old world meatballs with everyday tomato sauce

makes about 6 servings

everyday tomato sauce

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 medium yellow onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 (28-ounce) can tomato puree

½ cup hearty red wine, such as Shiraz

2 teaspoons dried oregano

1 teaspoon dried basil

¼ teaspoon crushed hot red pepper

1 bay leaf

old world meatballs

1½ cups fresh bread crumbs

½ cup milk

1½ pounds ground round (85 percent lean)

8 ounces lean ground pork

1 cup finely chopped onion

⅔ cup (about 3 ounces) freshly grated Pecorino Romano cheese

¼ cup finely chopped parsley

1 large egg, beaten

Grated zest of 1 lemon

1 clove garlic, minced

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

⅛ teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg

1 pound spaghetti

Freshly grated Pecorino Romano cheese, for serving

I often swap recipes with my dear friend, cookbook author and cooking teacher Diane Phillips. Here is her grandmother Aleandra's recipe for *polpette*, and a special one it is, too. Flavored with lemon zest and sharp Romano cheese, these are flavorful enough to be fried and served without sauce. Aleandra never fried her meatballs if they were going to be served with pasta, but simmered them directly in the sauce.

1. To make the sauce, heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the tomato puree, wine, oregano, basil, hot pepper, and bay leaf. Bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the sauce is slightly reduced,

about 45 minutes. Remove and discard the bay leaf. Makes about 3½ cups.

2. Meanwhile, make the meatballs. Stir the bread crumbs and milk together in a large bowl and let stand until the crumbs soak up the milk, about 3 minutes. Add the beef, pork, onion, Romano, parsley, egg, lemon zest, garlic, salt, pepper, and nutmeg and mix well. Cover and refrigerate for at least 15 minutes or up to 4 hours. Using your wet hands rinsed under cold water, shape into 24 equal meatballs. Transfer to a baking sheet.

3. Carefully add the meatballs to the simmering tomato sauce. Cook, stirring occasionally and adding more water if the sauce gets too thick, until the meatballs are cooked through, about 1 hour.

4. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the spaghetti and cook according to the package directions until al dente. Drain well and return to the pot.

5. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the meatballs to a platter. Remove the bay leaf from the sauce and discard. Add the sauce to the spaghetti in the pot and stir well. Transfer the spaghetti and sauce to a large warmed serving bowl and top with the meatballs. Serve hot, with Romano passed at the table.