

## A CHAT ABOUT MACARONI.



LEASED to see you back? What a question! Of course I am; and you know that I am anxious to hear what novelties you have in store for me—culinary novelties I mean.”

“I have gleaned less in the way of actual novelties than I have with regard to some of the dishes that we pride ourselves we can make in this country; in fact, my ignorance, and that of a good number of my countrywomen, has been brought home to me in a manner more

practical than pleasant, I assure you.”

“Why, I thought you were quite *au fait* in the concoction of macaroni and other dishes of the kind. All the Italian *plats* you have introduced to my notice have been first-rate.”

“Fairly good, my dear Carrie, until more light was shed on the subject by my hostess. Should you be surprised to hear that we begin at the wrong end in buying our macaroni ready prepared? The boxed-up stuff with which we are all familiar is nothing like the real thing.”

“What a surprise! but please explain a little. You know that all sorts of Italian pastes find favour in our family, so if you will confine your attention to that branch of cookery for the present, I will trouble you further by-and-by.”

“No trouble, dear. Let me suggest a snack known as ‘macaroni in the form of little caps,’ to put the name in plain English. It is some little trouble, but quite worth it. It is not an every-day dish, but just suited to serve on those occasions when something tasty is wanted, and some sceptical guest may be convinced that the roast beef of Old England is not necessarily the main feature of a good meal. But I am digressing, as usual. You want good dry flour—Vienna, of course—and some eggs and water, and a mince. After my recent experience, pray don’t ask me for a cut-and-dried method of making your mince. You know more about the resources of your own larder than I do, and I can only say experiment and cut your coat according to your cloth. It seemed to me that minces were always turning up, and every one seemed better than the last. But to return to the foundation of this dish. The flour is put through a sieve in a heap on your board, and a hollow made with your fist, then the yolks of eggs go in; two or three to the pound of flour does for economical folks, but those who can afford it use twice as many; salt is used in moderation, say a teaspoonful to the pound of flour; then you want water to make a paste—not a paste that sticks to your board, but one so stiff that it is downright hard work to roll it, and so thin that you ought to be able to see through it, very nearly. Simplicity itself, you will think; but there are few people in our country who would make a dish worth eating from the materials I

have named, just because the manipulation is a little more trouble than they are accustomed to.”

The listener smiled, and expressed willingness to put any amount of energy into the work. She was a girl who believed in exercise, and did not mind in what form she got it; and wisely decided that one of the most pleasant ways of attaining one’s object was to kill two birds with one stone, by developing the muscles and turning out something good to eat at the same time. And she believed in novelty; and was full of delight at the prospect of sending to table any remnants in a new form—“A mince that is not a mince at all,” as she expressed it.

“Perhaps I can best help you by telling you that the mass used for filling your ‘caps’ may be a mixture of meats, or one sort only, for the foundation; or you may use a scrap of bacon, or ham, or anything to make it tasty, such as a hint of liver or kidney, or onion or shalot, and need I say a spoonful of tomato sauce, or the pulp of a fresh one; while as to cheese, the veriest scrap of the real thing—viz., Parmesan—with any bits of English that are past putting on the table, will come as a boon and a blessing. Then think of the possibilities of the dish when you have a bit of calf’s head on hand, or the brains to give moistness, well blended with herbs for the requisite savour; and dare I mention garlic?—your prejudice there is so deep-rooted!”

“Mention anything; for most likely I have yet to learn how to use the bulb.”

“Just rub it across the board on which you chop your meat, or pass it across the bottom of your pan before frying the onion, should one be added. As to the consistence of the concoction, you won’t go wrong if your spoon stands up in it, for it goes without saying that, while it must not be dry, there should be firmness enough for the little caps to keep their shape. As to their size, a trifle larger than a crown piece gives you a company dish. Put in a little of the mince, and brush the edge of the paste with beaten egg, then gather it up with your fingers, giving it a twist, and flatten the bottom. Let them rest on the board till all are ready, then cook them in boiling stock, or water if nothing better—but that will not be the case with you—and let them boil for, say, twenty minutes. They must not be allowed to become mixed up or cook too fast; but unless the liquid *does* boil the dish is a failure. I found I was right on that point, and that no sort of Italian paste should ever go into cold water or any other liquid, or it all sticks to the pan, and the resulting mess is enough to turn anyone from such dishes for ever.”

“Of course, you keep the twisted parts at the top all the time?”

“Certainly; and then you may serve some of the stock as gravy by flavouring and colouring it, or a good tomato sauce is often made on purpose. The stock, of



course, comes in for soup after the cooking, because you have not impoverished it, on the contrary you have added to its goodness; and, while I think of it, let me give you a very good sauce of the kind. Rub the saucepan with garlic, then melt in it an ounce of butter and blend a little flour with it (about an ounce), and stir for a minute, then put in the tomato pulp, made by pressing the ripe fruit through the sieve; there should be half a pint of it. A bunch of herbs goes in, and a strip of ham, if you have it, and the whole simmers until smooth; then you flavour with salt and pepper, or you may put in some peppercorns at first, and any other spice you may fancy. This is simply the base, and the possible variations are well nigh endless. One day it was diluted with a little stock, another day some cheese went in, while on a third occasion it was enriched with a spoonful of cream. The herbs are to be strained out, of course, and the tomato flavour must never be overpowered, only brought out; and there is a difference in the two. For insipid dishes you will do well to make it rather piquant; as I tried it, with the vinegar of the country, it was very good."

"Thank you; and would the 'paste,' as you term it, be nice in other shapes? I see no reason for confining one's self to caps."

"I was coming to that. Just imagine you are dealing with a sheet of the paste we use for tarts and patties, etc., and cut it any size and shape to your liking. The thing is to secure the ends and edges by egging; then you may make rolls or half-circles, eggs or balls, in fact, there is no limit to the devices. Sausage rolls are famous made thus; a little sausage meat goes a long way; you may make a brave show for sixpence. One thing please remember: more seasoning must be added than usual, and you won't go wrong with herbs. The veriest suspicion of garlic vinegar, too, is worth trial."

"And are these little dishes always cooked in the same way?"

"Oh, no! A method which yields very good results is to cook the rolls or what-not in stock for a few minutes only, then take them out with a slice, and put them in a tin in the oven, with enough tomato or any other nice sauce to cover, and let them finish slowly. Again, you may simmer them in the stock until almost done, then bake them with a bit of butter and a coating of fried bread crumbs, and in that form they *are* good."

"And what other uses can you give me for the paste?"

"There are any number, and it can be cut in all sorts of shapes. For this home-made macaroni any design is possible, except the tobacco-pipe as we generally buy it, and that adds to the cost and not the food value."

"I shall make some for our soup."

"Do; cut it in stars or any shapes with vegetable cutters, or in strips to resemble tape. I forgot to say that in making it there is a difference of opinion as to the merits of cold or tepid water. Some say it must be icy cold, and others make it almost warm. My friend favours the cold. Then salt is a matter of taste.

From a pinch only to a teaspoonful to the pound of flour may be used; the nature of the 'filling,' as a Yankee would call it, must be a little guide here; you will be able to adapt it to the nature of the dish, I am sure."

"I will try. Did you happen to come across that dish we were reading of as being so popular in some parts of Italy, a mixture of rice and cream cheese? I forget the name."

"I did, and it is worth trying. The rice is boiled very nicely, and the cream cheese stirred into it. The result is a creamy savoury mass, and you want no seasoning but salt and pepper."

"I ask you, not that I care specially for rice, but it struck me that the macaroni might be worth trial in the same way. What do you think?"

"I should say it would be a success. The cream cheese, you see, is nothing more than cream in a savoury form, a sort of go-between plain cream and cheese in the matured state; and everybody knows that both these materials play a large part in the best of the macaroni dishes."

"And why should not some of the most delicate of our vegetarian mixtures serve for the filling of the little caps and things? I think they would. Not the watery sorts, or the paste would be sad, but some of the vegetarian forcemeats, I mean."

"There would be no harm in trying them; and now I must give you a recipe for a dish that I thought excellent, though I may repeat the warning given by my hostess that it is not one which everybody could digest or would like, as it has more body—shall I say more 'stay'?—than most snacks of the kind; in fact, it would be found a very good substitute for meat by the average meat-eater. Allow an egg for each person, and as much macaroni as you like; the eggs you boil hard and slice, and the macaroni you boil for twenty minutes, then drop in cold water, which prevents it turning pasty. Then you drain it again. The fresh is best, but you can use the bought article; then you must, of course, cook it until it is done, and that may be from twenty minutes to an hour or more. Next you butter a deep dish, and put in some of the macaroni and then eggs, seasoning the layers to taste, and distributing the eggs evenly. The top is of macaroni. Then the whole should be made moist, not wet, with some hot milk. Cover the surface with browned crumbs, and stick a morsel of butter here and there, and your dish only wants heating in the oven, and eating at table. The tomato is not always absent from this, and, as to mushrooms, they turn up everywhere. A little sauce or purée of either is spread over the various layers. What do you think of the dish?"

"No doubt it is famous; but I will put it to the test with poached eggs in place of the hard ones, and for a change I will serve a cheese sauce with it. What do you say to *that*?"

"Nothing more than that I shall be happy to assist in the disposal of it."

"You shall; and thanks for all you have told me, for I feel the richer by a score of dishes, though you have only detailed a few." DEBORAH PLATTER.