



Devoted to gastronomy and entertaining, husband-and-wife pair Gilberto Gaeta and Cintia Tavella are living proof that strong relationships are cultivated in the kitchen. By Low Shi Ping

It is said that a couple that eats together, stays together. For Cintia Tavella and her husband Gilberto Gaeta, they have taken this one step further - by also cooking together. Nowhere is their passion for the culinary arts more obvious than in their penthouse in Whampoa. Step through the main door and the kitchen is just inside the entrance.

"We enjoy cooking and entertaining, which is why we made the kitchen the centre of our home," says 39-year-old Tavella, the senior director of Strategic Growth Initiatives at Expedia Group.

### A space to entertain

Renovated in 2017 and designed with the help of interiors firm Space Matters, the duplex apartment was conceptualised to enable the couple to host home parties almost every weekend. While the simmering, boiling and baking takes place in where the actual kitchen is originally located, the areas flanking it are dedicated to food preparation and presentation.

There is a dry kitchen on one side and on the other, a custom-built, exposed pantry filled with bottles of wine, cans

of produce from Italy, where Gaeta hails from, and all the necessary accoutrements to serve drinks of every kind. An island sits in the middle of this, specially installed with wheels so it can be rolled around when necessary. It doubles up as an informal dining table to have a casual family meal at, or to enjoy pre-dinner snacks.

When guests come over, the main entertaining is held on the second floor. There, a wraparound terrace dominates, featuring an outdoor sofa set in one section, and an eight-seater dining set in the another.

The entire home is done in an industrial-chic-meets-rustic style, as evident in the light fittings, wall tiles that look like bricks (chosen for the sense of warmth they evoke), concrete screed flooring and rebars in place of a staircase banister.

### Friends from around the world

Tavella, who was born in Argentina, shares that they usually have their buddies or colleagues over for a meal, "Gil and I love to cook so we ask our friends to be our guinea pigs."





Once every few months, she and Gaeta, 40, who works as a director of marketing solutions at Google, also host an INSEAD Random Dinner. This is a dinner party held by an alumni of the business school, where other fellow alumni are invited to partake in. Food aside, it is an opportunity to get to know others from the 3,200-strong INSEAD community. These could be complete strangers or acquaintances.

Naturally, both Tavella and Gaeta are alumni - they met there in 2007 while studying their MBA - and readily give back to their alma mater. She is also the president of the INSEAD Alumni Association of Singapore.

This evening, they are hosting another Random Dinner with four other guests in attendance. "We try to keep the total number to six because we want to have only one conversation at the table. There is more intimacy this way," Tavella shares.

The cuisine served is what she calls "Italo-Argentine", a fusion of food from their birth countries, which they take joy in showcasing. On the menu is a Mediterranean cold cuts platter, made up of cured meats and cheese the couple brought back from a recent trip to Italy - something they are fond of doing.

There is also a cannelloni pasta, veal ribs and strawberry tiramisu.

Many of the recipes of the food they serve are adapted from both their parents who love to cook. Gaeta shares that the pasta recipe is his father's. "I called him a few days ago to confirm the steps of the recipe and to get his secret tips. My father hung up, had a fight with my mother about the right answer, then called me back a few hours later to tell me what to do," he laughs.

Tavella chimes in, "It's funny because our parents cook separately, but Gil and I prefer to do it together." In fact, it is so second nature to them that a few nights ago before this dinner, they found themselves once again in the kitchen preparing the strawberry tiramisu side by side. Gaeta had just returned home from a business trip to the Philippines and despite the late hour, gamely joined Tavella in the kitchen to create the dessert.

"It was only after we were done that I realised it was Valentine's Day," muses Tavella. "We didn't celebrate it but instead, spent it making tiramisu together into the night - in a way, that is a celebration of who we are." e

## BAKED VEAL RIBS WITH ASPARAGUS AND CREAM OF PUMPKIN

**Serves** 6

**Prep time** 40 minutes

**Cook time** 25 minutes

### veal ribs

- 2.5kg roast veal prime rib with bone

### seasoning mixture

- 1 tbsp onion powder
- 2 tbsp ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp salt
- 5 garlic cloves, peeled and cut in half
- 4 tbsp finely ground thyme
- 60ml Dijon mustard

### cream of pumpkin

- ¼ pumpkin
  - 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- (Spanish, Italian or Greek brands are the best)
- 1½ tsp fine Kosher salt
  - 1½ tsp white pepper
  - ½ tsp nutmeg
  - 2 tbsp cooking cream

### asparagus

- 18 asparagus
- 3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp Kosher salt
- 1 tsp black pepper

### For the veal ribs

- » Position the oven rack in the middle level and preheat the oven to 180°C.
- » Combine all the dry ingredients with Dijon mustard in a bowl.
- » Cut 10 slits into the veal meat and stuff garlic cloves into the slits.
- » Rub the meat thoroughly with all the ingredients of the seasoning mixture.
- » Place the meat on the baking sheet, fat side up.
- » Bake for 25 minutes or the duration needed to obtain an internal temperature of about



60°C for medium-rare doneness or 65°C for medium-well doneness.

» Remove the meat from the oven and stand for 15 minutes before slicing.

### For the cream of pumpkin

- » Boil the pumpkin for 10 minutes until soft.
- » Drain the water and put in a blender with all the other ingredients.
- » Blend till it reaches a creamy consistency, taste and add more salt and pepper as preferred.

### For the asparagus

- » Heat oven to 200°C
- » Season the asparagus with salt, pepper and olive oil.

» Once oven is heated, place the asparagus on a piece of baking paper in the oven.

» Cook for 7 to 10 minutes until soft and crispy.

### Presentation

- » Use a tablespoon to spread the pumpkin cream on the side of the plate to form a half-moon shape.
- » Add the veal ribs on the opposite side
- » Place two to three asparagus at the centre of the plate, between the veal ribs and the pumpkin cream.
- » Pour a tablespoon of jus from the baking pan on top of the veal ribs, and another tablespoon of jus on the asparagus.



## CANNELLONI FILLED WITH RICOTTA AND SPINACH

**Serves 6**

**Prep time 1 hour**

**Cooking time 25 minutes**

### **pasta**

- 200g 00 flour
- 2 medium sized eggs

### **filling**

- 450g spinach
- 1 garlic clove
- 300g ricotta cheese
- 15g extra virgin olive oil
- 2 medium sized eggs
- 100g grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 pinch nutmeg powder
- 3-4 tsp salt
- 3 tsp black pepper



### **béchamel and tomato sauce**

- |                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| • 100ml olive oil   | • 1 pinch oregano |
| • 2 garlic cloves   | • 1 litre of milk |
| • 400g tomato sauce | • 100g butter     |
| • 2 tsp salt        | • 100g 00 flour   |



- 2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 pinch nutmeg

#### For the pasta

- » Pour 150g of flour into a bowl. Add slightly beaten eggs and knead with hands until the ingredients are mixed.
- » Transfer dough onto a pastry board and knead it again. Add remaining 50g of flour gradually until dough becomes smooth, and homogeneous.



- » Wrap it with food foil and rest for 1 hour in a cool and dry place to retain elasticity.
- » Once rested, divide dough into two equal parts. With a pasta machine set to level 8, roll out dough to obtain a sheet about 2mm thick. In the absence of a pasta machine, roll by hand using a lightly floured rolling pin. Obtain rectangles 9cm by 14cm, or any shape, but take into account the width of the pan.
- » Scald pasta one at a time for about 1 minute in boiling, slightly salted water.
- » Drain and transfer them on a tray covered with a kitchen cloth. Spread the various rectangles perfectly without overlapping them.

#### For the filling

- » Pour olive oil into a pan, add garlic, let it brown then remove it.
- » Pour spinach (well-washed and drained), salt and cook. Cover for about 5 minutes until they are wilted. Let them cool.
- » Chop coarsely with a knife. Pour into a large bowl, add ricotta cheese, stir with a fork and add eggs. Add salt, pepper and nutmeg and mix everything. Add grated cheese and mix.
- » Transfer the mixture into a *sac à poche* and store in the refrigerator.

#### For the béchamel and tomato sauce

- » Heat olive oil in a saucepan over low heat and add garlic. Fry briefly and add tomato sauce.
- » Simmer 10-15 minutes. Add salt and oregano.
- » Heat milk separately.

- » In another pan, pour butter and let it melt completely. Add flour and stir quickly. After 2-3 minutes, remove from heat and pour hot milk. Stir constantly and season béchamel by adding a pinch of salt, pepper and grated nutmeg.
- » Continue to cook over a moderate flame for 5-6 minutes, until desired density is obtained.
- » Mix béchamel and tomato sauce in a glass bowl and cover with contact film.
- » Set aside 50-75ml of béchamel to be used for the final presentation.

#### Preparing the cannelloni

- » Take baking pan and spread two generous tablespoons of sauce (béchamel mixed with tomato sauce) at the bottom.
- » Take each pasta layer and place about 100g of stuffing with the *sac à poche* in the centre. Roll the pasta to form cylinders and place them in the baking pan.
- » Once cannelloni are aligned in pan, pour the rest of the sauce on top. As a final, purely cosmetic touch, spread two tablespoons of béchamel (not mixed with tomato) on top of the sauce, in order to obtain a contrast of white (the bechamel sauce) and red (the bechamel mixed with tomato sauce).
- » Sprinkle some Parmesan cheese on top.
- » Pre-heat the oven at 180°C, bake the cannelloni for 20 minutes, then activate the grill mode and keep in the oven for about 5 minutes to obtain a golden crust at the top.
- » Serve 2 cannelloni per person while still warm.



## ASPARAGUS-BACON ROLLS

**Serves** 6

**Prep time** 10-15 minutes

- 2 boxes of thin Thai asparagus
- A pack of bacon or pancetta if you like it more greasy (at least 6 slices)
- 3 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- decorative toothpicks

» Heat the oven to 180°C. Put the asparagus seasoned with salt, pepper and olive oil on baking paper to grill in the oven for 10 minutes or until crunchy.

» Separately, heat up a grilling pan and put some olive oil on it. Once it is hot, add slices of bacon and flip them until they are grilled on both sides.

» Once the asparagus and bacon are ready, roll each asparagus with a slice of bacon and tie it with a toothpick.

» Sprinkle a dash of pepper on top before serving.

## SMOKED SALMON-MOZZARELLA-TOMATO STICKS

**Serves** 6

**Prep time** 10 minutes

- 1 pack of mini mozzarella balls (from a brand like Galbani)
- 250g of smoked salmon
- 12 sweet cherry tomatoes
- 12 fresh basil leaves
- 2 tbsp of olive oil
- a dash of salt
- decorative toothpicks

» Cut the mini mozzarella balls, smoked salmon and cherry tomatoes into slices and place each in separate bowls.

» Assemble every stick by starting with a mozzarella ball, followed by two slices of smoked salmon and then a cherry tomato.

» Make at least 12 sticks and arrange in a serving tray.

» Cut the basil in small pieces (or use a blender if preferred). Add the olive oil and salt. Mix well with a spoon and sprinkle on top of the sticks to give a fresh, herbal flavour.

