




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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*I dedicate this book to the memory of my late beloved husband,
Jim White, whose passion for life, art, good food and all things Italian
inspires me still, and to my late father, Gary Gatto, the best cook
and raconteur in the family. Mi mancate entrambi.*

— LORETTA GATTO-WHITE



*To my late parents, Antonia and Saverio, and to my husband,
Ercole and our loving family.*

— DELIA DE SANTIS



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Introduction

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 predominantly 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 prosperous 1950s 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



INTRODUCTION

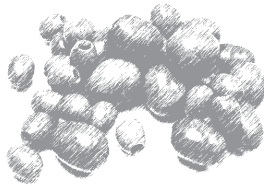
forage in city parks for spring cicoria, and take courses on how to cure and hang our own Berkshire Pork prosciutto in downtown lofts.

In short, Canadians have begun a *risorgimento* of homey, predominantly 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, baccalà, tripe, anchovies, bottarga, 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*





Plump Eggplant

MARISA DE FRANCESCHI

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?

of peppers from their plants, 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.



tomatoes

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.



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.



The Birth and Rebirth of Biscotti

DOSOLINA COTRONEO

O Sole Mio

*Che bella cosa è na jurnata 'e sole
n'aria serena doppo na tempesta!
Pe 'll'aria fresca pare già na festa
Che bella cosa na jurnata 'e sole.*

Ma n'atu sole,

cchiù bello, oje ne'.

O sole mio sta 'nfronte a te!

O sole, o sole mio

sta 'nfronte a te ... sta 'nfronte a te!

—ENRICO CARUSO

FROM THE TIME I learned how to put one foot in front of the other, I remember the meandering aroma of Ma's almond biscotti bright and early on Saturday mornings, with Enrico Caruso's *O Sole Mio* playing in the background. This was considered her only "day off" from the assembly line at the chocolate factory, where she worked alongside other Italian immigrant women. Saturdays were sacred and reserved for baking, cooking, and cleaning. Sundays were dedicated to St. Anthony's Church, where Ma attended every mass from 8:00 a.m. till noon, followed by confession, her rosary group, and finally a quiet but filling family dinner.

My sisters and I always prayed for Ma and her Italian immigrant co-workers, "the teapots" as we called them since they all had the

guage? I hesitate to say “yes.” I admit theirs cannot hold a candle to Ma’s decadent honey almond, hazelnut chocolate, amaretto almond, or apricot almond, but I do enjoy the camaraderie, fellowship and a read through the daily papers. Does Ma approve of her daughter’s participating in such activity? Absolutely not. In her words, “no like” and “I no believe” basically explain how she feels about the biscotti and the hideously outrageous prices of their coffees.

I try not to laugh as I patiently stand in line behind those hipsters and take pleasure in hearing them ever-so carefully and proudly order up their frothy lattes, cappuccinos, or Americanos, feeling almost fluent in our mother-tongue — doppio lungo, grande, and venti.

Watching the young barista feverishly prepare my tall decaf-Americanano with steamed milk, accompanied by Enrico in the background, I cannot help but crack a smile as I think back to my little red thermos filled with half espresso, half hot milk, two shots of sugar, and occasionally one raw beaten egg, (l’ouvo sbatutto). Ma would toss in a honey almond or hazelnut chocolate biscotti or two, and there was my childhood breakfast of champions.



muskoka pasta

DOMENICO CAPILONGO

the backseat a rotini of laughter
as we cut through the parmigiano snow
carving deeper into the winter afternoon
the tortellini moon creeping in the rearview

the power's out in the hotel
we stumble through the cannelloni hallway
like overcooked linguine

the four of us cuddle in the ravioli bed
in lasagna layers of pyjamas
telling stories of minestrone superheroes
until the gnocchi light bulbs pop back on



DOMENICO CAPILONGO

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.



“Pasta is magic, the rest is life”

LORETTA GATTO-WHITE

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

little or no resources.” Or vent their frustrations, exacting a small revenge. As Brunelleschi raised his famous dome over Florence’s Santa Maria del Fiore, a glory to the patriarchal church, an aggrieved Florentine housewife indulged in culinary alchemy, creating a new gnocco of ricotta and spinach for a greedy prelate, baptizing her creation with no small vindication, *strozzapreti* (choke the priest).

Perhaps while a young Leonardo lay atop an Umbrian hill and dreamed of flying like Icarus to the sun, but with better results, in a dark, dank scullery prettily shaped *farfalle*, painstakingly formed as butterflies with carefully crimped edges, pleated and pinched in the centre, floated effortlessly on the cloudy froth atop a pot of boiling water.

While the sinuous Gothic curves of Botticelli’s modest Venus entrance us even today, the heart-warming satisfaction one gets from Bologna’s famous *tortellini in brodo*, its seductive shape inspired by Venus’ navel, is more contenting and accessible.

Where the formal varieties of this very plastic substance are astounding, the arched stone *loggias*, marble columns and pediments of the High Renaissance are rigidly regular; the former is pliable and yields to the artists’ imagination, the latter is impassive and only grudgingly conforms. If the architecture of Tuscany was fashioned from pasta it might look like the mad and delightful structures of Gaudi’s Catalonia.

However, the names and varieties of pasta are equally attributable to creative genius as they are to competitive regionalism or *campanilissimo*, both renowned features of the Italian national character. An exasperated Garibaldi in the quest to unite his fractious countrymen, declared upon liberating Naples in 1860: “It will be *maccheroni*, I swear to you, that will unify Italy.” A prescient insight indeed. Ms. Zanini De Vita encountered this ages old problem in researching her encyclopaedia. Within one town in Lazio, for example, there were several different names for the same pasta, some differences found as close as one neighbourhood block to another. Her conclusion? That the unification of Italy by Garibaldi was a big mistake; instead in her view, it should have been formed as Switzerland was, a confederation of connected states. Oh dear, bankers and cuckoo clocks; where, we ask, is the fun or magic in that?

The magic of pasta resides in its ‘anima,’ the white core of the pasta which ever so gently, resists the eaters’ teeth; too hard, its spirit lies unawakened; too soft it is dead. *Al dente* it is, as the golden-locked Lucrezia Borgia might’ve said, “Just right.” Italians like their food, as well as their conquests, to resist a little before yielding.

In Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a gullible painter is regaled by a tale of the land of Bengodi, where on a golden mountain of Parmesan cheese, its denizens spend all the day making maccheroni and ravioli, to be boiled in a sea of capon broth, then ladled-out freely in as large a quantity as the swiftest and greediest can consume. Oh! to be by the capon-broth sea in Bengodi, sliding giddily through slippery tubes of maccheroni or dreamily floating supine upon a plump pillow of ravioli; what playful bliss.

I defy anyone to eat a bowl of pasta in anger; it can’t be done. One can certainly picture gnawing, stabbing and cutting one’s way, preoccupied by fury, through a porterhouse steak, chicken leg or pork chop, but fury is unimaginable in the gentle dexterity and concentration one needs to encourage slippery strands of tagliatelle around the fork, balancing it delicately to keep them in place on their journey to the patient, waiting mouth. These actions require concentration, and more to the point, do not require the use of any sharp weapon; pasta is a most calming, civilized and peaceful food. It is perhaps no accident then, that it was Italy, in the 11th century that introduced the table fork to the rest of Europe. This civilized utensil was lost on the British though, as they felt it was too effete, preferring to eat with their hands and from their knives until the 18th century.

Its soporific effect is part of its magic too, as anyone who has enjoyed making and consuming a bowl of ‘spaghetti a mezzanotte’ can attest. It was my unfailing ritual upon arriving home after two pasta-less weeks in the Caribbean to make my way to the larder always stocked with extra-virgin olive oil, black *infernata* olives, anchovies, peperoncini, spaghetti and a bottle of Chianti, the essentials for the classic, simple feast of *aglio e olio*.

Over my shoulder, from my position at the stove, I ask my husband, ensconced at the kitchen table, preoccupied with his own homecoming ritual of sorting through the mundane reality that is

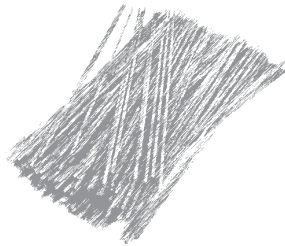
our weeks-old stack of mail: “Do you want some pasta?” to which he reliably mumbles: “Um, no, thanks.” Ignoring his typical reply, I set a bowl at each of our places, pour the wine, and we begin to eat. We sigh and let the oily, golden strands of pasta wend their languorous way down to that final place that is Elysium. This warm, visceral feeling of contentment urges us upstairs to our own familiar bed, to peaceful dreams of Bengodi where we are magically, finally, home.



Spaghetti a mezzanotte;
A symphonic recipe

Whoosh! goes a torrent of cold water into the capacious pot,
Ping! A small handful of *sale grosso* in the bottom
then Click!-Click! on with the heat beneath the pasta pot
and the shallow pan for the sauce.
A few glug-glugs of oil in the pan
followed by a silent sprinkle of hot pepper flakes,
then the sizzle of chopped garlic,
Plonk! in with a scattering of pitted olives,
then the final scraping of the wooden spatula stirring-in a
few anchovies.

Second Course:
Primo





Excerpt from Made Up of Arias

MICHELLE ALFANO

ONCE, A WEALTHY cousin of my father's was to arrive from Palermo, which is forty miles from my parents' village. This cousin, Cristofero, had made his money exporting some of the crops Sicily was famous for: olives, grapes, *fico d'India* and almonds. He was blonde and blue eyed and, Mama felt, inordinately proud of it. He always just happened to mention that his great grandmother was a Northerner from Venice and not a Sicilian.

"Some German *bastardo* raped his grandmother's grandmother and he thinks he's *speciale*," Mama muttered under her breath. She kept rearranging the kitchen chairs as she spoke to my father who was seated there. Later I learned that she meant the Normans who had conquered Sicily at one time but all European blondes were labelled Germans in our household.

"Be quiet," Papa ordered. "He's coming to stay and he's *famiglia* so enough of that kind of talk. Besides what does it matter what colour his hair is?"

"If *we* wanted yellow hair we could get it from a bottle *too*," she said as she angrily wiped and re-wiped the poor kitchen table. "And that peacock of a wife!"

"*Basta!*" My father said. "*È famiglia.*" He's family.

But this didn't stop my mother from complaining unceasingly even as she prepared for their arrival the next day. She was planning a special meal for Cristofero and Yolanda. She got up extra early to make the tomato sauce. She woke me so that I would watch and learn and then be able to "make it for my husband."

“Oh no, I’m not going to get married,” I objected as I dragged a weathered wooden stool near the stove.

“Ah, you say that now — *ma!*”

“No never! And I’ll never have to make sauce.”

“And why not?” She asked fiercely, pulling the ingredients from the cantina.

“C-c-cause,” I stuttered. “Why do I have to learn when I have you?”

“Oh paleeez! Are you to live with me always? *Zittiti* and watch,” she said. So I shut up and watched.

She poured a dab of olive oil into a huge pot and fried several diced cloves of garlic until they were browned.

I wanted to ask Mama something that had long been troubling me.

“Mama, why does Cristoforo have yellow hair if he is Papa’s cousin and we all have dark hair? And why do zia Mariangela and cousin Angela have red hair and freckles?”

Angela and I once found an article about Sicily in *National Geographic*. Angela was waving it around and saying to the rest of the cousins: “What do they think we are? Some special kind of orangutan?” We leafed through the copy and found this caption that seemed to summarize for us the unique situation of Sicily: “Closer to Africa than to Rome” under a map of the island. For Angela, that said it all.

As Mama answered me, she added four bottles of crushed tomatoes that we had prepared and placed in new pop bottles from Diamond Beverages last fall. Then she added two small tins of tomato paste.

“Because we are all children of many different peoples that came to Sicily hundreds and hundreds of years ago.”

“What people?”

“Go get your geography book and I’ll show you.”

I pulled out the black and gold Oxford atlas my father had brought home for me one day. It was printed the year my mother was born in 1935. Its pages were yellowing and turning slightly brittle. Each map was tinted in creamy browns and green for land masses and a pale blue for the oceans and seas. Railway lines were spiky, erratic red lines. The railway line ran along the spine of Italy’s boot and continued on to the island of Sicily and ended in Palermo.

pigeons named after operatic lovers and villains. Alfredo and Violetta, Otello and Desdemona, Rinuccio and Lauretta, Aida and Radames, CioCioSan and Pinkerton, Mimi and Rodolfo and, lastly, Iago. The unlucky Iago, the unpaired male, had been the only one Joey could trap and pluck a few feathers from.

“Christ! He bit me!” Joey screeched.

“Well, how’d you feel if I tried to pluck something offa you?” I said. We both giggled as I took a few nips at his bare arm with my fingers.

We placed the feathers in the small, battered pot in the basement with the pieces of our semi-successful raid. It was the pot Mama cooked snails in. Clara wandered in dragging one of her dolls, which was almost her height, by its orange hair. My sister was wearing one of her original outfits: a yellow dress with plaid pants. No matter how hard we tried or how we cajoled her, she would not wear one without the other so Mama and I resigned ourselves to her three-year-old fashion *faux pas*.

“It kinda feels like that scene outta Macbeth,” Joey said, shivering slightly.

“Yeah, but I want to be the head witch,” I said. “Besides there are three witches and I’m the oldest. I should be the First Witch.”

I opened the libretto from Mama’s copy of Verdi’s *Macbeth* recorded in 1952 at La Scala. Lady Macbeth was, of course, Maria Callas. The box containing the records was a delicate blue with gold lettering and resembled a sacred book in design. I leafed through its pages searching for the scenes with the three witches. Clara shifted uncomfortably. These three-years-olds, I thought, they have no ability to focus!

I read from the opening scene of the three witches in Act One in the libretto where Banco says:

*Favellate a me pur,
se non v'è scuro
Creature fantastiche,
il futuro.*

Speak to me then,
Fantastic creatures,
if the future is not
unknown to you.

“*Fantastiche!*” repeated Clara. She was now chewing on her doll’s hair.

“Not that part! Not the predictions. The scene with the boiling pot,” Joey said.

“Here it is!” I said excitedly. The scene I was looking for was the beginning of Act Three, Scene One in the witches’ cave. I chanted:

<i>Su via! Sollecite</i>	Let us begin. Hurry
<i>giram la pentola.</i>	around the pot.
<i>Mesciamvi in circolo</i>	Mix in a circle
<i>possenti intingoli;</i>	the potent brew;
<i>Sirocchie, all’opera!</i>	Sisters to work!
<i>L’acqua gia fuma!</i>	Already it steams!
<i>Crepitae spuma.</i>	Hisses and foams!

“I ain’t a sister!” Joey fumed.

“Sssshhh! Hmmm, they used a toad and thorns ... a bat. What’s a viper? Blood of an ape, yuck! Don’t listen to this part Clara,” I warned. She dutifully placed her plump hands over her ears. Then I repeated in a whisper: “*Finger of an infant.*”

“That’s disgusting!” Joey said. “Besides those old witches are trying to do *bad* things. We’re trying to do *good* things. Let’s make up our own.”

“I give you fea-ther of an-gels,” I intoned solemnly and cackled once for good measure.

Next came the stars of pasta. “Primo or Lancia?” Joey asked as he held up both packages.

“Primo!” Clara blurted out. She liked the colours of the package, she said.

“I give you pieces of staaaars,” Joey sang in his best operatic voice and added the *stelle*.

“I give you fruuiuuits of the earth,” I chanted, throwing in pieces of every kind of fruit we could muster: watermelon, cherries, grapes from the backyard, berries from nearby trees and bushes as well as peaches from our zio’s backyard. Clara draped a cherry with two stems over her left ear.

“I give you water from the moooooon,” Joey chanted and poured a small bucket full of clean rainwater, trying to remove the small, stray twigs that we saw floating.



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.

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.



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