped
1 kg of ripe plum **tomatoes** or other smallish, fresh sweet tomatoes
4-6 tablespoons of excellent quality **extra-virgin olive oil**, plus 2-4 tablespoons to serve
2 tablespoons of **white vinegar**
A pinch of **red chilies**, crushed (the sauce should not be hot, the chilies should be just enough to give it some zest)
Salt and freshly ground **black pepper**
3-4 leaves of **fresh basil**
Grated **parmesan cheese**, to serve (optional)



METHOD

Put a large saucepan of water on high heat and bring to the boil. Wash the tomatoes, then plunge them in the boiling water for a couple of minutes. Drain and peel, then cut them down the middle lengthwise, remove the seeds and chop into 2cm cubes.

In a deep frying pan, gently heat the oil (make sure it does not burn), then add the *aglione* and simmer on a very slow flame, stirring occasionally. It should form a paste and not stick to the pan or spoon. If it gets too thick, add water, one spoonful at a time. After 15 minutes, add the vinegar. Let simmer for a further 2-3 minutes, then add the tomatoes, the crushed chilies, and salt to taste. Cook on medium heat for 40-60 mins, or until the sauce is thick. Add the basil leaves before turning off the flame, and stir.

Approximately 20 minutes before the sauce is done, put enough water in a large saucepan, cover and bring to the boil, then add salt. Follow cooking instructions for the *pici* (they can take 5 to 20 minutes to cook, depending whether they are fresh or dry). Drain, leaving just a couple of spoonfuls of water on the bottom of the pan.

Off the heat, add a couple of spoonfuls of olive oil to the pan you used to cook the *pici*, together with a couple of spoonfuls of sauce. Pour the *pici* back in the saucepan and add the rest of the sauce, mixing gently, and adding further olive oil if they are not moist enough.

Put the *pici* on the serving plate and serve with Parmesan on the side, although to flavour the *aglione* at its best we would recommend to eat the *pici* as they are (i.e. with no added parmesan), adding further oil to taste.