

What's the deal with Columbus Day anyway? Perhaps they've been rewritten but according to my childhood schoolbooks, Christopher Columbus was trying to find a shortcut to India and China when he discovered America in 1492. Admittedly, we've all known for years that these stories romanticized his voyage across the Atlantic. It's hardly been a secret that he was put on a pedestal and made into a hero.

While I like a good hero story as much as the next guy, at some point somewhere in high school, or maybe it was a little later, two little details struck me.

The first and perhaps inconvenient truth is the fact that there were already people here when he arrived. Well, not really here, Columbus didn't land in New Hampshire. He landed in the Bahamas. To say he discovered the Bahamas is a little bit like telling your friends you discovered Barcelona. Sure, you spent a great semester there junior year. You probably discovered some interesting things about yourself. But Barcelona, no, you didn't discover Barcelona.

Anyway, while there aren't too many today, I'm sure there were some never-before-seen, uninhabited spots around the world in 1492. He could have discovered one of them but, as far as I know, he didn't. After all, Columbus wasn't trying to discover a new world. Remember, he was attempting to find a shorter route to Asia but he bumped into the Bahamas instead.

The second little detail is that Columbus never set foot in what was to become the United State or even North America. Not only that, Vikings led by Leif Eriksson built a settlement in Newfoundland several centuries before Columbus was born. They stayed for about ten years. Unfortunately, they were terrible neighbors. After constantly fighting with the locals, they headed back to Greenland.

So, given that he found something that wasn't lost and isn't even part of what is now known as United States, why do we celebrate Columbus Day? Why did we make him a hero and close schools, banks and the post office? While I'm happy for a day off, it does seem a bit odd. Doubly so since, by most accounts, Columbus was a pretty nasty guy.

Taking another look, it's pretty clear that Columbus Day's roots are in ethnic pride. First commemorated in 1792, the celebrations honored Italian American heritage and culture. While President Benjamin Harrison encouraged a day of patriotic recreation in 1892, FDR made Columbus Day a national holiday. A political move, President Roosevelt's proclamation came after considerable lobbying by his Italian American and Catholic constituents.

Columbus Day came under a cloud thirty, maybe forty, years ago. Long hidden cracks in Columbus' heroic façade started to appear. The daring explorer from our elementary school lessons is only a part of the story. Columbus might have been brave but he was also greedy and heartless. His cruelty towards the inhabitants of the islands he claimed for Spain is unfathomable. The atrocities he ordered were so brutal that he spent time in prison for them.

Columbus Day weekend might be a good time to make a few discoveries of your own. Nothing as momentous as a continent or even a small island. Instead, discover, observe and consider some of the contradicting complexities of life. The good, the bad and the ugly mix and mingle in astonishing ways. Open yourself and your mind to understanding some of these conflicting points of view.

What will you discover this fall? A hard truth, a new talent or an old friend? Bon appétit!




Pesto alla Genovese

My version of the Italian classic is both a handy and favorite staple. Perfect for last minute suppers, if you can't find a jar in my refrigerator, there is always some in the freezer. Enjoy!

Makes about 3 cups

8 cups fresh basil leaves
 1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted
 6 cloves garlic
 1 teaspoon kosher salt
 2 cups fresh parsley leaves
 1/2 cup or to taste extra virgin olive oil
 Zest and juice of 1 lemon (optional)*
 1/2 cup plus more for serving freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
 1/2 cup plus more for serving freshly grated Pecorino Romano cheese



Put half of the basil, the pine nuts, garlic and salt in a food processor and pulse to chop and combine. Add the remaining basil, the parsley, olive oil and lemon zest and juice and process until smooth. Add the cheeses and more olive oil if necessary and pulse to combine.

Cover and refrigerate for at least an hour to combine the flavors.

To serve: cook your favorite pasta according to package directions less one minute. Reserving some pasta water, drain the pasta and return it to the pot. Add a dollop or two of pesto – enough to generously coat the pasta, and a little pasta water. Toss to combine, cover and set over low heat for about 1 minute. Serve immediately and pass more grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and Pecorino Romano for your cheese loving friends.

** Lemon zest and juice will add a little sparkle and keep the pesto bright green.*

You can easily double or triple the recipe and store it in small containers in the freezer.