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## Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

By Cynthia Brian



A view through the crape myrtles to the smoke-shaded sun. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Truth comes out in wine." ~ Pliny the Elder

"The people who give you their food give you their heart." ~ Cesar Chavez

The fires and smoke have ravaged farms and vineyards throughout Northern California, including my family vineyards in Napa County. The grapes are plump, juicy and ripe. Harvesting would normally be in full swing this month, but, sadly, with so much smoke suffocating fields throughout the region, wineries require red grape samples to be tested for smoke taint.

Smoke taint is concentrated in the skins and during fermentation glycosides break down, releasing the volatile phenols and smoky flavors into the wine. The result tastes like licking an ashtray. The damage is not detectable by looking at or eating a grape. It is only noticeable in the wine. Since white wine isn't barrel-aged nor use skins, white wine doesn't experience this smoke taint.

The largest testing laboratory, ETS in St. Helena, is swamped with results backlogged for weeks or, as some growers are finding out, over a month away. If a grower or winery is not a client, they won't be able to process samples until November. By then the window for harvesting will be over. The grapes will be dried raisins, not suitable for pressing.

What this means for viticulture in 2020 is that farmers may lose their entire crop and face increased financial hardships as the grapes hang on the vines. There may not be a 2020 red wine vintage as wineries are not allowing deliveries of grapes under contract until the lab results have confirmed an absence of smoke taint. Truth is always evident in the wine.

With the stifling smoke of the past weeks, my normal September gardening tasks have been placed on pause. I am sheltering indoors and suggesting to clients and readers to do the same to maintain health as smoke inhalation peril is increased during COVID-19. But this doesn't mean that I'm avoiding my garden. I've been asked to write another gardening book and am brainstorming in my library. And, I'm bringing the fruits of my labors inside to my kitchen while I chef it up.

"Oh, I can smell the sauce from here," my charity collaborator and friend, Terry in Washington, emailed me when I wrote her that, to mask the smell of smoke, I was making my family's traditional homemade spaghetti sauce with ingredients from my waning garden. My process reminded her of being in her Italian great-grandmother's kitchen.

With the intense sunshine and heat of the summer, tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers and herbs are filled with flavor. Being Italian, neither my Nonie, mom, nor relatives measured anything. A recipe was handed down throughout the generations by watching, doing, and adding "a little of this, a pinch of that," lots of garlic, and several splashes of wine. We have always cooked by taste, adding spices as needed. Naturally, numerous "malfatti's" or mistakes occurred, which oftentimes, were our greatest successes.

The best cooks that I've ever encountered have also been avid gardeners. Gardeners amble through a potager snipping, smelling, nibbling, feeling, and seeing with a profound sensitivity to the innate characteristics of each legume, bloom, or crop. Being an astute chef requires one to know how to mix and match fruits, flowers, vegetables, and herbs to enhance any dish, allowing the natural essences to imbue their zests and aromas. Food must look good, smell good, taste good, and be ultimately satisfying, making one feel good.

Autumn is harvest time. Besides eating our tasty produce now, it is also the perfect opportunity to can or freeze fresh crops to savor during the winter months.

What herbs can you dry or freeze:

Basil  
Bay  
Oregano  
Sage  
Rosemary  
Dill  
Thyme  
Parsley

I prefer to freeze basil and parsley or make "sauce ice cubes" with those. The rest of the herbs, I dry, then store in labeled jars.

### Cynthia's Italian Family Spaghetti Sauce "Recipe"

- In a pestle and mortar grind together oregano, sage, rosemary, and thyme. You can also use a blender if that is easier for you.

- Chop red and yellow onions and several cloves of garlic.
- Saute onions and garlic in olive oil until translucent.

- Stir in chopped mushrooms.
- Add 3 or 4 whole bay leaves and a handful of the mashed herbs.
- Gently brown meat (ground beef, lamb, pork, chicken) in the mixture. If you want a vegetarian sauce, skip this part.
- Cut 6-10 tomatoes into small pieces. Smash half of the tomatoes. Add cut pieces and the tomato paste to the meat mixture.
- Pour in red wine.
- Tear 4 or 5 basil leaves into pieces and stir into pot.
- Continue adding more wine as necessary.
- Simmer at lowest heat for several hours until all the flavors have melded together. Turn off the burner to let sit.
- Sprinkle sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste.

Optional ingredients include peppers or eggplant. To make a Puttanesca, add olives and capers.

The final sauce will be thick, rich and delicious. Don't be afraid to make this in advance as flavors are more delectable the next day. Freeze or can any extra sauce. (I always make a big pot and freeze tubs for later consumption.)

Pour over spaghetti, ravioli, lasagna, or any pasta. Toss lightly to blend the sauce. Top with chopped parsley, torn basil leaves, and grated parmesan. Serve with crusty sourdough, a romaine lettuce salad, and a glass of sustainable, locally grown, aged, and bottled Captain Vineyards Petite Sirah. Finish off your meal with fall fruits: a bunch of grapes, tangy tangerine segments, crunchy Asian pears, and a few figs. Buon appetito.

What are you harvesting in your garden right now? Do you have a family "Fall in a Pot" recipe to share with others?

My mom taught me that expressing love came from gardens and homemade food. My dad taught me that farmers feed the hungry and wine is the nectar of the gods. Both gave their hearts. During these very challenging times as we pray that our California vineyards survive this ordeal, let's toast to life with a glass of local vino and welcome fall with a pot of goodness from our gardens.

In my next column, I plan to be outside once again offering you guidance for autumn gardening. Until then, limit your outdoor exposure when it's smoky and make sure to water your landscape deeply in the early mornings or late evenings. Be aware that your containers may need a daily dose of H2O. For the next two to three months until the rain begins to fall, our area is at imminent risk of fire danger. Be ready to evacuate. Read my article on what you need to know and do to be prepared.

<https://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1414/Are-you-ready-to-evacuate.html>

For a Zoom presentation of, "Tips, Tricks, and Tonics in the Garden" join me on Thursday, Sept. 17, as I kick off the 50th Anniversary of the Moraga Garden Club. For information on this Zoom meeting, call Membership Chair Jane Magnani at (925) 451-7031 for times to join in the conversation and presentation. I'll be participating from my patio for a light, fun, informative, and hopefully smoke-free lecture.

Happy gardening. Happy growing.



A vintage box filled with various basil and herbs makes for easy picking.



Black mission figs are a perfect dessert,



Using a mortar and pestle to make Cynthia's heritage spaghetti sauce handed down for generations.



Roma tomatoes are excellent for sauce making,



Grow romaine lettuce for a crispy nutritional salad.



Cynthia Brian in her library contemplating a new gardening book. Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, is available for hire to help you prepare for your spring garden. Raised in the vineyards of Napa County, Cynthia is a New York Times best-selling author, actor, radio personality, speaker, media and writing coach, as well as the Founder and Executive Director of Be the Star You Are!r 501 c, celebrating 21 years of service to the community. [www.BetheSTARYouAre.org](http://www.BetheSTARYouAre.org). Tune into Cynthia's StarStyler Radio Broadcast at [www.StarStyleRadio.com](http://www.StarStyleRadio.com). Buy copies of her best-selling books and receive extra freebies, Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul, Growing with the Goddess Gardener, and Be the Star You Are! Millennials to Boomers at [www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store](http://www.cynthiabrian.com/online-store). Cynthia is available for virtual writing projects, garden consults, and inspirational lectures. [Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com](mailto:Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com) [www.GoddessGardener.com](http://www.GoddessGardener.com)

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