

Serves 4
Prep 1½ hrs, plus
soaking time

Sweet meatballs with almonds and cinnamon

Polpette dolci

For the sauce

2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
1 large onion, finely
chopped
1 large garlic clove, finely
chopped
1 heaped tbsp tomato purée,
or *strattù* (see p40)
700g (1½lb) passata
1 cinnamon stick
sea salt and freshly ground
black pepper

For the meatballs

70g (2½oz) blanched
almonds
20g (¾oz) sugar
100g (3½oz) fresh
breadcrumbs, or *mollica
fresca* (see p30)
140ml (½fl oz) milk
480g (1lb 1oz) minced beef
80g (2¾oz) pecorino cheese,
finely grated
30g (1oz) raisins
20g (¾oz) pine nuts, plus
extra to serve
1½ tsp ground cinnamon
chilli flakes
2 medium eggs
extra virgin olive oil
oregano leaves, to serve

Polpette are hugely popular in Sicily and made with all kinds of different ingredients, such as aubergines (see p176), ricotta (see p107), or simply with flavoured fresh breadcrumbs. These sweet *polpette* are inspired by a recipe from Maria Grammatico (see p190) in her book *Bitter Almonds*. She describes that, in the post-War years, *polpette dolci* were the favourite festive treat served to children at the San Carlo abbey. The nuns certainly bulked out the meat in their *polpette* with quite a lot of breadcrumbs; Maria halved the quantity in her recipe. The raisins used here would have been those that weren't quite good enough for making dessert.

To make the tomato sauce, heat the olive oil in a pan over a medium heat and fry the onion with the garlic without letting them take on any colour. Stir in the tomato purée or *strattù* along with 400ml (14fl oz) of hot water, bring to the boil, then simmer everything for 1 minute. Stir in the passata and cinnamon stick, season with salt and pepper, and simmer for about 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, to make the meatballs, blitz the almonds and sugar in a food processor until the almonds are reduced to little chunks with just a bit of texture. Soak the breadcrumbs in the milk in a bowl for 20 minutes. Combine the almond mixture and breadcrumbs with the meat, cheese, raisins, pine nuts, and ground

cinnamon in a bowl. Season with salt, pepper, and chilli. Now stir in the eggs one at a time. The mixture should not be too firm or too soft.

Heat some olive oil in a frying pan over a medium heat. Use your hands to form 16 meatballs from the mixture. Fry them in the hot oil until golden brown on all sides, then transfer the meatballs to the tomato sauce and simmer gently for another 20 minutes. If the sauce becomes too thick, add some boiling water.

Take 4 deep plates and arrange 4 meatballs and some sauce on each. Scatter each with oregano leaves and pine nuts, grind over some black pepper, and serve drizzled with a dash of olive oil.

