Italian Canadians at Table:
A Narrative Feast in Five Courses
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Edited by
Loretta Gatto-White & Delia De Santis

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**Volume VIII**
A Bouquet of Rapini
Mary di Michele

Where the Lemon Trees Bloom
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Almond Wine and Fertility
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Our Love Affair
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Pizza and KFC
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Our Mother’s Kitchen
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Maria’s Feast
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Our Contributors

About The Book

Credits
A bite of Canada’s culinary minestra might taste like smoked salmon stuffed perogies, on a bed of curried lentil couscous layered with foie gras quenelle, garnished with a crackling of pemmican prosciutto and a dusting of dulse in a pool of ginger, lemon grass and sake reduction, followed by a molten butter tart a la mode; a feast to which every culture calling Canada home has contributed.

Canada’s rich food culture has run the gamut from old world culturally diverse commercial and domestic artisan products available wherever predominately working-class “ethnic peoples” settled, such as Toronto’s Ward, Montreal’s “The Main” and Vancouver’s Chinatown, to post-war, French-inspired haute cuisine, or as I call it the grand hotel, country club scoff of smugly prosperous1950s Canada.

Prosperity also created the new world fast-food nation purveying a distinctly American cuisine and bastardized old world ethnic dishes where Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker “duke it out” for shelf space with Mama Bravo and Chef Boyardee. In our twenty-first century, we see a return to old world artisan products and the slow-food cultural values attached to their production, sale and consumption, now ironically the purview of the privileged class.

The progressive acculturation of Italian cuisine into Canada’s national culinary identity is a testament to this social phenomenon. At the turn of the century, Toronto’s Italian bakeries vied for supremacy, some even resorting to branding their loaves to ensure the customer quality and authenticity, in Muskoka, family-run macaroni factories produced artisan pasta extruded from bronze-dies. Socially
ambitious Italian families fed the gentry’s hunger for fine European comestibles, opening wholesale and retail gourmet food emporia throughout our urban centres.

Still, Italian cuisine, especially that from the Mezzogiorno, the origin of a large share of Canada’s Italian émigrés, was disdained by restaurant patrons who regarded French haute cuisine as being truly refined, even though it was usually cooked and served by Italians. The economic turmoil of the Depression devastated many Italian family-owned food businesses which, being reliant on a labyrinthine system of community banks, precursors to credit unions, failed early and hard taking the Italian communities’ entrepreneurial house of cards with it. This interruption lasted until “the boys came home” when Italian cuisine was once again relegated to behind the kitchen doors, except for its new canned and frozen incarnations, whose stereotyped public face was represented by Mama Bravo then signora Michelina, et al.

Greasy spoons and restaurant chains served-up giant bowls of gluey, over-cooked spaghetti drowning in an acrid pool of canned tomato sugo graced by polpette as hard as bocce balls and crowned with a sprinkling of ersatz parmesan, washed down with domestic red plonk from gallon jugs, or worse, if it was a festive occasion something sparkling like Spumante Bambino.

The public’s concept of sophisticated five star cuisine was still solidly French with few exceptions, until the 1980s when Northern Italian cuisine, by little stretch of the culinary palate, became trendy with its focus on butter, cream, truffles, risotto, polenta and veal, and a notable absence of strong tastes and colours. Its soft and velvety textures were an easy segue from central France to Italy.

But something has happened to our palates, arteries and social aspirations between then and now. We want to eat food that is as sustaining of our bodies as it is of our environment. We want the rustic produce and products directly out of the farmer’s field or the artisan’s hand, to gather-up our families’ generations on Sunday and share boldly coloured and flavourful food from big steaming majolica platters. We’ll plant heritage tomatoes amongst the genteel delphiniums in our urban courtyards, challenge city hall for our right to raise chickens and wood-roast peppers in midtown backyards, forage in city parks for spring cicoria, and take courses on how to cure and hang our own Berkshire Pork prosciutto in downtown lofts.

In short, Canadians have begun a risorgimento of homey, predominately southern Italian cuisine which resonates beyond the domestic kitchen to the gregarious communal restaurant table, the bustling boisterous farmers’ markets, the clang and clatter of outdoor cafés, the weekend line-ups at the deli counters of the few remaining mom and pop’s Italian grocers where you can run a tab and delivery is free. As the cheekily chauvinistic saying goes: it seems there are only two kinds of people, Italians and those who wish they were. Melanzane, spaghetti, polpette, rapini, oregano, peperoncini, bottarga, anchovies, pecorino Romano, the yin yang of agro-dolce verdure and the deep dark red of Nero d’Avola — bring it on! cries Canada. The cucina casalinga and cucina povera are the new haute cuisines.

There’s no poverty of taste, history or tradition in the rich cultural heritage of our Italian Canadian cuisine; its bon gusto and piquancy is served-up in these entertaining narratives. Tutti a tavola a mangiare.

— Loretta Gatto-White
First Course:
Antipasto
One of my relatives once suggested it would be far better if I took up cooking instead of writing. She may have had a point. What sheer, unadulterated pleasure it is to cook up a delightful dinner, to soak up all the oohs and ahhs that come with the territory. Rejections? I hardly get a one. How infinitely more satisfying it can be, at times, to poke the sharp end of a knife into the purple skin of a plump eggplant, to feel that spongy texture, to slice it into thick disks for grilling after brushing them with a bit of olive oil and freshly ground pepper, or to dice for an autumn peperonata. How joyous to see the ease with which I can coax the bitter juices out by simply sprinkling the slices or chunks with salt, and letting all stand for a while, draining the unpleasant dark liquid into the sink. How much more difficult to coax words from my pen, to extract the bitter juices from life and drain them away. Instead, I tend to catch and store them, and turn them into stories. Ah, yes, this too can be sheer unadulterated pleasure, except when I unintentionally pour salt into wounds, and bring forth shivers of pain. More often, my poking into life’s mysteries is a Herculean feat which brings ill results: rejections, criticism, noses twisted out of joint, hurt egos ... Sometimes applause, as in cooking, but how much more safe is cooking with its predictable results: always applause? I have maimed many with my words, but I have yet to poison or kill anyone with my ragù or pesto or gnocchi or fragrant autumn apple pie. Simple things matter too. They relax the mind.

When that relative advised I give up the pen and take up the cooking utensils, she was certain this was an either or situation; one
could not do both. She was wrong, of course. The rituals that sustain the physical body can lie side by side with the rituals that sustain the mind and spirit. In fact, as my own experience can testify, one must pay attention to all these facets in order to nourish and sustain each. I know what it feels like to be slowly shrivelling, decaying, composting. Or was it desiccating from not being able to fortify and nourish the body, from not being able to swallow and hold anything down? But I’ll leave that for a later chapter.

Liliane Welch, the Luxemburg-born, Canadian author with a bit of Italian blood, frequently wrote about the interdependence of the natural world and the fingerprint man has put on it. In one of her books, *Untethered in Paradise*, she constructed essays on some of her favourite artists: Rodin, Cezanne, Chardin, Monet, and more. Her piece on Cezanne entitled “Cezanne’s Heroes” struck me as exemplifying the connection I want to make between the simple things of nature and the whole of who we are. At the Museum of Fine Art in Basel, Switzerland, as she viewed *Still Life with Apples and Peaches*, one of more than 170 of Cezanne’s still lifes, she talked about the bond between “natural and man-made things.” I was particularly captivated by her statement: “It is as though the apples and peaches remembered the sun that ripened them ...” In that essay, she also says she is convinced “the secret heart of things resides in a simple yellow apple which rests on a pile of peaches ...”

Sometimes, I think we become so caught up in our man-made world that we undervalue, underestimate and even scorn the simple things of nature. There was a time when I used to scoff at my grandmother and my aunts’ obsession with their gardens, orchards, and animals and their total abstinence from anything to do with the arts! But I learned later that, without taking reasonable care of the body, it becomes impossible to sustain the other.

Man-made masterpieces like Cezanne’s and Welch’s essays make us stop and think. If, as Welch writes: “All his life Cezanne persevered, painted humble things, and did not listen to his father’s admonition: ‘My son, think of the future. You die by being a genius, and you eat by having money’,” what does it say about the importance of apples and oranges?

I laughed when I read Cezanne’s father’s words to his son. They sound much like my old relative’s admonitions when I failed to take up cooking as a profession. But what can we infer about the fact that this work of art is still around after ninety five years? That Cezanne is still with us? That this is how he chose to reel in a bit of eternity?

In another masterpiece, the movie *Like Water for Chocolate*, we are again exposed to the intricate and intimate connection between food and spirit and art. In a Cinderella type story, Tita’s wretched and domineering mother will not allow this younger daughter to marry the man she loves, dictating instead that her older daughter must have him, despite the fact that he too is in love with the younger Tita. As the youngest child, Tita must take care of her mother, and help run the household. This magnificent film pulls together all manner of food and food related symbolism in order to show that the overlooked Tita can indeed entice and hold on to her lover through the preparation of delectable food despite the fact that she and her beloved do not consummate their love sexually. In contrast, the older sister, who becomes the wife, is not able to coerce her husband to love her in spite of the fact that they share the same bed. This spiritual and emotional divide is portrayed with food. Tita’s sister, the new bride, is incapable of preparing the delicacies that Tita prepares; she is incapable of being Tita. Food, then, takes on spiritual significance. It represents Tita’s nurturing qualities. Food also takes on artistic value since the manner in which Tita presents it to her beloved becomes a visual feast, as they say.

The interdependence of body, soul and spirit is obvious in the film. When any one aspect is suffering, the others follow suit. Ironically, in this film, the wife who does not cook becomes gluttonous and dies as a result of her little sister’s culinary talents, finally leaving the husband/lover for Tita. In the dramatic ending, when Tita and her lover finally consummate their love, and all the forces collide, we are shocked at the eruption that ensues. Watching this scene, and the entire film, I once again go back to my premise that, if we hold back on any one of our needs, the whole will suffer the consequences.

In the fall, when there is a bounty for us who live in Essex County, we have traditionally followed the templates of nature. My
husband will make wine because the grapes are now available; I will roast red peppers, carefully peel off their thin, charred and now brittle skins, clean out the seeds and freeze the pulp for winter antipasto or an appetizer when I will defrost the peppers and toss them with a bit of my own home grown garlic and parsley and a bit of Italian extra virgin olive oil. Whenever I open one of my frozen packages of red peppers, I will inevitably inhale the fragrant scent of autumn and recall the day I drove to Harrow to purchase my peppers, which I used to pick myself, but arthritis has reared its ugly head. I will recall the day I roasted them on the barbecue, peeled them and stuffed them into plastic bags. I will recall sitting at my picnic table outside in the back yard cleaning and preparing the fragrant peppers while Eddie, my little Jack Russell, looked on, intent on snatching a piece of this food he has never seen since this is his first autumn, and he is still a pup. I will recall the stereophonic symphony the sparrows played for their audience of two: myself and Eddie, hundreds of them twittering in our cedar trees, flitting about the yard, to and from the birdfeeder, so trusting of myself and Eddie. And I will recall how I felt in the fall. At times like this, I feel enveloped in pure joy. It is a feeling of such deep satisfaction that it supersedes any type of sexual enjoyment, for that seems selfish while this seems an act of embracing the entire universe. Like Water for Chocolate comes to mind.

I’m sure that my grandmother and my aunts and uncles who farmed and worked the land, who raised chickens, ducks, pigs and cattle must have experienced the same feelings. I used to wonder how anyone could get through life without picking up a book, reading a story, but I suppose they expressed themselves with their gardens and barns, and read the heavens. Whenever I have done hard, physical labour, working myself to a sweat, working until my muscles ached and longed for rest, I also remember the feeling of satisfaction one gets from physical exertion, the sound sleep one sleeps after a long hard day of picking tomatoes, or hoeing weeds in the fields.

But it is no different from the feeling of satisfaction I get when I get up from my writing chair and lift my weary hands from the computer keys or drop my pen after editing or writing out thoughts. The muscles of the body let go and relax as if I’ve just plucked bushels of peppers from their vines, snapped baskets of Italian beans from their vines.

The first rose of the season always comes to keep me company at my desk as I write. My husband will go out secretly and cut it, place it in a vase and set it beside my computer, something he will do throughout the season. It never fails to bring a smile to my face. I myself never find the time to go out and cut a rose for my work room, but he does. He tries to bring in the most fragrant of our roses: a ‘Mister Lincoln’ dark red or a ‘Tropicana’ with hues of red/orange. When I approach my study, which is often a chaotic mess, much to my dismay, it is the rose I will notice first because it is the rose which will perfume the air and I will be aware of its presence even before I enter the room, the scent preceding the actual sight of the flower. I will inevitably smile. I will smile at my romantic man, but also at the incongruity of things. This beautiful feat of nature, this work of magnificent art which has inspired the likes of now famous artists, is in such contrast to the austere lines of the computer, which are so different from the frilly, delicate beauty of the rose. The twinkling lights of my apparatus, which indicate I am in communication with the world, the hum of the machines, the whirr when I press a button and print out a page jar me. The contrast is inescapable and yet, for me, they are entwined, the one feeding and nurturing the other much like my poking into a plump purple eggplant and getting it ready for grilling, or my poking into my stories feeling their sponginess and getting them ready for the page.
Domenico Capilongo

alla maniera di George Elliott Clarke

I got passionate pomodori freschi big red fat ass sons-of-bitches tomatoes. Round firm mother fuckers perfect for salad. I got tiny testicle cherry tomatoes bouncing up a storm like you wouldn’t believe. Watermelon sized beefsteak tomatoes ready for a hot veal sangwich if you know what I mean. How about some smooth virgin plum pomodori to make the best salsa from here to halifax? caro mio, you know who started all of this? Columbus found pomodori for you and me in 1493.

Summer and Figs

Joseph Ranallo

In 1952, when I was eleven, my family emigrated from one of Italy’s smallest regions, Molise, to one of Canada’s largest, British Columbia. In Molise, I had completed grade five, but because I didn’t speak English, when I enrolled in the Rossland elementary school, I was placed in grade four. Such was the E.S.L. strategy of the time. However, soon I became adept at communicating in three distinct languages: the Molisano I spoke at home with my mother; the semiformal Italian I used with the few non-Molisani Italians in Rossland; and the strained, broken English I spoke with my non-Italian friends. I was fully aware that, though I could make myself understood in these three different languages, I was not really fluent in any one of them.

Despite the language barrier, as I grew up, I adapted well to the new culture and I felt proud that my English speaking friends enjoyed my mother’s cooking, especially her spaghetti, gnocchi, polenta, baccalà, and home-cured Italian prosciutto, salame, and sausages. Unfortunately, though, I never managed to recover the two-year setback and move up into my peer grade. When I did finish high school, I was already twenty years old. Ironically, next to the teachers and support staff, I was the oldest person in the school, a situation that I bore in mild discomfort, but with good humour.

Before my last year of high school and during my first two years of university, to help to pay for my studies, I spent the summer months working for the Trail-based Inland Gas Company that, among other things, installed the first domestic natural gas services in my spectacular region of the West Kootenays. Each hot new day, the summer students and the seasonal workers who had been hired
on a temporary basis showed up, lunch buckets in hand, waiting patiently to be assigned to one of several teams that were charged with the responsibility of installing brand new gas services to the local residences.

The favourite team leader, by far, was a joyful, carefree Calgarian bachelor named Jack. He was a fun-loving, creative welder who was clear with his directives and generally easy to appease. All that he requested from his subordinates was that they did their jobs well, whether it was digging a ditch with a hand shovel, loading and unloading the truck orderly, cleaning the work site before departing, or turning the pipes that he had to join systematically and evenly so that he could showcase his skill as a master welder.

Jack was far from being the typical construction welder. Even to those who hardly knew him, he presented an intriguing blend of vision and ambition. He had applied to teach welding at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary, and by his late twenties, had established a reputation as a promising leader with a future. The workers acknowledged that Jack had a forthright presence about him. He was well informed and well read in literature, politics, and history. He was especially fond of the sensual poetry of D.H. Lawrence, and loved music, especially the popular songs of the day. His appetite for learning was legendary. After the day’s work, Jack became a formidable orator in the bar room political debates. For those of us who were summer student relief workers, Jack became the charismatic dream boss. We all wanted to be on his crew.

In late July, quite by accident, Jack invited me to join him for the day. His customary helper, who had already worked with the company for several of the spring months, was needed elsewhere in some other capacity. Jack made sure that I understood clearly this arrangement was only temporary and not a permanent partnership. Nonetheless, I was both delighted and grateful for the invitation.

When we arrived at our destination, we were greeted by a dignified gentleman with a white mustache and wavy silver hair who spoke English with a distinct Italian accent.

“Da quale parte dell’Italia venite?” I asked him.

“Io sono da Grimaldi, in Calabria.”

For the next few minutes, we exchanged pleasantries in our native dialects. I switched to English when I noticed what I interpreted to be a disapproving look that had crept over Jack’s usually jovial face. I suspected that he probably felt uncomfortable being excluded. I feared that, by talking in Italian, I had cut short my work association with Jack. Luckily, I was wrong.

Within minutes, we got started with the work. Jack seemed pleased that I was quite prepared to do the heavy, tedious, and dusty tasks such as digging and drilling into the concrete basement walls with a Hilty. He was also gratified to note that I had brought a lunch bucket. For Jack, this meant that he did not have to bring an additional labourer with him nor would he have to drive me around to find a place to eat. Jack also confided that he was glad that he did not have to eat his lunch alone in the truck.

We worked hard most of the morning. When we stopped for the coffee break, Jack asked: “What’s in your bucket that smells so good, mate?”, eyeing my crusty bread, golden chicken drumstick roasted in a veneer of tomato and red pepper sauce, shiny black oil-cured olives, and succulent white grapes.

“Does your mother always pack your lunch?”

“Most of the time.”

“You’re so lucky she does, all I have is a mystery-meat sandwich on pasty white bread I bought at the deli and some of their industrial strength coffee.”

Just before lunch, the old Italian gentleman, who had mysteriously vanished for a couple of hours, suddenly reappeared with a tray of freshly cut salame, prosciutto, and hard cheese. On a second plate, he carried a loaf of thickly sliced white Italian homemade bread with a hard, firm crust. The gentleman disappeared momentarily again and returned with a bowl of grapes and a few fresh, purple figs.

“Fiche!” I practically shouted. “I have not seen them since I left Italy ten years ago. I love them. My grandfather used to grow them in his orchard. I used to eat them by the handful.”

“Per un giovane come te,” the old man winked, “è impossibile mangiar troppo fiche.”
My face must have turned red at the double entendre. In most regions of Italy, the female form of fico was the most common synonym for the female genitalia. I was glad Jack didn’t ask me to translate what the old man had said.

He left again and returned with a half gallon bottle of red Zinfandel wine he had made the previous fall. Although we were forbidden to drink alcohol on the job, in appreciation for the old gentleman’s hospitality, Jack decided to make a slight exception this one time. He had heard there were only three things that could offend an Italian man more than insulting his wine: disrespecting his mother, wife, and daughters. Jack declared that it would be most impolite to insult our generous host.

“We will drink only one glass now,” Jack said, asking me to translate, “otherwise we won’t be able to work sensibly in the heat of the afternoon sun.” Jack knew that I was old enough to drink alcohol. I had already told him my age on the way over.

“Then we save the rest for after quitting time,” the old gentleman answered in his broken English as he laid out the food on a wooden bench for us to enjoy. “Eat the fig first,” he said, winking at me again. “When you are young and single, you never know how long it will be before you are offered another one. They don’t grow around here, you know. I was sent these by a relative in the states.”

At the end of the day, we cleaned up a bit earlier than the customary four o’clock. When the old gentleman brought out the remainder of the wine and some other cold meats and bread, we moved to the back lawn and sat on his garden chairs. Jack gave me permission to drink one more glass while he drank two. “Both the food and the wine are exquisite,” Jack remarked as he thanked the old gentleman. “You Italians are fortunate; you eat food that has been prepared and served to you by loving hands and not someone who is being paid to ask you if there will be fries with your order.” The old man smiled and nodded in appreciation, obviously satisfied that his generosity had not passed unnoticed.

On the way back to the office, Jack asked me if I would like to stay on as his helper for the few remaining weeks of the summer. Without hesitation, I responded with an enthusiastic yes. The only condition he lightheartedly imposed on me was a pleasant one. I had to speak Italian to all our Italian clients. “I know that the more Italian you speak,” Jack kidded, “the more and better the wine and food will get.” To my pleasant surprise, Jack, who seemed wiser than his years, turned out to be right.

That hot summer, we serviced many of the Italian residences in the Trail area. Almost without exception, as soon as I spoke Italian, the food and wine appeared. When it came to drinking wine on the job, Jack made many concessions. He did not want to offend any of our hosts. Most of the time, we were only given cold meats and cheese. On rare occasions, we were treated to entire meals: freshly cooked aromatic pasta and gnocchi dishes that turned concrete dingy, dark basements into fragrant, joyous parlours; pizzas with their pungent blend of baked tomato and cheese; or the different kinds of polenta that reflected the culinary customs brought to Trail from the different regions of Italy. Jack already knew that, with northern Italians, polenta was a real staple of their diet. He joked good naturedly, that he had heard from reliable sources that Cominco Northern Italian workers actually packed it in their lunch buckets.

Whenever we were offered a new food, like lupini or finocchio, Jack asked me to pronounce its Italian name several times. On the way back to the office, he would repeat the word over and over until he got it just right. He even memorized the second verse of Nicola Paone’s Tony the Ice Man, a lighthearted, popular Italian American tune of the fifties. The section he committed to memory consists exclusively of a litany of anglicized staple Italian foods:

\[
I \text{ see un provolone, un salisiccone, nu pastrami, nu big salame, } \\
Un \text{ capicollo, na meatballa, na scarola, a gorgonzola, la mozzarella, la, la, la }
\]

In fact, when Jack saw a surname that ended with a vowel on his morning work order, he began singing this verse in anticipation of the reception we would likely get at that house. For him, this verse became a kind of anthem, much like the ones sung at the start of major athletic events.

As we worked in the scorching sun, Jack, acetylene torch in hand, like a latter-day Prometheus bringing fire and warmth to a
cold, indifferent humanity, would sometimes lift the goggles off his sparkling, green-blue eyes and talk to me. “Women are like figs,” he would say, obviously delighted with his uncanny ability to weld words into metaphors with the same ease and agility that he could weld steel pipes together. “D.H. Lawrence has written a splendid poem about that. You should read it. In their prime, whether golden, purple, or black, on the outside they are firm, symmetrical, and shapely. But on the inside, they are all mysterious and oh so succulent, tantalizing, and sweet.”

Practically every day, Jack would surprise me with some other memorable, striking extended metaphor in which at least one of its two elements was an item from the Italian menu we had been offered that particular day. “Black olives,” he would say wistfully, “are enchanting. But only because they have been picked by full bodied, alluring dark skinned, southern Italian women in whose tender embraces lay the opiates of oblivion.”

Sometimes, the metaphors became quite elusive, complex, philosophical, and personal. Occasionally, they even revealed a slight trace of vulnerability and insecurity that Jack’s common, everyday vernacular guardedly camouflaged. “Most women love salame,” Jack, who was beginning to entertain thoughts of marriage, would say pensively, “but they can soon tire of the same lacklustre brand. This is why the Italian meat industry wisely offers them an endless variety to choose from: Genoa, Friulano, Prosciutto, and Soppressata, to name only a few. Perhaps if we can present them with this infinite diversity, they might be less inclined to listen to the messages from the little men in the canoes between their thighs urging them to paddle away from the predictability of their matrimonial beds to explore other distant, exotic horizons.”

These philosophical chats, on hot summer days, taught me a lesson that I could never have learned even at the most prestigious university. I learned there is something special about the Italian food we prepare and eat, the quasi religious attitude we have towards it, and, most of all, the magical words we choose to describe it. It was this food, given to us sincerely and unconditionally by people whom we hardly knew, which helped me earn Jack’s admiration.

I really don’t know to what extent these talks about my ancestral cuisine and Jack’s passion for language influenced my unlikely determination to enrol in Honour’s English in my last three years at the University of Victoria. Through Jack’s poetic diction, inspired largely by his love of Italian food and the care and respect we give it, I learned to make my peace with English, the language that initially held me back when I first came to Canada. Now I wanted to embrace it fully. Without forgetting my native tongue, I came to love and respect English, my adopted language, a language that has given immortality to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats, Lawrence, and a host of other writers who at some time or other have paid their poetic homage to the joys of food.

And, in his own way, through his subliminal metaphors, Jack also taught me that perhaps, like lovemaking, the sheer enjoyment of good food is the most sensual experience we can engage in. On our tongues, we feel the granules of the ripe fig’s seeds; with our eyes, we appreciate the delicate beauty of its near perfect symmetry; through our ears, if we listen closely enough, we hear the juicy gush of the first bite into a ripe fig. Put your nose to a warm ripe fig and inhale its subtle fragrance. When perfectly ripe, the humble fig, offers a sensual palatal delight almost unmatched by any other fruit. As D.H. Lawrence demonstrates, this is the stuff that poetry is made of. And, as poetry nourishes and calms the restless soul, Italian food satisfies the ever-yearning flesh.
thought they were capable of ingesting. And as the hostess-with-the-mostess in the making, I have no qualms at dessert time, carting out two or three cakes, instead of one perfectly good one.

There’s only one explanation for my personal preoccupation with wanting to feed (and possibly over-feed others) — and that’s: culture. It’s become apparent to me that cultural convention is difficult to smudge out, no matter how mighty the eraser. The rush of self-satisfaction that I feel (ta-da!) when presenting an overflowing platter of antipasti — meant for twelve to my party of six — riffs the titillation my kin experienced when they spoiled their guests. I’m convinced that I’ve acquired my long arms, which apparently haven’t shrunk much in the process of assimilation, from a long line of compulsive givers. Sure, tradition gets watered down as Diaspora transfers it from its indigenous context to another paradigm, but habits run deep — just like bloodlines — no matter how long after, or how far from their inception.

As much as I try to distance myself from the customs which shadowed me in my formative years, I can’t seem to escape them, and, in the right light, they still cast themselves alongside me. And although I take offense to the cheesy Olive-Garden-esque media stereotypes depicting my heritage — the kerchief nonna stirring a stove-top caldron, or the grinning, ruddy-faced nonno slicing an enormous, flour-dusted loaf of bread held tight under his armpit, beckoning viewers to step into their saccharine cosmos — the sentimental montages do seem a tad too familiar. Waving a white, lace tray doily, I acquiesce to the generosity gene: I’m unbendingly, unshakably and unequivocally of the same ilk. Let’s face it — it’s all in the hardwiring. In any case, whether my givingness is virtue or foible, I trust you’ll forgive me if I should ever invite you to an extra helping — or two. After all, I can’t help myself.

The Kitchen Table

Carlinda D’Alimonte

This kitchen table, draped in oil cloth of reds and yellows, is where our lives unfold,

where bags of newly bought groceries are placed on Saturday mornings, unpacked by small hungry hands looking for Cocoa Puffs, marshmallows and bananas not seen in this house for days, where important things are prepared from scratch — pasta, pastries, plans, where we come together each day to allay our hunger for food or belonging, where homework is done after dinner, where papers are lain, scrutinized, where guests are seated coaxed with sweets, lupines, olives, and wine, where we play our hands of crazy eights and euchre raising our voices, slapping the table to make a point, where grandparents sit every night reading the bible aloud, where late-night talks in hushed voices over coffee and biscuits find us forever giggling.
anymore. Some are small, crimson, hard and quite tart; others are big, pale green, with softer flesh, sweeter. Combined in a pie they create a taste sensation unlike any other. We have also found fabulous mushrooms. They are quite plentiful at this time of year, growing thick in some patches of moss, alongside the path, in rocks and dirt, or on broken limbs and stumps.

We have identified a few varieties now that we can harvest and safely consume—known to be edible, easily identified, and even successfully tested by the brave among us. *Lactarius deliciosus* are, indeed, delicious; they have broad tops of pale pink, deep gills, and bleed a bright orange milky liquid when sliced. And we have found lots of *Coprinus comatus*, commonly known as Shaggy Mane. They have to be picked young, before they begin to fringe on the edges and throw off their black ink. But they are firm, woodsy and buttery when they’re young. I clean bits of moss and leaves from some while my mother looks on: “Your grandfather would be proud of you!” she says.

My maternal grandfather started the Maple Leaf Mushroom Company. He grew, packed and sold fresh button mushrooms, from a farm in the east end of Toronto, what is now part of Scarborough. I can remember in the spring, before we planted the garden at home, making trips to the farm to pick up manure from the steaming mushroom beds to mix into our flower beds. No wonder our pots of basil grew so well—they were stoked with some serious fertilizer.

The roots of the food connection run deep on both sides in my family. Now, I am a little farther removed from those roots, and sometimes a little sadder for it. But when I stop to consider it, I can easily understand why food is such a passion in my life and such a force in our family—it’s bred in the bone.
the perfect moment, not the overcooked soggy feeling in the back of your throat when you don’t know what to say like on the first date when I told you that I don’t believe in marriage. the perfect light. the sun sitting just right, just so, holding them for the first time. the hospital room spinning. the firmness of that moment. the words forming nicely in your mouth like they were meant to be there. like now, years later when I tell you that you heard me all wrong. I know you don’t believe me.

Consider this, that from an anonymous act of prestidigitation a pedestrian mound of flour and a trickle of water were transformed into pasta in all its emblematic shapes and nomenclature. This casual act of invention makes the phenomenon that was the Renaissance seem a comparative failure of the imagination, based as its very name asserts, on earlier cultural innovations. Whereas the delightful creation which holds the Italian body together and its soul eternally in thrall, has no primo genitor, it is, like God, its own sufficient cause rising spontaneously it seems, from a magic mountain of flour.

What mystery lay within that golden coil, what secret alchemy woven in each supple strand? Well, Federico Fellini nearly got it right in his characteristically enigmatic declaration: “Life is a combination of magic and pasta.” We expect a deeper sentiment from the son of a Barilla pasta salesman. “Pasta is magic, the rest is life,” seems more sensible. Doubters may ponder the magnificence that is ‘La Loren,’ an Italian icon as famous as Michelangelo’s David and just as majestically statuesque, who freely admits her debt to the national dish: “Everything you see, I owe to spaghetti” and possibly a little more besides.

One only need survey the 310 kinds of pasta in Oretta Zanini De Vita’s Encyclopaedia of Pasta to realize that its potent magic resides in its ability to inspire the imagination and motivate the nimble fingers of its anonymous, mostly female creators. Mona Talbott, executive chef of the American Academy in Rome, accounts for the impractical labour lavished on creating these fanciful shapes as a “way of self-expression for women to show their creativity and imagination with
food thoughtfully then unceremoniously spit it out into her napkin. She noticed we weren’t eating and stood up and grabbed both of us by one ear each.

“Are you trying to poison us?” she demanded. My father’s cousins carefully averted their eyes and placed their forks back on the table.

“Dimme che hai fatto!” Tell me what you’ve done!

Piece by piece the story came out. No one noticed Clara finishing her pasta with relish, oblivious to the turmoil, sauce splattering on to her pink top and round cheeks. Yolanda was holding a napkin to her mouth and trying to prevent herself from gagging, but oh so delicately. Cristofero put his hands in his pockets and started to inspect the garden most carefully. My father said nothing but his face got redder and redder with each ingredient we listed until it looked like his head would explode. Suddenly he got up and turned to my mother.

“You see what your stupidaggine have lead to? You fill their heads with silly stories and this is what it comes to!” He turned to his guests and started apologizing as Mama jerked Joey and me away from the table. I stared at Clara. Sure, just because you’re four years old doesn’t mean you don’t know what you’re doing, I thought. She brought us into her bedroom and closed the door. For a brief moment, I thought I could convince Mama that this incident was an act of insurrection against the Norman conqueror, the blonde invader. But from the look on her face I soon gave up that idea. As she turned towards us she said: “If there is to be any poisoning to be done, I will do it. Capisce?”

Joey and I looked at each other. “Sì, Mama.”

“I do the cooking from now on — okaaay?”

“Sì, Mama,” we replied again.

“Besides if I wanted to poison that rooster I would have been more careful. Now go outside in the backyard. Don’t — touch — anything. If I hear you breathing, you’re going to get it. I’ll bring you something to eat.”

She left us. Joey and I stared at each other, amazed that we had escaped. Did I see her winking at us, or was she blinking because she was so angry? She made her way back to the dinner table and Joey and I were never able to figure it out.

Making Olives and Other Family Secrets

Darlene Madott

Olive Oil Properties

Sun, stone, drought, silence and solitude. These are the five ingredients that create the ideal habitat for the olive tree. Their colour defines them. Unripe olives are green. Fully ripe olives are black. The longer the olive is permitted to ferment in its own brine, the less bitter and more intricate its flavour will become.

“You have to crack them open, devi schiacciarle — crack them open, so they can absorb the sweetness of life.” My aunt Vitinna, from my mother’s Sicilian side of the family, was describing how to make olives. But when my Sicilian Aunt Vitinna spoke of cracking the olives open — abusing them so that they could become sweet — I thought instantly of my Calabrian Aunt Florence. Aunt Flo, as I knew her, was one who, like the olives, had been schiacciata by life.

Sun

Possessed of a legendary beauty that was quite gone by the time I knew her, she was the first to be married. She had a good many suitors — men who later gave decent lives to their women, but my Aunt Flo gave herself to Ercole. I knew my Uncle Ercole as a rude man who rolled putrid cigars wetly between his lips and buffed his teeth after dinner with a folded serviette. His hands smelled of cigars.

Uncle Ercole had made Aunt Flo pregnant before making her his bride.
That was shocking in those days. Today, it would not be a matter of a wasted life, but in those days, to disgrace family was a choice worse than death.

While her belly swelled, Ercole talked long and leisurely about returning to Italy. For six months, he talked.

**Drought**

In the meantime, Florence’s sister Vittoria grew in her own righteousness. Vittoria accused Florence of spoiling her own prospects of marriage. With her buckteeth and draught-horse figure, Vittoria had never been pretty, or sought-after, or loved. Secretly, she probably preened at her sister’s tragedy.

Florence wasn’t restrained. Not like her sister Vittoria. She used to talk about Ercole to anyone who would listen to her. She didn’t care who knew what kind of a man she had married. Florence lived with Ercole in this chicken coop of a house and sold eggs around the neighbourhood to make herself some pocket money. Ercole never gave her a cent, expecting her father to support his damaged-goods daughter.

**Stone**

When it came time for Florence to have the baby that had so compromised her, Ercole stood at the door of their bedroom, his face hard as stone, watching the progress of Florence’s suffering: “That’s the way I like to see you — like that.”

My cousin’s head was showing, but Florence sat up in the bed on her elbows and heaved her pillow at the door. My cousin Frankie was born in a flurry of feathers.

Florence, astonishingly, was without shame. She simply refused to mourn her life, and perhaps this, more than anything, drove her sister Vittoria closer to her own bitter osso (olive pit).

**Silence**

Now was this next development part of the plan? Is this what people mean when they say we all get back our own?

Vittoria had only one child. A daughter, Gioia. She came to Vittoria and Enrico, almost by surprise, eight years after they married. Now Vittoria, who had always criticized her sister’s righteous way of bringing up children, had a chance to rear her own.

Chubby Gioia. At sixteen, she wore bobby socks and full skirts that stopped just short of her dimpled knees, and sweaters buttoned up backwards and pulled down tightly over her enormous breasts. She had an open cheerful face and a boisterous way of laughing that reminded some people of Florence — much to her mother’s dismay. In fact, Vittoria was dismayed by most things about her daughter, not least of which were those breasts. Jiggling and irrepressible, no harness of a bra could contain them.

From the silent way my parents dressed for Gioia’s wedding, I knew something must be wrong. My older sister had been told and preened with the knowledge. But I was thought to be too young. I only knew our Dad had been asked to give Gioia away, that for some reason, her own father would have nothing to do with the wedding.

“What is it with the women in this family,” my father said that day, knotting his tie. “All made of Flo’s blood? All soft hearts and hard heads?” Words I did not then understand.

**Sun**

There is a home movie my father made in the late 1950s at one of Aunt Flo’s Christmas Eve dinners. In the kitchen, sweating from hot camera lights and the steam rising from the pasta pot, Flo lifts the pasta for the movie. The meal itself would be served on a plywood table, covered with a white linen tablecloth. Her fallen bra strap dangles on her arm, as she pulls the pasta from the water. Her own daughter, dressed in a fuchsia pink, tight-fitting satin cocktail dress, waves for the camera. Aunt Flo is laughing — irrepressibly. Although this is a silent home movie, you can hear Flo laughing.

On the day our youngest sister was being born, my oldest sister and I went to stay with my Aunt Flo. Our father drove us over early in the morning, just as the sun began to rise. Flo greeted us in the kitchen. She wore a pink floral housedress, the brassiere strap dangling on her arm. Her own children were long grown and gone from the house. We had the whole house to ourselves, and Aunt Flo.
Flo played with my older sister and I. I mean, she really played with us, as if there were no difference in our ages or imaginations. From a deep bottom drawer filled with costume jewellery, she pulled out the coloured strands of beads, roped these around our necks, and showed us how to dance “the Charleston.”

For lunch, we gorged ourselves on black olives. When our father came to pick us up, I was being sick on the black olives. “What happened to the money I gave you to make them a proper lunch?” Aunt Flo looked flushed and ashamed. She looked like a child being chastised. I wished so much my father would not be so angry with her. It was my first intuition of an odds between one adult and the rest of the grown-up world.

**Solitude**

“Don’t you know your pain is no different than anyone else’s,” my sister said to me, the winter of my separation, after I had made my own first mistake with the likes of an Uncle Ercole—a man just as abusive, although he came polished and wearing a business suit. I am told that, when I laughed at the altar (how this man had hated my laugh), the wedding guests had heard my Aunt Flo. “No one wants to hear you, or don’t you know yet?”

I wanted to tell my older sister then, as I do now: It is not the pain that defines us, but rather our response to it.

**Sun**

I will eat olives. I will eat olives as long as I can, as many as I can get. I will eat them to excess, even if eating them should make me sick. I will allow life to crack me open, so that I can absorb the salt, the sweetness of it. I will risk making them, over and over again, just like my mistakes. I will do this in memory of my godmother, my very own Aunt Flo—è stata schiacciata dalla vita. Cracked, she had been like the olive, but like the olive cured in salt water, had absorbed all the sweetness of life.
Food is much like a John Coltrane or Eric Dolphy free jazz piece that goes “out there” over generations and then returns to a few bars of recognizable themes to punctuate, bring the listener back to ground and rest-on-the-familiar before going off into the stratosphere again. The evolution of Italian food in Canada is like that to an enchanted foreign palate. So much of my experience of South-Central (second wave, ancient order) Italian-Canadian life is rhythmic and cyclical; but speaking more celestially, filled with mobius motion ... the invisible twistings and turnings of fertility; of gender complementarities and rigidity; of evaporation and condensation; of a sun rising triumphantly then setting in soft indigo light; of one ancient man and one ancient woman's myriad sisteme in the garden ... Food then, becomes, in the spontaneous “free” compositions of life, the melodic reference point, the diatonic reliever of chordal tensions, the quiet magnificent within the cacophony and greater magnificences of a living opera that is unique to each Italian-Canadian family. — Glenn Carley on Cucina Casalinga and the Mobius Life

If literature can be delicious take a taste from this smorgasbord of treats, words and food, that will entice you to the entire feast. But be prepared, Italian Canadians At Table is not the literary equivalent of fast food grabbed at the drive-through, pulled into the car and gobbled behind the wheel. The reader of this fare needs to sit and leisurely enjoy. It is food for the mind, full of simple, essential philosophical, spiritual, historical and social truths. It is serious writing about real food but it will often make you quietly laugh the way tasty food
Italian Canadians at Table: A Narrative Feast in Five Courses is a love letter to Italian food culture at its most authentic. The poems, stories, and recollections included in Italian Canadians at Table are an accurate and elegant portrayal of the distinctive place that food holds for all cultures, but particularly for Italians. Food occupies a unique position as something both universal and culturally specific; we all have to eat, even if we don’t go about it in the same way. For Italians, there is a special emphasis on food, on the need to demonstrate generosity, to offer extra servings, to always have something on hand for guests and family alike. For immigrant families, food also serves as an important reminder of the country left behind, as well as the trials of making a home in a new country. Through the generations, the struggles of poverty have turned into the art of simplicity. A family’s entire history can be told through a dish cooked from the heart, with an emphasis on local, seasonal, and quality ingredients. These stories capture that language of food, both from outside of Italian culture and from within it, and convey a range of emotions, disparate and nuanced. Anyone who has been jolted back to childhood memories by a whiff of sautéing garlic will find themselves adding their own associations to the contributors’, sharing in the special magic of food and memory.

Above all, Italian Canadians at Table offers something that is too often forgotten in an age when cookbooks are being replaced by Google searches: heart. The stories and poems selected for the collection, like each recipe selected for a cookbook, have been chosen for their importance to the author, a specific feeling or memory, the most important ingredient in any authentic, home-cooked meal. This collection is sure to be a treat for anyone who has felt the profound connection in passing down a recipe through the family, who has longed to find a place at the table, or even anyone who appreciates the simple perfection of preserving red peppers on an autumn afternoon. — Maria Filice (Author, Food Stylist, Publisher, Food and Fate Publishing)


Giulia De Gasperi: “From Tomatoes to Potatoes: La Bella Marca on Cape Breton Island.” A version of this story was previously published in *Accenti*, issue 22, Spring 2011.


Loretta Di Vita: “An Extra Helping” copyright © 2009 by Loretta Di Vita. A version of this story was originally published in *Panoram Italia Magazine*, Vol. 4 No. 4, Fall 2009 under the title “Mangia, Mangia.”


CREDITS


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