

Love Italy

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Extract

Introduction

Growing up in an Italian family in the suburbs of Melbourne, I remember the vegetable garden and fruit trees being an essential part of our household. My father was a great chef and an avid gardener. On Sundays, we children would spend hours with him, helping to tend the tomatoes, broad beans and zucchini. There were countless jobs to do, but to us it was fun and exciting. When 1pm came around, it was time to sit down and eat, and this was always a welcome break. My mother would prepare a feast, with much of the produce plucked straight from the soil. And so began my love for food and especially homegrown produce . . .

We ate according to the season and the time of year. In many cases, religious holidays became intrinsically linked to certain dishes, such as spaghetti with calamari ragù on Good Friday, which we still have now. Making passata for the winter was a ritual that involved a gruelling day of work. We toiled in the yard in the sun and the filled bottles were sterilised in an old drum. Having people over to the house whatever the occasion meant there was always cooking to do. Lots of cooking!

I knew our school lunches weren't like those of the other kids and that our family behaved a little differently when it came to food and eating, but I never really thought beyond this. However, as I grew up I began to notice that we weren't the only 'different' ones, and that Melbourne was made up of many cultures. When I started to work in professional kitchens with my father, I became more aware of this diversity. I became intrigued by different cultures and even tried to learn odd words in other people's languages so that I could break the ice! The more I discovered, the more I wanted to know. I got hold of as many cookbooks as I could and consumed them. I loved talking to people about their food traditions, and found that as I asked questions, they became passionate about the subject and happily told me more.

When I travelled to Italy for the first time, I had served three years of my cooking apprenticeship and was eighteen years old. It was on this trip that I started to appreciate just how rich my cultural heritage was. I had always been proud of my background, but this was my first connection with the land itself and I loved it. I was completely hooked and over the following years I travelled to various different parts of Italy, discovering the people and their foods, traditions and regional diversity.

My cultural background heavily influences the food I cook in my restaurants. Regardless of whether the recipes are rustic and simple or more sophisticated, I want there always to be a thread back through time that connects to that heritage. And as a chef, the connection with produce that was instilled in me as a child has become one of my greatest assets. I know instinctively that an understanding of what you buy or source gives you respect for your ingredients. This in turn obliges you to take greater care in the preparation and cooking, inevitably yielding better results.

For a long time now, I have thought of Italy as a country made up of different ingredients rather than towns and villages! And so the idea for this book evolved. I chose the food and wine that I most wanted to see being produced and started to map an epic journey through Italy. We – a small team including photographer Mark Chew, publisher Julie Gibbs, my daughter, Loredana, and our driver, Marco Vigarelli – would travel from Piedmont to Sicily, covering some of Italy's most important food regions. There we



would meet true artisan producers who were passionate and knowledgeable about their ingredients, and experience the varied gastronomic wonders of this beautiful country. We would mostly stay in *agriturismi*, farmhouse accommodation where we would spend time with the producers and sample the ingredients grown or made there.

With the help of the wonderful Slow Food organization (founded in Piedmont in 1986 to celebrate the pleasures of good food and help preserve traditional ingredients and processes – see slowfood.com), a detailed plan began to take shape. Many ingredients on my wish list were Slow Food *presidia*, unique food products at risk of extinction, but now protected and promoted by the organisation. Slow Food put us in touch with many of these passionate producers and advocates of artisan ingredients.

The resulting experience was all I could have hoped for and more. I met the most amazing people, and formed friendships that will last a lifetime. Through them, I discovered a country filled with flavour, passion and quality, where tradition is respected but creativity is not stifled. A country where young people three generations into the family business wear their work as a badge of honour, and are hugely proud to maintain the ancient traditions of their forebears. And the generosity we experienced was overwhelming. We left each producer with not only fantastic memories but almost always a van filled with produce – at one point we all smelled of truffles and salami! We sampled some of the most exquisite food in the country, from the rustic to the extremely refined.

Working on this book has made me more aware of my heritage and has truly put me more in touch with the food of Italy than ever before. I hope that you too will enjoy meeting the warm and wonderful characters who grow and produce this food, immersing yourself in the breathtaking landscape, learning about classic Italian ingredients and discovering some lesser-known but no less delicious ones. Most of all, I hope you find the journey as inspiring as I did.

Love Italy – you will never regret it!