**ITALIAN SAUSAGE, SPINACH AND ORZO SOUP**

Our good friend Carol Nollsch gave me this recipe and recommends making it the day before serving to allow the flavors to blend. It’s my favorite kind of recipe — quick and easy to prepare from items usually on hand (with limited chopping!) and full of flavor. Carol recommends serving it with cornbread; our testers also liked it with sourdough bread.

SERVES: 8

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

1 pound uncooked Italian sausage, casings removed if necessary

2 cups chopped onion

1/2 to 1 teaspoon chopped garlic

2 teaspoons Italian seasoning

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes

2/3 cup dry white wine

7 cups chicken broth or stock

2 cups seeded and diced fresh tomatoes, or 1 (16-ounce) can diced tomatoes undrained *(see Tip)*

1 cup orzo pasta

5 cups packed shredded fresh baby spinach

3/4 to 1 cup (3 to 4 ounces) freshly grated Parmesan cheese

In a large stockpot, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add the sausage and sauté until browned, breaking up meat with a spatula. Drain and discard oil.

Stir in onion, garlic, Italian seasoning and red pepper flakes and cook 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the wine; reduce heat to low and simmer, scraping up any browned bits from bottom of pan, until wine is almost evaporated. Stir in the chicken broth, tomatoes and orzo. Bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer about 10 to 12 minutes or until pasta is cooked.

Stir in spinach; cook about 3 to 5 minutes or until wilted. Ladle in to soup bowls and sprinkle with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

*Tip: If using canned tomatoes, don’t drain and reduce chicken broth about 1/2 cup.*

*Recipe from Fresh Tastes by Lee Clayton Roper, reprinted with permission*