

Tempero: The sauce starts here

At Marco Pantano's house in Wheaton, he always has a supply of his mother's recipe for *tempero*, a basic seasoning mix that reminds him of his childhood in Brazil.

A combination of raw onions, garlic, leeks, parsley, basil, scallions and a lot of salt, the *tempero* (a Portuguese word loosely translated as "basic seasonings") is a beautiful pale green and lends a bit of magic to just about any savory recipe. Made in enormous quantities by Pantano, 40, and his wife, Kathleen, and kept in the refrigerator for as long as a year, his *tempero* adds zest to salads, and – when cooked with them – to meat dishes, chicken, vegetable dishes, even to plain white rice.

The seasoning mix was developed by Pantano's mother's family, who in the 1890s emigrated from France to the small town of Salto about 50 miles west of Sao Paulo city. It was also embraced by the cooks in his father's family, Italian immigrants to Brazil. Fiddled with over time to suit each generation's palate (it's now more Italian than French), the *tempero* eventually became a local staple – thanks largely to Pantano's Uncle Jose, who made huge vats of it and gave it away to friends and family. (He still does.)

A kind of mother sauce that jump-started many other sauces and savories, the seasoning was his family's link between past and present, between France and Italy and Brazil. It was also highly practical. Not only did the mixture enliven food, it also saved time. Instead of peeling and chopping onions and garlic every night, and cleaning and mincing a handful of standard herbs, cooks could reach for a tablespoon of the *tempero*. The mixture was long-lasting too because of the preservative powers of so much salt.

If anything defined the cooking style of Salto, a city where 90 percent of the population was of Italian origin when Pantano was growing up, it was the Pantano family's *tempero*. "My mom is a great cook," he says. "The whole family is. We never went to other people's homes to eat. They came to our house. And everybody called her for recipes. We'd tell them they were easy to do, but they'd have to use the seasoning, even for a pot of rice."

Pantano's mother, Marianete Pantano, used the *tempero* every day – for vegetables, rice and beans, chickens, legs of lamb, pork roasts, suckling pigs. "Whatever she cooked, she cooked with it," he says. "She still does today."

His grandmothers, Padua Deoboux and Theresa Pantano, used it too – even for the 70- to 80-pound pigs they'd roast for Sunday afternoon barbecues at his mother's father's coffee farm. They'd rub the pig with the mixture and lots of lemon the night before, cook it in a pit the next day and serve it with *tempero*-heightened black beans, collard greens, corn and polenta.

There were lots of children in his immediate family, but only young Marco helped with the food shopping. "I was the one who got bread for breakfast, herbs for lunch, chicken for dinner," he says. He was also the one who watched people ask his mother for recipes. And he was the one who helped out after school at a small restaurant, bar and bakery his father's mother owned. "She had this big three- or four-pound jar in the refrigerator at all times," says Pantano, "and the same size jar of chilies."

From the time he was 4 until he was 14, he learned to cook by watching and helping her. And she'd always use the family *tempero*. To roast a chicken she'd start by killing one in the back yard, then

plucking and cleaning it, then cooking it with a tablespoon of tempero in boiling water for 20 minutes before chilling the bird and roasting it with a little butter. Or she might coat a thin slice of veal with a little of the seasoning mixture and olive oil and rub it in bread crumbs for veal Milanese. Or she'd make meatballs and tomato sauce, both seasoned with tempero, and serve them with hand-rolled pasta. Or she'd flavor short ribs with some tempero, a little lime juice and oil, wrap them in banana leaves and start them on the grill away from the coals until it was time to unwrap them and brown them (and then serve them with salsa and some more tempero). And on and on.

After his initial schooling, Pantano studied accounting at Sorocaba University, in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo, became a CPA and worked in his father's firm. But in his mid-twenties, Pantano decided on a different course of action. Concerned about the uncertain political situation in Brazil in the mid-1980s, he sold everything he owned – his car, his sporting equipment, everything – and headed to New York, the first in his family to leave the country. Initially, he concentrated on studying English and discovering Manhattan. He didn't think much about cooking – and the family tempero recipe might have stayed in Brazil.

But as money ran out, he had to find work. Unskilled in American accounting, he took the jobs he could get. One day, working as a dishwasher in a Japanese restaurant, he got a look at the chef's paycheck and begged the chef to give him lessons, which he did. For the next year Pantano worked in a sushi bar, where he earned enough money for a ticket to Florida – after Brazil, he hated New York winters – and got a job as a cook at a seafood restaurant in Palm Beach.

Soon sous chef jobs followed, first at an American restaurant on tony Worth Avenue in Palm Beach, then at an Italian one. And then, when he was appointed chef at the Cafe Carina, a new Italian restaurant in Jupiter, Fla., he started mixing up batches of tempero for the first time since he'd left Brazil. "Now I'm cooking Italian food, and making my seasoning again," he says. "To me as a cook, it's a staple. And it felt good – like going back to my grandmother's house."

He stayed at the Cafe Carina, where he met his future wife, for three years, and then they moved to Washington. He's cooked here a bit, but gave it up for the world of a waiter at downtown restaurants such as I Ricchi, Gerard's Place and for the last four year's at Kinkead's.

Now that he's no longer cooking professionally, Pantano's family seasoning is reserved for home cooking and for friends and family. Many of the things he cooks he learned from his mother and grandmother. Meatballs and tomato sauce. Roasted pork loin. Roasted whole rockfish or snapper stuffed with shrimp and vegetables. Turkey marinated in tempero and olive oil. Turkey tetrazzini. Rice and beans. Sautéed vegetables. "Every family has someone preserving the recipes," he says. "I'm the one in my family. Like my Uncle Jose."

Recently, Pantano called his mother to go over family history and his food memories and the precise proportions of her tempero. She'd written it down for him years ago in metric measurements, and he wanted to review them before configuring them in American terms.

"My mother had no idea I was carrying this on," he says. "You could say it's almost a legendary recipe, except everybody in town knows about it."

And now everybody here knows about it too.

Pantano Family Tempero (Basic Seasonings)

(Makes about 8 cups)

Remember that the tempero is made up of raw ingredients, and is not intended to be a sauce itself or to be used on its own. The mixture is an ingredient in other recipes, and most of the time will be cooked with them. Keep it in the refrigerator to add to other sauces and recipes in small amounts, starting with half a tablespoon and tasting as you go.

2 1/4 pounds (36 ounces) onions, peeled and coarsely chopped (about 4 large onions)
Generous 1/2 pound (10 ounces) garlic, peeled and coarsely chopped (about 9 medium-size heads garlic)

14 ounces (2 cups) kosher salt

1 1/2 leeks (1/2 bunch), washed and coarsely chopped

1/2 bunch parsley, stems discarded

1/2 bunch basil, stems discarded

1/2 bunch scallions (white and green parts), coarsely chopped

Put all ingredients in a large bowl and toss. Working in batches, add the mixture to a food processor or blender and process until smooth. Transfer the batches to a large bowl and combine until the entire mixture is smooth. Transfer to resealable containers, cover and refrigerate for 6 to 8 months.

Per 1-tablespoon serving: 7 calories, trace protein, 2 gm carbohydrates, trace fat, 0 mg cholesterol, trace saturated fat, 1,203 mg sodium, trace dietary fiber

Tomato Sauce With Meatballs

(Makes enough to sauce 30 meatballs)

Although this sauce is intended to be served with meatballs (recipe follows), it is an excellent pasta sauce on its own. Without the meatballs, it will feed 4 as a main dish and 6 as an appetizer. With the meatballs, it will feed 6 to 8.

4 tablespoons olive oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 small onion, minced

1 tablespoon tempero (see preceding recipe)

4 to 6 fresh plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced

1 cup chicken stock or broth

1 cup fresh basil or parsley leaves, finely chopped

1 bay leaf

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Meatballs With tempero (recipe follows)

Heat the oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add the garlic, onion and tempero and cook, stirring frequently, for 5 to 8 minutes. Add the tomatoes, stock or broth, basil or parsley, bay leaf and pepper to taste. Stir to combine. Add the meatballs and cook, partially covered, until they are warmed through and the sauce has reduced just slightly, 20 to 25 minutes. Remove and discard the bay leaf.

Per serving (sauce only, based on 4): 156 calories, 2 gm protein, 7 gm carbohydrates, 14 gm fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 2 gm saturated fat, 559 mg sodium, 1 gm dietary fiber

Meatballs With Tempero

(Makes about 30 meatballs)

The combination of mixed ground meats, tempero, orange peel and fennel seed makes some exceptionally flavorful meatballs. See for yourself.

1 pound freshly ground beef

1 pound freshly ground veal

1/2 pound freshly ground pork

1 clove garlic, minced

1 small onion, minced

1 1/2 tablespoons tempero (see first recipe)

1/2 cup finely chopped fresh parsley

Pinch dried oregano

1 egg, lightly beaten

1/2 cup finely crumbled fresh bread crumbs

1/4 cup heavy (whipping) cream

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

10 fennel seeds (optional)

1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (optional)

About 1 teaspoon finely ground dried orange zest (from a 1-by-2-inch piece zest) (optional)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil.

In a large bowl, using a wooden spoon or your hands, mix all the ingredients until thoroughly combined. Divide the mixture into 2-ounce portions (about 2 tablespoons) and shape each portion into a ball. Transfer the balls to the prepared sheet. Roast until the meatballs are lightly browned and cooked through, about 20 minutes. Set aside to cool, discarding any drippings that remain on the baking sheet.

Per meatball (based on 30): 109 calories, 7 gm protein, 1 gm carbohydrates, 9 gm fat, 40 mg cholesterol, 3 gm saturated fat, 135 mg sodium, trace dietary fiber

Roast Pork Loin (*4 to 6 servings*)

Marco Pantano serves this with white rice and black beans (recipes follow), both of which have been made with his tempero and a salad of arugula and hearts of palm that has been tossed with a dressing flavored with the same seasonings (recipe follows).

3 pounds boneless, center-cut pork loin

1 tablespoon tempero (see first recipe)

Juice from 2 limes

7 tablespoons olive oil

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

1 tablespoon butter

Pat the pork dry. Set aside.

In a shallow bowl, whisk together the tempero, lime juice, 4 tablespoons of the oil and pepper to taste. Add the pork, turn to coat all sides, cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours and preferably overnight.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

In an ovenproof skillet or sauté pan over medium-high heat, heat the remaining 3 tablespoons oil with the butter. Transfer the pork to the skillet, discarding the marinade, and sear on all sides until browned, turning only as necessary. Transfer the skillet to the oven and roast for 25 minutes. Turn the pork, reduce the heat to 350 degrees and cook until an instant-read thermometer registers 155 degrees, about 20 minutes longer. Transfer to a cutting board and set aside to rest for at least 10 minutes prior to carving.

Per serving (based on 6): 396 calories, 49 gm protein, 1 gm carbohydrates, 21 gm fat, 137 mg cholesterol, 6 gm saturated fat, 319 mg sodium, trace dietary fiber

White Rice (*4 servings*)

The tempero is barely discernible in this recipe; in fact, you may wish to add a bit more.

2 cups long grain or basmati rice

5 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 tablespoon lard (optional)

1 tablespoon tempero (see first recipe), **plus additional to taste**

1 whole clove garlic

3 cups hot water

Black pepper to taste

Rinse the rice under cool running water until the water runs clear. Drain, then set aside until completely dry.

Heat the oil and, if using, lard in a large pot over medium heat. Add the dry rice and cook, stirring almost constantly, until the rice is coated with oil and very hot. Add the tempero and garlic and cook, stirring frequently, for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the water and pepper to taste and bring to a boil. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to very low and cook, stirring occasionally, until the rice is done, about 22 minutes.

Per serving: 491 calories, 7 gm protein, 75 gm carbohydrates, 18 gm fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 1 gm saturated fat, 305 mg sodium, 1 gm dietary fiber

Black Beans

(6 servings)

1 pound dried black beans

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 small onion, diced

3 malagueta chili peppers* (optional)

1 green bell pepper, seeded and diced

1 tablespoon tempero (see first recipe), plus additional to taste

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

1 ham hock

1 bay leaf

1/2 bunch fresh cilantro, finely chopped

2 ripe fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced

Cold water to cover (about 4 cups)

Soak the beans overnight in enough cold water to cover. Drain.

In a tall stockpot over medium-high heat, heat the oil. Add the onion, malagueta chili peppers, if using, bell pepper and tempero and cook, stirring frequently, for 5 minutes. Add the beans, cumin, pepper flakes, ham hock, bay leaf, cilantro, tomatoes and enough water to cover the beans by 2 inches. Cover partially and simmer until the beans are tender, stirring occasionally, 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Remove ham hock and, if desired, remove the ham from the bone, shred it and return the meat to the beans. Remove and discard the bay leaf.

***Note:** The malagueta pepper, also known as the malaguetta, melegueta or Guinea pepper, is a West African hot chili with a flavor somewhat similar to cardamom. If you wish, you can substitute whole cardamom pods or black peppercorns.

Per serving (with ham): 353 calories, 18 gm protein, 53 gm carbohydrates, 8 gm fat, 3 mg cholesterol, 1 gm saturated fat, 273 mg sodium, 13 gm dietary fiber

Best Salad Dressing

(Makes about 2/3cup)

Marco Pantano prefers Portuguese olive oil for dressing because of its mellow flavor.

1 teaspoon tempero (see first recipe)

1 teaspoon Dijon-style mustard

Juice from 1 lime (2 to 2 1/2 tablespoons)

4 to 6 tablespoons olive oil, or to taste

Black pepper to taste

In a small bowl, combine the tempero, mustard and lime juice. Whisking constantly, slowly add the oil in a steady stream, whisking until the vinaigrette is smooth and completely emulsified. Season with pepper to taste. Use immediately.

Per 1-tablespoon serving: 75 calories, trace protein, 1 gm carbohydrates, 8 gm fat, trace cholesterol, 1 gm saturated fat, 303 mg sodium, trace dietary fiber