

The countdown

Twelve dishes, one oven, two meals — and the schedule that gets every one of them on the table hot, while you are still sitting at it.

Mattia Stanchieri · Lisbon · Christmas, on time

Twelve dishes, one oven, one fridge, one of you — and, crucially, *two meals*. Dinner on the twenty-fourth and lunch on the twenty-fifth. This is the chapter the rest of the book hangs off. If you read nothing else, read this.

It was always two meals

If you put all twelve of these dishes on one table you will have a bad day, and I say that as someone who has cooked for three hundred people in a night. One oven cannot do a five-hour roast and a forty-minute pie. It is not a question of skill or of organisation. It is arithmetic.

But in Italy, in Portugal, in most of Catholic Europe, nobody ever asked it to. **There are two meals: the dinner on the twenty-fourth and the lunch on the twenty-fifth.** And the twenty-fourth, by tradition, is *magro* — no meat. Fish, vegetables, bread, oil.

Which means the tradition has already done the hardest part of the planning for you, four hundred years before you were born. Look at what happens when you sort this menu by that one rule:

Six and six — and not six and six of anything. Each meal ends up with the same six *jobs* filled, which is what balance on a table actually means:

**BREAD
AND FAT**

Rye bread and whipped brown butter — what people eat standing up, before anyone sits down

**THE CURED
THING**

Beetroot and citrus gravlax — rich, cold, sliced thin, the dish everyone photographs

**COOKED
VEGETABLE**

Insalata di rinforzo — cauliflower, olives, anchovy, cold, made two days ago

**RAW
AND FRESH**

Oranges, fennel and black olives — the only thing on the table that was a plant an hour ago

**THE HOT
CENTRE**

Seafood pie — one dish, one oven, forty minutes, arriving in its own pan

SWEET

Rabanadas — fried in a pan while the pie is in the oven, and eaten at room temperature

**BREAD
AND FAT**

Lardo and salumi — the opener that is pure assembly, cut and laid out, no cooking at all

**THE SAVOURY
PASTRY**

Shallot and truffle tarte tatin — baked on the 23rd, back to life in twenty-five minutes

**THE HOT
CENTRE**

Flæskesteg with crackling — the only long job of the two days, and it is unattended

**SWEET
AND SOUR**

Red cabbage braised with apple — made three days ago and better for it

STARCH

Batatas a murro — parboiled yesterday, smashed and roasted in the pork's own window

SWEET

Pecan pie — on the sideboard at room temperature since yesterday morning

Nobody arranged that. It fell out of the one rule about meat. And once it has fallen out, the thing that made the single-day version impossible simply stops existing:

On the twenty-fourth, the only hot dish is the pie. On the twenty-fifth, the only long one is the pork. The two meals never once want the oven at the same time.

So two meals is not twice the work. It is the same work with the bottleneck taken out of it — an evening and a morning instead of one impossible afternoon. If you have been doing all of this in a single day and finding it brutal, that is why, and this is the fix.

And then there is the jar

You will have noticed that the pickles are in neither list. That is deliberate, and it is the thing that makes the arithmetic work.

The pickles are not a course. They are a jar that sits on the table for two days. On the twenty-fourth they go next to the gravlax, because vinegar is what cured salmon and whipped butter are both asking for. On the twenty-fifth they go next to the pork, and that is not my idea either — *agurkesalat*, pickled cucumber beside flæskesteg, is as fixed in Denmark as apple sauce is in England. One jar, made on the nineteenth, doing two completely different jobs.

Twelve dishes, then, and a jar of pickles. Thirteen recipes, and the thirteenth is the one you make first and think about least.

Two more things cross over

The lists are where each dish is *cooked*, not the whole of what is on each table. Two of the twenty-fourth's dishes come back on the twenty-fifth — not as leftovers, by design:

MADE ONCE, SERVED TWICE

INSALATA DI RINFORZO

Topped up, not reheated. The name means *reinforcement*: in Naples it is refilled from the Vigilia to Epiphany. It is the only dish in this book that was designed, centuries ago, to span exactly these two meals.

ORANGES AND FENNEL

Cut fresh again. Ten minutes. Do not keep yesterday's — it weeps, and the fennel goes limp. This is the one dish worth making twice rather than making large, and on the twenty-fifth it is doing the hardest job on the table.

That last one matters more than it looks. Read the twenty-fifth again: cured fat, pastry, pork, crackling, potatoes, something sweet. **It is a magnificent table and it is entirely brown.** Nothing on it is raw, nothing is sharp, nothing is cold, and by the third slice of pork everybody at the table will want all three without being able to say so. Ten minutes with a knife, three oranges and a fennel bulb is the answer, and it is the reason that salad is in this book at all.

So the honest count is six dishes cooked each day, nine on the table on the twenty-fifth, and a jar going the whole distance. Thirteen recipes, two Christmases.

Why the Vigilia dessert is fried

The twenty-fourth closes with rabanadas, and the reason is the oven. The pie is in it. Anything baked would have to queue behind forty minutes of pastry at two hundred degrees, and the last thing you want at nine in the evening is a dessert waiting its turn.

Rabanadas go in a frying pan. Stale bread, milk, egg, hot oil, then wine syrup and cinnamon — the Portuguese Consoada dessert, which is to say the dessert of precisely this meal, on precisely this night. Fry them in the afternoon and serve them at room temperature, which is how they are actually eaten in Portugal for the three days that follow.

And look at the shape of the evening it gives you: **the meal opens with bread and closes with bread.** Rye and whipped brown butter to start, fried bread and syrup to finish. That is not a flourish I invented — it is what poor cooking does at both ends of the same table, in Portugal and in Italy alike, and it is the most honest thing on the whole menu.

If you don't want to fry on the twenty-fourth, buy a panettone or a bolo-rei and open it at the table. No Italian grandmother has baked a panettone at home in fifty years, and nobody at your table will think less of you. But make the rabanadas once in your life, because they cost almost nothing and they are better than they have any right to be.

Two things that do the heavy lifting

The pork's rest is your hot oven. A roast carved straight out of the oven loses its juice onto the board; it has to stand, covered, somewhere warm, for half an hour. While it stands, the oven is empty and already hot. The potatoes and the tatin go in there, and come out as the pork is carved. That half hour is not dead time — it is the only hot-oven window of the twenty-fifth, and the whole lunch is built around it.

And the cold table is not a course. On both days the first thing on the table is food that was finished hours or days ago. That is not a starter. *That is half an hour of oven time with your guests already in the house, eating and drinking.* It is the single

most useful thing on this menu, and it is why the cold dishes come first in this book — not by order of service, by order of usefulness.

The week before

D-7 · 17 DECEMBER

ORDER

The pork, from a butcher, and ask for the rind scored. A proper flæskesteg cut is not something you find on the 23rd. Tell him the weight you want and the day you are collecting.

ORDER

The fish and shellfish for the pie, for collection on the 23rd, and **a side of salmon** for the 22nd, pin-boned.

DECIDE

How many, and at what times. Everything below is built for eight people: dinner at 20:30 on the 24th, lunch at 13:30 on the 25th. Both can be moved — see the note at the end.

D-5 · 19 DECEMBER · THE PICKLES

30 MIN

Make the pickles. They need five days to stop tasting of vinegar and start tasting of themselves. This is the only thing on the whole list that genuinely cannot be done later — and it is also the easiest. They serve both days.

SHOPPING

Everything that isn't fish or bread. Do it now and do not go back. A supermarket on the 23rd is an hour of your life you will not get back.

*BUY
BADLY*

A loaf more bread than you need, on purpose. The rabanadas want it stale, and three days is exactly right. Buying good bread and letting it go hard is not waste — it is the recipe.

20 MIN

The whipped brown butter. Brown it, cool it, whip it, fridge. It keeps a week, it improves, and it is the first thing anybody eats on the 24th.

*MORNING
25 MIN*

Cure the gravlax. Mix, pack, weight, fridge, forget. It does not want you again until tomorrow evening.

*AFTERNOON
1 HR*

Braise the red cabbage. For the 25th, three days from now. It will be better then than it is today, and that is not a consolation — it is the reason it is on this menu.

WHILE THAT COOKS

The stock for the seafood pie. It sits at the back of the hob and asks nothing of you.

MORNING

The pecan pie. It is served at room temperature on the 25th, so baking it on the 25th would be a decision taken against yourself.

MORNING

The tarte tatin, baked all the way. It comes back to life in twenty-five minutes on the day. Today it goes cold into the fridge in its own pan.

AFTERNOON

The insalata di rinforzo. Make it today, serve it tomorrow, top it up for the 25th. The name means *reinforcement* — in Naples it is refilled every day from the Vigilia to Epiphany. It is the one dish on this menu that was *designed* to span both meals.

AFTERNOON

Assemble the seafood pie up to the pastry lid. Covered, fridge.

COLLECT

The pork and the fish.

EVENING

2 MIN

Gravlax out of the cure. Rinse, dry, wrap, fridge. The cure has done its work.

The twenty-fourth — la Vigilia

One knife job and one oven job. That is the whole day. If this evening feels like hard work, something has gone wrong further up the page.

MORNING

10 MIN

Slice the gravlax. No oven, no hob, no heat. Fan it onto the plate it will be served on, cover, refrigerate. It is done for the day.

AFTERNOON

15 MIN

Score and salt the pork rind. Uncovered, in the fridge, until tomorrow morning. Eighteen hours of dry cold air is the entire secret of crackling, and it is the step everybody skips. Do it today, while you have nothing else on.

AFTERNOON

15 MIN

Parboil the potatoes for tomorrow's batatas a murro. Drain, cool, fridge. Tomorrow they want smashing and roasting, nothing more.

AFTERNOON

10 MIN

Cut the oranges and fennel. Dress them at the last minute, not now.

AFTERNOON

25 MIN

Fry the rabanadas and make the syrup. Do it now, while the oven is cold and empty and nobody is in the kitchen. They sit out on a plate until tonight and they are better for it.

THEN STOP

Go out. This is in the plan on purpose. Everything that can be done early is done, and the next thing you touch is at seven.

19:00

Lay the cold table. Pickles, rye, the butter out to soften, the insalata di rinforzo. Dress the orange salad and put it out.

19:45

Pie into the oven. 200 °C / 400 °F, 35–40 minutes. Egg-washed. Then do not open the door.

20:00

People arrive. Gravlax out of the fridge onto the table. They start eating. Everything in front of them was finished hours ago.

20:25

Pie out. It needs five minutes standing or the first spoon takes the sauce with it.

20:30

Pie on the table, in the pan it was cooked in. You have been in the kitchen for ten minutes all evening.

The twenty-fifth — Natale

Built backwards from one number: the pork coming out at 13:00. Everything else on the day is downstream of that.

10:15

Pork out of the fridge. It goes into the oven at room temperature, never cold. Leave the rind uncovered and dry.

11:15

Pork in. 200 °C / 400 °F for 30 minutes to set the crackling, then down to 160 °C / 325 °F. Now it is alone, and so are you — this is the morning, and the morning is yours. *These times are for a 2.5 kg / 5½ lb loin. Belly takes an hour and twenty minutes longer and goes in at 09:45 — see the pork chapter before you fix your clock.*

12:00

Red cabbage onto a low hob to come back up slowly. Lardo and salumi out of the fridge; cold fat tastes of nothing.

12:15

10 MIN

Cut the orange salad fresh — new oranges, new fennel, not yesterday's. **Top up the insalata di rinforzo. The jar of pickles onto the table.** Three dishes, ten minutes, and they are the only sharp, cold, raw things you will see all afternoon.

12:50

Check the core: 65 °C / 150 °F. If the crackling is not crisp and blistered, five minutes under the grill now — before the rest, not after.

13:00

Pork out, under foil, somewhere warm. Oven straight up to 200 °C / 400 °F. The pork does not move again for thirty minutes. The window is open.

13:00

Potatoes in. Smashed, oiled, salted. 25 minutes.

13:05

Tarte tatin in alongside them, straight from the fridge in its pan. 25 minutes.

13:10

Lardo, salumi and bread on the table. People sit down and start. This is the twenty minutes you bought yourself in November.

13:30

Everything out. Carve the pork at the table. The crackling has had thirty minutes of dry air and is at its best rather than its hottest, which is the correct thing for it to be.

LATER

The pecan pie is already on the sideboard at room temperature, where it has been since yesterday. There is nothing left to do.

To move either meal, move one number. The 24th hangs off the pie going in at 19:45; the 25th hangs off the pork coming out at 13:00. Shift one of those and shift everything in that block with it. Nothing before the morning of the 24th cares what time you eat on either day — the whole week above stays exactly as it is.

If your oven only holds two dishes. On the 25th the potatoes go in alone and the tatin waits: it reheats in twenty-five minutes at any point, including while the pork is being eaten. A tarte tatin that arrives warm and late is a dish. Cold smashed potatoes are a failure.

If you only have one day. Then cook the twenty-fifth and leave the twenty-fourth alone, except for three things that cost nothing and change the table completely: the gravlax, the pickles and the orange salad. No oven, no hob, one knife between them. That is the cheapest half-hour on this whole menu.

The one thing that will break this. Somebody will want to help, and helping will mean opening the oven. Every time that door opens the temperature drops forty degrees and the clock moves — on the 24th it costs you the pastry, on the 25th it costs you the crackling. Give that person the cold table, the wine, the music, the fire, anything at all. Not the oven.

The book comes out this winter. Thirteen recipes across the two tables, each one cooked the way it is actually cooked at home in the place it comes from — the traditions meet on the table, never in the pan. You'll hear about it here first.

In the meantime, all the free recipes live at recipes.mattiastanchieri.com.

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