

A Street Treat from Nice

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There are few better ways to greet guests than with socca, the chickpea “pizza” from Nice. It’s dead easy, impressive and new to even many sophisticated eaters, and it conveys a sense of your own competence like nothing else. Known as farinata across the border in Liguria, this is essentially a large pancake made from chickpea [garbanzo bean] flour, water, olive oil and a lot of black pepper. Bakers in Genoa often add onion and rosemary.

But its main attractions are these: The batter is quicker to put together than pancake batter; it can rest for an hour or even half a day. Or not; it is baked in a normal oven, finished in a broiler, and done in about 20 minutes; it’s served hot or warm, to be eaten with the fingers. And it’s irresistible. And while chickpea flour is sold in few supermarkets, it is readily found at Indian, Middle Eastern and natural foods markets.

If there is a drawback, it will come when you serve socca to a well-traveled person who will tell you that to make it properly you need a wood burning oven and a copper pan. Such a person may also say that the combination of Mediterranean chickpea flour, water and olive oil is unique, so that socca cannot possibly be duplicated anywhere else, that even the Ligurian version is inferior (or, if the guest is an Italophile, that the Provencal version is no good); and so on.

Forget it. I’ve eaten and made both socca and farinata in Nice and in Genoa, and I’ve made it at home a hundred times. It is foolproof and 90 per cent as good made in your oven as when whisked from the wood-burning ovens of Nice to the street stands in the market. It’s so simple and its flavors are so pure that unless you buy rancid chickpea flour, you will get it right the first try.

Now the details. Sift the chickpea flour into your bowl, so it doesn’t lump, and use a whisk to combine it with water. Do not skimp on black pepper or olive oil; the pepper should really hit you when you take a bite. Preheat your skillet or pan in the oven. When the socca is done, put the pan on the table, cut it into random shapes, hand out napkins and have at it. If more than six people are present, get started making another.

SOCCA (FARINATA)

Time: 45 minutes

1 cup chickpea flour

1tsp. Salt

1tsp. at lease, ground black pepper

4-6 Tbls. olive oil.

½ lg. Onion, thinly sliced, optional

1 Tbls. fresh rosemary leaves, optional

- 1. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Put a well seasoned or nonstick 12 inch pizza pan or cast-iron skillet in the oven. Sift chickpea flour into a bowl; add salt and pepper; then slowly add 1 cup lukewarm water, whisking to eliminate lums. Stir in 2 tablespoons olive oil. Cover and let sit while oven heats or as long as 12 hours. Batter should be about the consistency of heavy cream.**
- 2. If using onion and rosemary, stir them into batter. Pour 1 tablespoon oil into heated pan, and swirl to cover pan evenly. Pour in batter and bake 12 to 15 minutes, or until pancake is barely firm and edges set. Heat broiler and brush top of socca with 1 or 2 tablespoons of oil if it looks dry. Avoid overcooking.**
- 3. Set socca a few inches away from broiler for a few minutes, just long enough to brown it spottily. Cut it into wedges and serve hot, or at least warm.**
- 4. Yield: 4 to 6 appetizer servings.**

Note: Dexter and I first had socca at the market in Nice where it is cooked on top of a steel barrel with a fire burning below, just as though it was a pancake on a griddle, and there was no broiler, but as I recall, it was turned at the end with a spatula, manipulated into pieces, and served.

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