

Silvia's Cucina

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Extract

Introduction

My Italian identity

Growing up in Italy in a family of natural home cooks, I very quickly developed an interest in culinary matters, but it was only when I was in my early twenties and touring Italy with theatre shows that I saw first hand the vast regional diversity of my country, from dialects, politics and religion, to the very core of our national identity: our food.

It became clear to me that there was no such thing as one distinctive Cucina Italiana (Italian cuisine). It is proudly regional cuisine, always characterised by its relationship to its immediate environment. For this reason an Italian would never order risotto in the south of Italy – rice doesn't grow there! Nor would an Italian choose seafood more than a stone's throw inland from the coast. There is a deep understanding of the importance of freshness, locality and seasonality, all mixed in with a strong sense of regional pride.

My nonna's *sagne a pezze*, an Abruzzese classic of hand-cut pasta squares, goes by the name of *maltagliati* in the neighbouring Marche region, and *straccetti* if you venture west towards the Tyrrhenian coast. Even the type of flour and the presence, or absence, of eggs can be subject to regional preference and tradition.

To further complicate matters, the recipes, preparation and consumption of food vary, not simply from region to region, but from village to village, and from family to family.

And each difference is not to be taken lightly.

Proud Italian home cooks safeguard their culture with the same vigour that they forage for wild truffles in September, or slaughter a pig in January! Every family's distinctive recipes are passed on to relatives as a most treasured dowry, generally by the *mammas* and the *nonnas*.

The cooking styles of my two nonnas couldn't have been more different.

Nonna Pina, my father's mum, was from Emilia Romagna, the culinary epicentre of Italy and birthplace of national treasures such as *parmigiano*, *tortellini* and *prosciutto di Parma*. Her food was opulent and her attitude towards it intrinsically epicurean: enjoy it now, while you can – in large portions! She holds a dear place in our hearts for the million *ravioli di brasato* (ravioli filled with slow-cooked meat), *arrosto di vitello* (roast veal) and *gnocchi al ragu* (potato gnocchi with traditional bolognese sauce) she handcrafted for us over the years.

Sadly, Nonna Pina fell ill and died when I was too young to realise I had missed out on her invaluable gastronomic inheritance. To this day, I am yet to taste a filling for ravioli as perfect as hers.

Nonna Irene, my maternal grandmother, was from a remote rural area in the mountains of Abruzzo, and her cooking reflected the character and riches of a territory where imposing rocky mountains are populated by Marsican bears, wolves and wild chamois. The soil is lush and the produce abundant, from piquant extra virgin olive oil to crimson saffron and bittersweet honey.



In the late fifties, she, Nonno Domenico and their two young daughters moved to Milan out of financial necessity, but Nonna's cooking always held the honest, unfussy traditions of her origins. Embedded in it were the secrets of generations of Abruzzese women, whose hands were forever at work – rolling, slicing, kneading, making do with what was available.

When she got sick, in the late nineties, I asked her to pass that knowledge on to me and, contrary to the belief that Italian home cooks take their secrets to the grave, she eagerly obliged. I spent many happy days in her kitchen in Milan, covered in flour and splattered with tomato sauce, and the first thing I learnt was that she never measured anything! She would merely say 'add some . . .' and I would duly ask how much, and she'd say, 'just enough.' 'How do you know when enough is enough, Nonna?' 'Well, you just do!' she'd reply.

And with those few words she was already imparting the most valuable skill of Italian cooking, common to all regions and family traditions: let your senses and your instinct be your guide.

And so, over the years, I have done just that. I've kneaded, beaten, rolled, chopped and pounded and, although life has taken me 14 000 kilometres away from my homeland, I feel I have found my authentic Italian identity in my Sydney kitchen.

Since moving to Australia, I have come to learn how loved and appreciated Italian food is, but I have also realised that it is often perceived as very rich and somewhat unhealthy: food to be indulged in very occasionally, and then with some caution. This is because too often the dish you order at your local Italian is drowning in olive oil, rich tomato sauce or creamy white sauces (sometimes all three!). This style of cooking is a hangover from a bygone era, when Italian food was tinkered with to give it broader appeal to a generation of diners raised on meat and three veg. The favoured shortcut was of course to add more sugar, salt and fat.

I am striving to change this misapprehension by showing how to cook healthy Italian food. For although the Mediterranean diet allows the occasional indulgence in rich and festive foods, people are amazed to learn just how little fat is required in everyday Italian cooking. They are also surprised to know that not every plate has garlic. Nor does it have to be dusted in parmigiano and black pepper . . .

Silvia's Cucina is meant to be a practical user's guide, in which stories and family anecdotes provide a context, a deeper contemplation of the place food has in our lives – its connection with those who came before us and those who will follow. I have a treasure trove of recipes for antipasto, pasta, meats, vegetables, dolci, and of course those delicious nibbles we call stuzzichini to enjoy with a drink – I am, after all, Milanese! The hardest part was choosing only eighty to share with you in this book. My aim is to offer you an authentic, uncompromised Italian culinary heritage: mine. But most of all, I want you to cook these recipes, and I want them all to work perfectly.