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MANELL'

Fried Polenta Fritters

Serves 4 to 6

At Trattoria Masella, a working farm in Cerreto Sannita (near Benevento) with a restaurant and rooms for rent, a snarling dog defends the pigsty. On one recent trip to this family-run establishment, proprietor Dino held his protective canine back as I inspected his hogs, a couple dozen happy animals who supply the farm and restaurant with meat and fat. The area around the farm, which sits at the edge of steep Apennine peaks, is known for rustic mountain fare that never wastes. Even the scraps left over from rendering pork fat are used, making their way into dishes as a savory flavoring known as *cicioli*. For *manell'*, so called because they take the form of one's hand (*mano*) as they are shaped, *cicioli* are mixed with cornmeal. These fritters are served at festive meals and especially holidays, but Dino or his mother, Maria, will make them upon request at their trattoria.

2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups instant polenta
½ cup small-diced *cicioli* (see note)
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 cup boiling water
Neutral oil or lard, for frying

Line a large platter or baking sheet with paper towels.

In a medium bowl, mix together the instant polenta, *cicioli*, olive oil, salt, and pepper. Add the boiling water, about ¼ cup at a time, mixing vigorously to incorporate all the ingredients until a compact mass has formed.

In a medium frying pan or cast-iron skillet, heat 2 inches of oil to 400°F.

When the corn mixture is cool enough to handle, grab a fistful and squeeze it between your palm and fingers, creating a crescent-shaped fritter with your fist. Repeat. Fry the *manell'*, working in batches as needed, turning once for even browning, about 4 minutes. Drain on the lined platter and serve hot, sprinkled with salt.

NOTE *Cicioli* are a common ingredient in the south, but they come in various incarnations depending on where you are. Sometimes they are pressed fat, layered, and sliced to be used like fatback or pancetta. In this case, they are the fatty and meaty substance that has been left behind when pig fat is rendered. The remaining material is pressed into tiles and used to impart savory flavor. If you cannot find *cicioli*, you can substitute pancetta, *guanciale*, or lardo.

