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## Close to the Source

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Close to the Source

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing- Literary Nonfiction

By

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B.A. Sonoma State University, CA 2001

December 17, 2011

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## Abstract

*Close to the Source* is comprised of a series of nonfiction vignettes about the artisan, agricultural, and culinary methods of Italy. In *Close to the Source* the human relationship with nature, food, and art is reexamined while a series of rich characters help bring the material to life. Through interviews, research, and first-hand experiences, the author attempts to archive fading artisan and food-related techniques and rituals. In the process, a cultural critique about the importance of the practical arts in contemporary times emerges. The thesis contains four sections: *Terra/Land*; *Art and Artisans*; *Pane/Bread*; and *Compagnia/Company*.

Artisan and Culinary Traditions, Italy, Literary Journalism, Nonfiction, Travel

## Introduction

Some years ago, I jumped on an airplane to take my turn as an innocent abroad. I was lucky because, while I fell in plenty of rough spots, I ultimately landed in the thick of something old and sound. What caught me was a tradition, a sort of formula for daily life that put me on whole new terms with nature, with art, and with people.

I first entered Italy by train from Austria in 1999. My backpack thrashed from a month of pure travel, the back of my neck sticky from the heat. My right shoelace was split in two and only laced up half of my boot and the last bath I'd had was a dip in the Innsbruck River a day or two before. I considered the blisters on my feet proud battle scars of the vigorous month.

I was taking advantage of a budget-traveling trick a friend taught me that consisted of packing a few cucumbers and slicing off little pieces with a knife for snacks when on the move. It's not that filling, but it's cheap and extremely refreshing in those hot trains, especially when your water's gone lukewarm.

As the train slid into the foothills, it acquired more passengers at each station, launching what would be my first of many bouts of Italian claustrophobia. I had seen a documentary of Woody Allen on a speaking tour of Italy, I had a flash of him saying to the crowds that inched in around him, "Stand back, stand back, I need space, I'm clawah-stra-phobic here!" as he was about to be ushered out of a Bologna auditorium. He wasn't kidding.

A packed, non air-conditioned smoking car full of sweaty, vocal summer travelers

made the ride nearly unbearable. At least I had a seat. That is, until heavily eye-lined eyes glared me out of my non-reserved spot after a battering of foreign language fell on my ears. I was forced into the aisle to sit on top of my bag along with a row of others in that narrow place between the seating compartments and the sticky windows.

“How am I going to spend the next year in this country?” I thought dismally. My study abroad program was set to start the following week. Two photographs caused me to write Italy in careful lettering as my number one choice on the study abroad form. I had no idea that Americans were entering their Tuscan-mania phase and that I would be but one of many.

The first photo of Italy was a picture of the Sistine Chapel ceiling that I found in a newspaper at around age fourteen and have kept ever since. I hung it on my wall, contemplating Michelangelo at work, the paint dripping in his eyes, as the article next to it had said. The other picture I acquired later on, at around 18. It was a black and white photo from some magazine of a small group of hip-looking teenagers and twenty-somethings sitting on an old well in a town square, hanging out. They occupied the space so smugly and gracefully, perched on top of that marble well. I wanted to be there, dressed in dark colors, confident and pensive.

Fantasies of sketching in high-ceilinged museums or lying on the ground in the Sistine Chapel or sitting smugly in those squares were drowned in a loud fog of smoke and sweat. Mourning the alpine breezes of Austria, I opened the little window and tried to take in some air.

Then a saving grace appeared, the first of many that would turn my one year into two, followed by frequent, long visits in the years since: Trees everywhere, branches heavy with ripe mid-August fruits. Plums and peaches so plentiful and so full and round,

it looked as though they would burst out of their sun-baked skins.

The train passed hundreds of small *ortos*, or vegetable gardens and fields of grain, recently cut and sent off for milling. Olive groves spread over hills, the undersides of their leaves a silver-green that flickered in the sunlight. All looked carefully tended and groomed. It is not unlike a scene from where I grew up in California, but the feel was more intimate and nurtured. Occasionally, I saw figures leaning over, working in gardens or on fields and realized that most of them had gray or white hair.

In the following years, I'd learn that the dialogue between the cultivators and the land is imbued with centuries of folk wisdom and common sense. It is part of a long, continuous rapport between humans and the earth. Also, the food tradition holds the power to acquaint the palette with nature in ways I never knew possible.

At that point, my life's meal history could easily have been played out to the tune of an eighties pop song. I grew up like many people in the U.S. who live at a significant psychological and often physical distance from their food sources. We were happy Safeway kids. So what if our oranges traveled along a giant stretch of highway from Florida to arrive on a California or Connecticut breakfast plate? Rituals surrounding food except for the good old Thanksgiving turkey were hardly given much attention. So what if the act of drizzling honey on toast is reminiscent of ancient Greek rituals? Ancient rituals, who cares? Those tomatoes spent three days on the highway? I won't even begin to ask where Oreos come from. We have other things to think about.

My well meaning, hardworking parents came to California from New York City. They bought a house half a block from a Safeway and our culinary life growing up was pretty good. My dad thoroughly enjoyed a hearty meal and my mom is a great cook. We

didn't lack anything. But we didn't have a culinary history to draw from. College, about an hour's drive away, was about frozen chicken nuggets and chocolate milk or In and Out Burger, Top Ramen and the closest thing to real grub, El Farolito, a Mexican place. Food: It's there, it's convenient, not much to get worked up over.

With the current failing economy and the suffering environment, it seems that food consciousness is on the rise. People want to stretch their dollars and potato sacks as far as they can go. Many are also being alerted to the role of the food industry in the destruction of the environment. The obesity epidemic and the surge of diabetes in the U.S. are alarming reminders that something is awfully awry.

To tackle these problems, gardens are sprouting up in neighborhoods in Detroit, New York, New Orleans, and other cities. Several schools are incorporating garden programs. Neighbors are trying to build a sense of community that unites them, allows them to save money on food, and limits their environmental impact. In the process, they're not only expressing civic responsibility, but they're reviving something fundamental by enhancing their connection to the earth and one another. Perhaps we should draw upon the wisdom of Italians who have had a rich, unbroken food and artisan tradition for hundreds of years to guide us.

The rituals around food, the act of cultivating it, and the art of making it taste good create bonds among people, and meals are most definitely an integral part of the country's social glue.

Eating at tables topped with bottles of oil, bread and salt just a stone's throw from where they came eventually gave me a new appreciation for simple things. For the first time, I became aware that an act as simple as picking a few sprigs of mint from the



ground for an afternoon dessert connected me to a system, a way of life that had been intact for so long.

Not to say that Italy is without its problems in other areas, and plenty of them. The dark side of the country is powerful. After some time there, the pastoral images of well-kept land lost some of their magic. The seediness of the city train stations make you constantly look over your shoulder. More than one sneaky thief weaseled his fingers into my backpack or jacket pocket. On the streets, visual attacks of pointy snakeskin boots, exaggerated sunglasses, and piles of cheesy, flashy merchandise made me want to put on a black turtleneck and brood over a glass of vodka in a sterile room of the former Soviet Block. As I learned the language, headlines about *mafioso* dealings, convoluted government affairs, sexist officials, and suspicious money became a part of daily or at least weekly news.

Michelangelo's heroic figures almost lost their luster when I found out some of my new friends' fathers were either in jail or in hiding in the South for reasons not discussed. The sea surrounding Naples lost plenty of glimmer when some friends and I walked through a two-foot-deep bed of garbage to catch a taxi from the train station. Then I listened to the driver gush over me, the "*ragazza Americana solare*," the "sunny American girl" before he slammed me with three times the normal taxi fare.

That said, a little shine to Michelangelo's statues or not, they are always Michelangelos and something graceful and priceless endures. Likewise, the food tradition is absolutely worth revering, which is why it's been written of and celebrated again and again. Even if, at the worst times, food seems to be the singular saving grace in the throes of chaos and corruption.

In Italy, through it all, you can get a renewed sense of the staples for a good life. After studying and being seduced by the place for a year, then working and living in a stunning spot on top of a hill in Florence with artists for another, I left on Italy for a while. I returned home until it came back to me.

“Watch out, Meghan, Machiavelli was Italian.” This was my father’s warning when I brought Filippo, my eventual husband, home. I had just about given up on Italy (and definitely on Italian men) when I met him in California, just a few years after my initial two-year study/ work stint there. F’s friends loved my dad’s comment and sometimes refer to him as “Machiavelli.” Married to Machiavelli, the Italian adventure kicked into a different gear. I was officially tied to the place now, for better or worse, in sickness and in health.

The following is a series of vignettes. They are drawn from three different periods: 1) The first year as an international student and the introduction to the natural table through my friend Rossana and her family; 2) Life as a student-worker and lodger at the legendary Erta Canina, a house for artists and travelers in Florence; 3) My years with Filippo’s parents and friends in Arezzo, a town between Florence and Rome.

As I chipped away at the language barrier, blinked and drooled in front of works of art, made some friends, and took a seat at many an Italian dinner table, I’d get hooked on the place. I settled into a pattern that was centered on food and enriched by art.

## **Terra/ Land**

“You must pick the green beans before the sun takes the dew off of them.” - Riccardo

## **Persimmon**

I never thought much about persimmons until I got whacked in the face with one. Then, they commanded my attention. Now I recognize how persimmon trees create some of the best images of late fall. Spiky, leafless branches shoot out of black trunks, covered with strings of orange persimmons. The bleak branches contrast with the bright fruit in a last hurrah of the season, just before winter completely takes over. The fruit is electric and unapologetic as it clings to death.

The trees remind me of retirees who have a blast of rejuvenation towards the end of life when they find themselves without demanding jobs or families to care for, full of energy and gusto.

The first place I rented, my initial year in Florence, was a room on a side street in the neighborhood opposite the Arno river, removed from most of the monuments and attractions. It was a modest bedroom in a home with creaky doors, run by a petite woman who rented out the spare rooms in her house to international students.

Sofia's stringy gray and black hair hung past her shoulders. She almost always wore carefully pressed white blouses with gray skirts. All of her ironing was done in a room that was crowded with empty handmade birdhouses, collected by her eccentric husband who was often out traveling. Folded socks with ruffles topped the Converse tennis shoes on her feet. Her laugh and walk were girlish, though she was in her sixties.

Her only son had heroin problems and was in a rehabilitation center outside of town. Four dead bolts were on their front door from when he had lived with her. She had been forced to lock him in so he didn't go find his drug friends. Regardless of her troubles, she was quick to laugh, and kind.

There was an actual birdcage in use next to the telephone. Rebecca, the parrot, lived next to the phone and pronounced "*pronto pronto*" in a scratchy voice whenever the phone rang. She would say her own name, "Rebecca Rebecca" while we were at the dinner table, just to remind us to feed her too.

From the table, I could look up at the high ceilings and see faded family crests painted on the wall beneath the wooden rafters. In previous centuries, the space that made up Sylvia's kitchen, dining room and sitting room had been stables for Florentine horsemen. The family crests were painted every five feet or so, to indicate which

horseman parked his horse where, once upon a time.

When the stables were converted into a home, the east side of the room was covered in windows that opened into a yard with a cement sitting area. In the yard there was a well covered with a jagged slab of marble, and four or five trees including a big persimmon tree. High, ivy-covered walls blocked out the sunlight in the closed space.

One overcast afternoon in November, as I was studying at the kitchen table, I dropped my pen and ran over to the window. Sofia abandoned her newspaper on the couch. A giant flock of blackbirds, possibly starlings or black sparrows, had suddenly descended on the back yard, intending to use it as a rest stop. They alighted on the walls and trees, including the persimmon tree, in a stormed pack. There must have been over a hundred of them. We stood, hushed and anxious at the window, for the twenty whole seconds they paused. They stopped in unison, some poked their heads at the persimmons for a few seconds, but they were mostly too alert to the synchronicity of the flock to stop and eat. Then one swept up and the whole flock stole away. Sofia clapped her hands together and laughed. "I wondered if they would come this year," she exclaimed.

Black birds had been arriving one by one throughout the fall to tear apart the skin of the persimmons and feast on the pulpy insides. Some of the persimmons had fallen on the ground in a messy pile, but many were still on the trees. Sofia's house had been part of their migration path for a long time though they had missed a few years here and there.

Later that week, it started to rain heavily. Stir crazy from being indoors one night, two friends, one Italian and one American and I, decided to go outside in the rain and collect persimmons. I stood on a chair with a long umbrella and shook the branches the best I could, hoping lightening wouldn't strike. The rain cooled my cheeks and threatened to make the chair too slippery for me. The two of them ran to catch the fruit before it

landed on the ground. They both had long hair, Hillary bright henna-red and Rossana, dark locks that reached her waist. It's the same color combination as the tree, now that I think about it.

As I shook the branches, they ran in a busy clutter around me, fumbling and laughing while trying to catch the fruit. I started shaking the branch more furiously to make it more difficult for them, when the one of them pelted me in the face with a persimmon. I'd never actually tasted one at that point, so my real introduction was a fine whack on the cheek. I jumped off the chair and threw one at Hillary. Rossana started to come to my assistance, but I couldn't resist crushing one on her forehead as she smeared my forearms with another one.

We were a rain soaked, exhilarant, persimmon-covered mess when we opened the back door (another creaky one) and delivered the intact orange fruit in a bucket on the table. Sofia came in. She laughed at the scene and quoted a French book, saying something to the effect of young women coming into their own. It was then that we took the time to wash up, and to taste the fruit.

Persimmons are soft and sweet, like a light marmalade. They should be eaten when ripe to avoid a rubbery overload of tannins. When they are just right, the pulp itself tastes like the marmalade of that evening. If the persimmons aren't ripe enough, an apple thrown in the midst of them for a day or two will do the trick. Apples have a ripening effect on a lot of fruit. Many people eat persimmons as they are, or make jam out of them.

Of Chinese origin, but also found in Greece, Persimmons where they were known as *Diospiros*, breath of the Gods. The tree was introduced into Italy in the 1870's and they've been quite popular ever since.

Sophia's son would escape from the rehabilitation center weeks later. He would spend a few nights on the streets and she would send us out on bicycles to search for him. A neighbor found him, dragged in off the street and dragged him back to the "stable" like a dishonored, war-torn horseman.

She would reinforce the deadbolts, all four of them, and devote most of her attention to him. Many of the international students would leave her home because of his belligerence, not to mention the uneasiness of being locked in themselves. We, in fact, disappeared almost in unison, about as suddenly as the flock of birds.

## **Dew**

Riccardo and Gemma live in the house that has belonged to their family for over 200 years. It's about thirty miles outside of Florence. Riccardo grew up working the vineyard and the vegetable garden with his parents and grandparents, but now works as a mechanic. The fields are still tended by his elderly father, mother, and other family members when they're not working their regular jobs. The vines and groves retain much of the luster they've always had, though a new section of unattractive apartment buildings has recently been built next to them.

Their kitchen has a high ceiling and a simple brick fireplace and stove. Gemma's round cheeks were flushed from leaning over the heat. After rolling green



beans, zucchini, zucchini flowers, tomatoes, and bell pepper in a light batter of flour and salt and *acqua frizzante*, she dropped them into a pan to fry. When the dish was at the desired point of doneness she placed the huge *frittura*--a pile of fried vegetables--on the table.

After the first course was cleared away and we focused on the *frittura*, I asked them how much of the meal actually came from their property. “Oh, I picked all the vegetables this morning,” Riccardo said. “I was out there before dawn. You must pick green beans before the sun takes the dew off of them.”

“They keep the most *sapore*, flavor, that way. They’re nice and crisp and moist at that hour. You can tell if something has been picked that day or if it’s been sitting around for three or four days. Even on the second or third day, much of the flavor disappears. The goal when we eat is to remain as true as possible to the flavor that the fields or trees create.”

Giving spoons a metaphorical slant, revolutionizing the pine nut—Rossana was my real introduction to this whole world. Before I set foot in Italy, she picked up a spoon in a cafe in California and spoke in pictures. With a few short words, she managed to cut short a whole conversation between a few college students, myself included, who were wondering what to do with their lives. In careful English she said, “Just pick one thing,” like this she said, holding up the teaspoon with command, “*and do it.*” I liked how she took all the stress and fuss out of it.

It was one of the first times we had talked. I had signed up to go to Italy for a year and I had heard about this Italian exchange student with super-long hair who got down and touched the shag carpet at a recent party because she had never seen carpet before. We became fast friends. I was shocked when her shy, cautious demeanor fell away the

night I took her to sing at open mike night at The Inn of the Beginning, the music venue I worked in. She was thrilled because Janis Joplin had once played there.

Rossana got up there and sang, *a cappella*, a song by Lucio Battisti, followed by “Amazing Grace.” Her voice was so powerful that it seemed the sound waves could break the windows. It filled the room and spilled into the streets and soon people were drawn in from outside. They watched in awe as she sang “Amazing Grace.”

She was enthralled by the music world in America and at the same time felt the need to lift all those heavy centuries of family tradition off her back. She said it weighed on her “like stone.” So we went to concerts, to parties, to the coast, and even to wide-open spaces like Yosemite. Meanwhile, I was trying to find some sort of narrative or history to participate in. At the time my life felt open, disconnected, unfocused. Although we seemed to be seeking opposite experiences, we managed to help each other find them.

The next year it was my turn to be the foreigner in her country. One of the first of many times I was invited to dinner, I witnessed a pine nut tasting at which Rossana and her father debated the virtues of pine nuts from two different regions. They took miniscule bites and let the nuts rest on their tongues for what seemed like ages. At that point, my taste buds mostly knew the difference between Fritos and Doritos.

The aim in all the cooking in their house is to be true to the flavor that the earth produces. The simple maxim that less is more applies here and those words explain why some Italians visit the morning fruit markets daily or why chopped up cucumber with just a little salt and oil is considered a perfectly decent salad. Apparently most of the other vegetables in the *frittura*--zucchini, zucchini flowers and tomatoes--had been picked early that morning as well.

We enjoyed the delicate golden crust on the *frittura* with the healthy, almost raw vegetables in the middle. The exciting prospect of dew as a flavor enhancer made the meal more thought-provoking.

Alongside some wine, there is also cloudy green oil in a bottle. With a little scrap of saltless bread, they teach me to “taste the green.”

## Olive

We sat in an olive grove at the top of Via Erta Canina. I rented a room in the former servants’ quarters of a villa with other travelers, students, and artists. Our quarters were detached from the main house, but we shared a green hillside that overlooks the city of Florence. To get there from the center of town, one must do the following:

1. Note the use of Roman letters & Arab numbers in these directions. Both are civilizations that depended on olives.
2. Leave the madness of the Florentine tourist center where olive oil moistened just about everything you ate at lunch.
3. Pass the Bargello Museum where marble statues of Athena (known as Minerva to the Romans) reside. Athena, Goddess of wisdom, crafts, and the olive tree, which was prized more than any other staple of Greek civilization. As the story goes:

(on a scroll)

((=====)))

Athena competed to become patron of Athens against her brother, Poseidon. They were asked by the citizens of the city to offer the best possible gift for the people. Poseidon struck the Acropolis, with his trident. A saltwater spring flowed forth. Athena then touched the Acropolis with her spear, and an olive tree sprang forth.

The people decided that the goddess's gift of "liquid gold"(in Homer's words) was more valuable and she became their patron.

((=====)))

4. Cross *Ponte all Grazie* Bridge which was rebuilt since the original was bombed by the Germans during World War II. (Don't Germans eat a lot of butter?)

5. Exit the city walls through the *Porta San Miniato*, through which Michelangelo once transported marble from *Carrara* when he wasn't eating olive products or working by the flame of an oil-powered lamp.

6. Climb up a jagged former ox cart road called *Via Erta Canina* which cuts through the *oliveto* (olive grove) just beyond the city walls. Olive branches, an international symbol of peace, will surround you.

*“I come bearing an olive branch in one hand, and the freedom fighter's gun in the other. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand,”* Yasser Arafat.

7. Walk through the green door at number 56 and on down a corridor, the mouth of a giant hillside garden awaits.

*“And for the entering of the oracle he made doors of olive tree: the lintel and side posts were a fifth part of the wall.”*

-Bible, Kings 6:31

I'm not really sure how I got lucky enough to live there for a year and haven't found a comparable place to live yet.

Winter threatened the land. Early afternoon hung heavy and gray on the olive grove. The grasses were green from November rain and soft enough to stretch out on, but brown decay was beginning to eat away at the blades. The black soil beneath would soon trespass the comfortable green in a thick sludge. Fruit was gone from most of the orchard trees down the slope. Bare branches were beginning to show. The night was nearer than I'd have liked. All was quiet and barren except for heaps of healthy olives weighing heavily on their branches.

A friend from the U.S. was visiting. We sat on the grass and gazed at the city and drank hot orange tea. The orchard flowed down the hill and ended at the city wall on one side. From our hillside perch we could see the tiled roofs and round monumental

buildings. The brown trail of the Arno was lined with roof shingles. The olive trees encircled us, their phantom-like trunks hovering like a crowd of cranky munchkins. They had thrown out this year's goods and stood top heavy as some of the limbs inched towards the ground.

My friend, a history and archeology major and I, an art history and language arts major began to geek out on the history of the fruit. Hadn't olives and their oil been so traded, so used, and so essential to the economies of the Middle East, Greece, and Rome as to be responsible for civilization? Athena made her promise of peace with its limbs; countless lamps have burned on their oil. The economies of the Romans, Greeks, and the inhabitants of early Fertile Crescent civilizations were fueled by it. Bodies have been nourished and healed, bread has been softened.

*A taste older than meat, older than wine.  
A taste as old as cold water.  
Only the sea itself seems as ancient a  
part of the region as the olive and its oil that like  
no other products of nature, have shaped  
civilizations from remotest antiquity to the present.  
-Lawrence Durrell, Prospero's Cell*

In more ways than we could fathom, the olive was responsible for the two of us twenty-something women and the way we thrived in Western Civilization. We were post-orthodonture (a mark of an evolved society—olive oil was a lubricant during the industrial revolution) with a healthy sense of competition, stamped up Euro-rail passes, and a basic grasp of the Roman alphabet. We couldn't just sit idly on the grass like lazy foreigners and watch the fruit rot on the branches as we sat idly on the grass. We drew up our scheme as the tea went from hot to tepid.

We would shake the branches and then we would gather. Afterwards, we would figure out what to do with the ripe green olives: currently we hadn't a clue. I brought our empty mugs indoors and grabbed some plastic sacks. We spent the rest of the short afternoon until after twilight *racogliendo* or picking olives.

It was harder than I thought. We seemed to manage climbing better than shaking the branches. So we climbed. We picked one by one.

I let my sweatshirt slip to the ground as my t-shirt became damp with sweat. I resisted the urge to call it quits. I learned to trust the branches, stronger than they seemed, to hold me up. Maybe it was the American in us that made us quietly compete. We picked swiftly, each eyeing the stash of the other. We pretended not to tire. The sky turned a purple hue as my bags became heavy and knotted and dropped to the ground. Shouldn't we know how to use the olives? Yes, but we didn't.

*Always observe how ephemeral and worthless human things are. Pass then through this little space of time conformably to nature, and end thy journey in content, just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thanking the tree on which it grew. -Marcus Aurelius*

As we dragged our stuffed sacks back inside the house, we knew we were going to have to find friends to ask about olive preparation. As it happened, we found my Spanish roommate and a southern Italian friend hanging out in the living room, and they had some quick answers. With no second thoughts and no doubts, the southern Italian gave us her solution in a “God-we-have-to-teach-these-Americans-everything tone.”

1. Pit them. We heaved the bags up on our long wooden table and cracked open a bottle of wine.

*“Wine within oil without.”* -A Roman saying (that refers to the practice of putting oil on skin.)

We grabbed some chopping boards and between sips, we slammed the sturdier, larger glasses down on our olives to remove the pit. The loud rhythmic pounding fell more and more in sync. Our hands were black when we finished.

2. Soak them. Olives straight from the tree are too bitter to eat--soaking them in water or salt water extracts the bitterness.

*“Happiness is finding two olives in your martini when you're hungry.”*

.-Johnny Carson

We filled a large bowl and put it under the window with cloth over it.

3. Change the water every day for a week to ten days. Unaccustomed to curing our food, we reminded each other to replenish the water each day.

*“Olive oil ... asparagus ... if your mother wasn't so fancy, we could shop at the gas station like normal people.”*

-Homer Simpson

4. Season. We made two batches, the first on the Spanish suggestion of using lemon, rosemary, and sea salt. The citrus lay lightly on the olive and enhanced its subtle taste. The second with the southern Italian version of fennel seeds, raw garlic, and a touch of *pepperoncino*—crushed red pepper.

*“The olive tree is surely the richest gift of heaven. “*

-Thomas Jefferson



*Luna Calante, Luna Crescente, Luna Silente*

**Waning Moon, Waxing Moon, Dark Moon**

*The moon “replenishes the earth; when she approaches it, she fills all bodies, while, when she recedes, she empties them. -Pliny the Elder*

On the night drive with friends out to the *Casentino* countryside, I spot a fox. A quick flash of amber fur and a blazing set of eyes. According to my college literature professor, through the short story “The Fox” D.H. Lawrence sent the animal-self rumbling into British writing after eras of disassociation with natural and sexual urges. My professor declared that the appearance of Lawrence’s fox on a farm represents the return of the animal in the human psyche. Not that it ever disappeared, though it was muffled by reason and society and manners. The characters on Lawrence’s farm become deeply unsettled and violent as the fox lurks around. They thought they were in control, but they discover that the animal within them is actually in charge.

The sighting of a fox in this area was, in my own mythology, a nod to the great Lawrence. He explored these parts and wrote about the sensual honesty of the Etruscans in his “Etruscan Places.” Their “pagan” exuberance seemed as natural as the sun on the grass to him. The Etruscans exhibit a joy and easiness in their art and tombs that reveals their unforced relish for life.

Lawrence’s reverence for the Etruscans includes their celebration of the fox

within, so to speak. They seemed to joyfully succumb to natural powers without attempting to conquer, repress, and control them. Just as the emergence of the fox signaled to the power of natural forces beyond our control, I was to about to discover a natural force that people obey whether they know it or not: *la luna*.

Our destination was a party that took place in a small gathering of houses from the 1700s to 1800s. The five of us got out of the car to see that we were not quite in a village, though there were more than a few houses. The houses seemed to be a cooperative cluster that was perhaps built for an extended family. Some were dilapidated and crumbling, others were holding up well. All but one seemed dark and deserted. And that one house was hoppin', entirely lit up, people spilling out into the driveway and onto the second-story terrace while hushed fields loomed in the distance.

Inside, vibrant colors on the walls and furniture seemed to leap out at us. I found the bold tones refreshing because the buildings in Tuscany tend to be consistently beige and gray, a startling reduction of the palette I'm accustomed to seeing in an American day. Though the lack of color commands that I pay more attention to shapes, when Vasari has designed the shapes, that is not such a bad thing.

But color has its place. In the house, the pigments were not quite the vibrant reds, ochres, and blues of painted Etruscan tombs, but something similarly splashy and spontaneous. There were polka-dot walls and fuzzy red chairs in the kitchen. A banquet table was strewn with half-empty trays and wine bottles. In the back, red lights shone on a band that was playing to a small crowd. The hostess was a graphic designer who had bathed the house in her own designs.

I wandered upstairs through clusters of people and eventually found myself on

the terrace sipping my second or third plastic cup of wine, chatting away with a group of F's old friends. The most striking stood at over six feet three inches, wore a ripped t-shirt, and sported three dangling earrings in one earlobe. One of the earrings was a lightning bolt, which seem a wink at his checkered, revolutionary past.

Amid conversations about a punk band and speculation about whether the shyest person of the group would get up the courage to say hello to a girl, the Tall One lifted his head skyward and said. "Look at that moon. You could plant tomatoes in a phase like this." The moon was not yet full.

"What are you talking about? What does the moon have to do with tomatoes?" I asked. "

You never heard of planting by the *luna calante* o *luna crescente*?!" He laughed and shook his head as though I had never heard of water.

His initial explanation was that the moon helps pull some plants out of the ground more rapidly and allows others time to germinate in the earth. Some vegetables need to be planted while the moon is waning so they can do their thing underground without any gravitational pull upward. Others will have a more robust harvest if planted during a waxing moon.

The gist of the idea, which predates Roman times, is that when the moon is waxing, life's flux is in a state of abundance and growth. Therefore, it is an ideal time to plant. Alternatively, when the moon is declining, it is time to prune and harvest. There are a few exceptions to these rules. Similarly, specific tasks were reserved for *la luna silente* the dark moon.

I couldn't resist asking others about this idea over the course of the following days. "Oh yeah, it affects hair too," one friend said a little too emphatically, "I try to get

my hair cut during the waning moon, because it won't grow back as fast."

"Me too," said his friend, a teacher. "Except last time I really needed a haircut, it was during the waxing moon. Now my hair is growing back really quickly so I'll have to pay for another one soon." I thought they were yanking my chain--a hunch possibly confirmed when I learned the Roman dictum that to avoid baldness one must cut hair during the waxing moon, not waning. The first of the men was, on former occasions, open about his fear of going bald. If he were really that concerned, wouldn't he be sure to cut his hair during the waxing moon?

At first, it all sounded like superstitious hogwash. But when I started inquiring, I found countless references and articles about people all over the world who still respect lunar planting patterns and claim it works. There even seems to be some slim scientific evidence of the effect.

When I ran this by everyone who had anything to do with working the land, they all knew the rules, like second nature. Without hesitation, many Tuscans still throw their seeds in the ground during the waxing moon and reap and prune during waning. It had been commonplace for so long that it became common sense, I suppose.

If the old-fashioned farmers did follow the moon cycles for centuries perhaps there is something to it. Whether we realize it or not, we still obey the moon, don't we? Our months are roughly 30 days long, which coincides with the length of a 29.5-day lunar cycle. Women's menses are ruled by the moon, at least our bodies are in sync with her rhythms. Who can suppress the moon-pulled ocean tides?

So, do apples taste better when picked in the waning moon as some would attest? Does she influence the flow of water to the soil, the way a seed germinates?

R.J. Harris, a gardener in Cornwall, England divided his crops into sections that

followed lunar patterns and others that didn't. He claims that the lunar patches were much more abundant and healthy. In his book, "R. J. Harris's Moon Gardening: The ABC of the Cornish Head Gardener's Moon-Managed Production of Common Soft Fruits and Vegetables," he asserts that tide water is not the only water pulled by the moon, the water beneath the soil is subject to the same force.

Before Newton's ideas became popular, the idea of the moon's gravitational influence may have been already present in people's minds thanks to observation and intuition. Today, contemporary biodynamic farmers use logic of lunar cultivation in their renewed, fairly recent cultivation practices.

Some biodynamic farming methods are dismissed as new-age nonsense because they incorporate astrology. Nonetheless, some are willing to accept the mystery, and many organic farmers seem happy with the results. Maybe some take it a little too far with the astrology, but they are probably falling under the same spell as people in earlier societies who assigned guiding symbols with their own meaning.

Many of the superstitions of Roman or Egyptian or even Tuscan *contadino* lore have fallen away. For example, some Egyptians wouldn't eat onions, because they didn't correspond to the lunar schedule that influences other plants, and must therefore be unnatural. Also, in ancient times, the moon was thought to be responsible for the size of hens' eggs or the pungency of one's breath after eating garlic or leeks. If grown in a certain part of the lunar cycle, the odor was thought to be less potent.

I came to understand that the moon served as a guide. The sky symbols formed a sort of picture book of instructions. When the superstition is shed, one is reminded that the sky has long been the calendar, and in some ways makes more narrative sense than the checkered paper bits we post on refrigerators. Virgil makes constant reference to the

sky in Book One of *The Georgics*, written in 35 B.C.E.

*Set beans in springtime, the alfalfa happens in collapsing furrows, and millet clamors for its annual attention, when Taurus, gilt-horned and incandescent, gets the new year up and running, and the Dog succumbs to his advance. But if you've been working towards a strong output of wheat or you're heart set on hardy ears of corn, hold off until one of the Seven Sisters steals away from you at dawn and the star of Knosseos, the shining Northern Crown, retires(13).*

Similarly, Roman scholars such as Cato, Pliny, and Varro--all of whom wrote agricultural guides--each refer to lunar laws, discussing which phase of the moon in which astrological sign is ideal for certain chores.

The sky held people in a pattern that helped them survive, whether the idea behind it was logical or not. The moon tells when to slaughter (when the moon is waxing for the tastiest meat), when to shear (a waxing moon will ensure that fur grows back thick, quick and abundant), when to dig a ditch (in the dark moon the ditch will hold better), when to till a field (in the dark moon because weeds won't germinate as quickly in the absence of moonlight), when to plant root vegetables (underground during the waning moon when the moisture levels are lower). Fruits to be cured or dried such as raisins were to be picked or cured during the waning moon (for "holding" purposes).

All around the party where the moon-loving, hair conscious men drank from plastic cups, the fields were quiet, partially illuminated by the moon; meanwhile we became rowdier, in our splash of color and wine and lunacy.

Does it add to our rapport with the environment if we're in tune with the moon's moods? She has certainly acted as a shepherd toward our agricultural well-being. As much as we try to wriggle out of old pagan ideas, they are ingrained in our history. Tiv was the moon goddess, but little more is known about her. If scholars could crack the code of the Etruscan language, there may be much to discover about her.

Lawrence's fox appeared in modern literature to remind us that we too are animals, instinctual and potentially wild. Each night, the moon sneaks up on the surface of the earth, and in the same spirit can show us that whether we know it or not, we are in sync with her quiet magic. A table loaded with food before us and our modern prosperity and joy are evidence that she has been a trustworthy guide.

***Industirati!***  
**Make Use of Yourself!**

Kids far from home at the University of Florence, mostly from the south of Italy,

brought giant boxes from home to their dorm or received packages sent up by train with cousins or acquaintances. This almost always meant an abundance of salted olives, homemade salami, jarred eggplant *sotto olio* (under oil), dried meat smoked with the fire of lemon wood, homemade *limoncello*, wine and a bag of baby oranges that you'd pop in your mouth, peel and all.

Chiara's grandmother only speaks Calabrese dialect. Calabria is the southernmost province apart from Sicily, and has the most stunning stretch of aquamarine sea on the eastern side. The land is made of jagged hillsides and one can see goats perched on nearly vertical pastures. If Europe and Africa would stop bumping into each other, causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, the landscape would be much smoother.

In the surrounding area, Greco Roman ruins are scattered just a few feet beneath the ground. Some of the most prized archeological finds are ancient theatre masks, the best of them are mischievous faces sticking their tongues out in mockery.

Invited for a summer visit, I watched Chiara and her grandmother speak earnestly to one another. We sat at their kitchen table and I tried to decipher their dialect without much success.

Her grandmother has well-worked hands and round cheeks and shy eyes. I was pleased to meet the donor of the giant boxes, loaded with edible treats, which Chiara would hoof up on the nine-hour journey to *casa degli studenti* in Florence. The boxes contained nothing that didn't come from one of their trees or animals. The edible treasures invariably included salami, homemade oil and wine.

Her grandparents have a steady, hardworking lifestyle and seem to live by the motto "*industriati--*" make use of yourself. It is a phrase that Chiara throws out when she wants something done.



Her grandmother put a bit of homemade *piccante* salami on the table with a knife and offered us some pickled eggplant to munch on. Behind her on the shelves stood scores of jars with preserved vegetables and fruits in them--olives, eggplant, bell peppers, some with spicy *pepperoncino* added, and a few different kinds of marmalade.

Spring and summer may be generous in these parts, but it's always best to store up to ensure abundance. The couple, in their seventies, work tirelessly every day to fill their cupboards and tend to their family's needs, whatever and wherever they may be.

Chiara's grandfather has worked the same fields daily since he was five. In past years he also used to walk to the surrounding fields to work in the mornings--sometimes a few miles distant. He still does a staggering amount of work for his age. He provides for the rest of his family and neighbors and sells what he can. He stuffs his own salami and never complains about the five-mile walk from his house to the fields he works.

Chiara and I spent mornings and late afternoon-evenings at the seaside with other friends. At some point it occurred to me that, back at their inland home, Chiara's grandparents were working.

The aquamarine Ionic waters could easily be mistaken for the Caribbean. When I leaped in from the hot white sand, it seemed to hit all of my pores at once. When I opened my eyes underwater I could clearly see my feet and the floor of the sea.

At our other friend's family house by the water, we spent languid afternoons over lunches of pasta, or seafood, or melon and prosciutto. The salt and sweetness seemed to go perfectly with the sand and sea and heat. Lunch was followed by a tomblike sleep in which even I who never seem to sleep in the afternoon could wholly enjoy. The slumber would be jolted away by sips of the cool Calabrian coffee fizz drink "*Brasilena*," leading

to a return to the beach again only when it was bearable to go outside. It wasn't exactly an "*industriati*" kind of lifestyle for us.

We sat in the olive grove on the hillside of her family home when I was getting ready to leave. Men in *motorino* trucks drove around yelling into megaphones in excited dialect whatever there was to sell "*patate, pipparedu, cipuji, meloni!*" When my friends packed me off on the night train, it was with foil wrapped tubes of homemade salami, pickled eggplant, and bread to go with it.

### *La Famiglia Baroncelli*

The flames lick the iron grate and the meat lands on top of it with a thunk and sizzle. Blackened by the grate, browned by the flame, salt crushed in Rita's fingers grazes the top, and disappears into the heat and flesh. She lifts the fire poker and while stabbing the wood, she turns from the fireplace in the corner of the ground-floor room and looks at

us.

She is an older version of Rossana, her granddaughter--bold and soft features, full lips, determined nose, eyes that hold a steady gaze except when they occasionally collapse in laughter.

On the way upstairs from Rita's fire, we pass the small painting of the Madonna and child. At the table Rita's son Riccardo, between the first course and the second, pretends that tablecloth is the ocean, and compares the year to seafaring. He even puts his hand under the table to demonstrate a sunken ship. He is speaking in metaphors, in pictures, as his daughter does.

The table is long and this is one of many Sundays in the past century or two that a table of those proportions has been laid and the Baroncelli family have taken up their forks and shared a meal.

They have their own wine on the table, though only the grandfather, Baldo seems to be drinking it. Baldo still makes wine exactly as it was made when he was a child, save for the fact that he doesn't stomp the grapes with his feet.

He scoffs at the "*grandi aziende*" or big companies that add artificial flavors to their wine. "The grapes need to be looked after, treated according to seasons and needs," he insists. Big companies put in additives to alter flavors or to get rid of the sediment. Sediment transfers from one container to the next and Baldo considers it a natural part of the wine.

At 90, it turns out, Baldo is a well of information. He was a *fattore*. In other words, he oversaw the duties of the *contadinos*. *Contadino* could translate to peasant or farmer, but literally means "counted ones," a term for land workers that stems from their relation to landowners. Though it now generally refers to anyone who works the land.

The role of the *fattore* is to act as a kind of manager on behalf of the landowner. Baldo was a *fattore* and milk producer who eventually bought much of the land for his own family. Though their houses and land have been a bit crowded in by newer buildings around, they still maintain much of the land that is left.

There was great collaboration in the communities in the not so distant past. Neighbors and friends sprang up to exchange, help each other, work the land together, and have a good time while they were at it. Women, men, children, everyone got involved. The family goes out to harvest the grapes together when it is time for the *vendemmia* (grape harvest). They don't have the help or the production they once did. For many years, friends and neighbors came over to help out. They weren't paid but they were fed. During the day, they'd have a break and eat near the house. On the last night, they'd celebrate with a big dinner.

“*Porca miseria!*” Rita exclaimed, “*c’era sempre un monte di gente.*” “Pig misery! (an expression that means something like “Holy Mackerel.”) There was always a mountain of people.” She lights up when she speaks of them and starts listing the names of relatives and friends-- “*Il Barbiere, fratello della mama,...*” The barber, my mother’s brother...”

On the last night, they played music, and sang songs. Rita pointed out that someone often brought a mandolin. “And we sang,” she said, then as if thinking of her granddaughter, “not well but we sang.”

Just as families helped them, they would help other families when their grapes were ready. It was customary in those days and sometimes it still occurs. Then, many passed on the work to college students who could earn a few *lire* for the year. Filippo put in his time in the *vendemmia* sessions when in college. He would wake at the crack of

dawn, spend the day covered in dirt and sweat filling heavy sacks, (and imagining, as the hours passed, a music career abroad.) At the end of the day he would sink into the bed in the sleeping quarters near the vineyards, exhausted. Now, migrant workers do much of the work.

If a family had too many kids, they would send them over to help with the labor at another farm where they were short. Boys were schooled until fifth grade, girls until third. After that, if one wanted further schooling, he or she had to be sent out of town to Empoli or Florence.

Baldo says many were illiterate. His mother was loaded with recipes and wherewithal, but she couldn't write her own name and could barely distinguish numbers. Therefore, she couldn't count money. But, they all understood the value of goods.

Baldo's father gave a giant heifer to the local butcher on credit once. Because of that, he enjoyed the luxury of a steak just about whenever he wished for years after. "And he would sometimes eat a whole steak all by himself," Baldo declared, reminding me that meat is a luxury.

Fresh or boiled meat was, in fact, a luxury and consumed only about once a week, usually on Sunday. During the week, the family ate cured meats or conserved fish like anchovies or herring. So, the steaks his father earned on interest were eaten with real satisfaction. Before, Baldo says, meat was tastier because it was more natural. Now, animals are all overfed and made purposefully fat.

More than oil, in those days, they used lard for cooking. Oil was more precious and was used for flavor or seasoning. Lard, in the right form, sliced thinly and cured with pepper, is considered a delicacy. They would place the lard on ashes and store it in the

*cantina*, the basement or pantry.

I knew that people of their era lived in sync with their environment, but Baldo brought my awareness to a new level when he made a startling point about waste. “Now,” he exclaimed, “you have to pay people to take away your sewage. Before, people *paid you for it*.” Yes, human waste was sold and used along with animal waste for fertilization. It was the most natural fertilizer.

Baldo claims that modern chemical fertilizers have greatly damaged the local ecosystem. Many insects and birds and lizards and crickets and snakes have just disappeared—gone. Rita chimes in and the two of them clamorously list the disappeared creatures together. “*Uccelli, insetti, serpenti, farfalle, grilli*.” “It’s so quiet without them,” she adds.

Generations before them rode waves of wealth and poverty. Baldo’s grandfather brought the hay and straw of Signa into the Florentine marketplaces. The grandparents had people working for them. “And they even went on *vacation*,” he said. Rossana was the first of a few generations to make such a leap. When she came back from her year abroad, thirty friends and relatives met her at the airport.

The meat for our Sunday lunch is remarkably tender. It is unseasoned (save for the salt) to avoid distraction from the flavor of the meat itself. They pour some of Baldo’s wine for me to taste. It is just right with a touch of sediment in the bottom of the glass.

### **Ask the *Orto* or Ask Romeo**

When you're wondering what's for dinner, walk outside and ask the *orto*. As I ride the train up to Pisa on a day trip with Marta, my mother-in-law, we discuss the neatly tended blocks of land. She tells stories about the women she grew up around who marched outside to consult their vegetable gardens on a daily basis. Someone might walk in the garden to find a few eggplants and little else, and even if they'd had been eating them for dinner all week, they'd have it again. "Guess it's eggplant tonight, there's no way around it," she says, laughing.

The *orto* is the vegetable or kitchen garden cultivated for family meals. It was

considered such a fundamental source of food for families that after World War II, the government designated plots of land near the train tracks so families, widows, and orphans could plant *ortos* in them.

Traditionally, on family farms or family homes the *orto* most often had to be near the house or near a water source and surrounded by a hedge or wall to prevent animals and poultry from entering. It needed to be in a location that protects it from the northern winds, but allows exposure to the sun. Some families with more property planted *ortos* that needed little tending at a distance from their house. They might also move the *orto* away from the house if the well was positioned farther out. It was essential to cultivate the garden so that it would serve the family year round. For that, variety was key. The *orto* was constantly evolving.

Though lettuce was grown in the *orto*, Marta says that her grandmother also knew how to decipher all the edible lettuces from fields. The two of them would walk into the fields with aprons on; they would fold the aprons up to make a little compartment and store the lettuces in it. When the same fields of grass and greens were particularly soft and fragrant, her grandmother would also sometimes place the white linen sheets directly on the grass to absorb the scent and bring the freshness inside for the beds.

Now that she lives in the city, the ask-the-*orto* game has become ask-Romeo. Romeo asks the *orto* and the orchard, actually. The doorbell rang on a summer morning in Arezzo. Marta picked up the door intercom phone to the apartment building entrance and called out, “Romeo?” pronouncing it *Ro-may-oh* and buzzed him in. “See, *Ro-may-oh* is always after me,” she joked.

A thin man in glasses climbed the stairs and placed a bag in her hands, and nods a modest hello and good-bye. Romeo is her chosen *fruttivendolo*, or produce vendor



who makes deliveries a few times a week.

He lives in the Val di Chiana outside Arezzo and rises each morning very early with his wife. They pick whatever the land has spit out for them and bring it into the city to sell. Much like the women of Marta's youth or people living in the country today, who stroll out to consult the garden when it's time to figure out what's for dinner, she relies on whatever Romeo delivers to her front door.

Romeo knows she and her husband Roberto grew up in a way that honed their taste buds and sets aside the best of what he can for them. They weren't raised on hothouse produce and they know the difference. She and Roberto can decipher discrete levels of ripeness or variation in flavor that either younger people or those who grew up entirely in the city, or certainly I can't.

She always makes a display to set in the center of the table. In June the apricots are a light shade of canyon orange with just a smudge of red. They rest against the fleshy soft peaches and firm nectarines and spots of depth are given to the whole tray by the burgundy-colored cherries that punctuate the crevices in between. The arrangement gives off a sweet smell that keeps us company while we read the newspaper or chat.

The consumption of fruit at the end of each meal is essential because it helps with digestion. The act often leads to conversations between her and Roberto about the distinction between one pear and the other, which variety of cherries is the most satisfying, or of who likes soft nectarines and who likes unripe, crunchy ones as if such preferences were a reflection of character. They most certainly discuss the difference between the quality of this year's and last year's fruit at length. Ideas circulate about potential meals. Recently they discussed applesauce with ginger and how it might taste on some pecorino.

Fruit cultivation traditionally ended just before the *vendemmia* or grape harvest, which usually began around the twentieth of September. The weeks before the harvest were very busy. The last of the summer fruit needed to be jarred or set out to dry and the cantinas needed to be cleaned and organized in preparation. The fruit was stored in flat wooden mats or shelves in the cantina providing it was a cool room with good ventilation.

When my parents were about to visit in mid-May, I went to Romeo's headquarters myself. It had been a rainy spring, and we had hosted some raucous and difficult visitors in the apartment we were renting on Via San Niccolo, at the top of Arezzo. The apartment was part of a convent from the fifteenth century that had been transformed into a residence. In the fireplace there was a small cement sculpture that looked just like a headstone. The tall ceilings and dark, dank surroundings led to visions of nuns chattering and haunting the place. We hadn't had a great night's sleep there for months, and often ended up down the hill at Marta and Roberto's cozy place.

But the rain was over, the difficult visitors were gone. I was ready to throw some color in the place, let some light in, and make it welcoming for my parents. This meant buying tea for my dad, bringing in some blankets and tablecloths, and paying a visit to Romeo.

Romeo's vegetable-fruit store is a short walk outside the center of town. I found him behind the counter, placing eggs in cartons. Impeccably neat clothes, clean hands and an orderly store. I was pleased to see it as I had only known him to make home deliveries. I asked what came from his land and what came from elsewhere. He politely pointed to virtually everything in the small store and explained its origin. All the produce

was Italian and much of it was from his property or nearby farms, but some of the earlier summer vegetables and fruits had been sent up from the South. He raved about his own spring potatoes as they were brand new, and to confirm what I had heard from Marta, some of the best of the year. They were small nuggets that were to be soft and tender when cooked.

I selected some potatoes, spring lettuces, a giant yellow pepper and some farm eggs, some garlic, and some red pears from the South. Sensing my curiosity, he opened up. “My business will die with my wife and me,” he explained as he bundled the packages. “My children are grown and they have careers and want nothing to do with manning the orchard or the *orto*.”

On the way back, I stopped at Daniele, the cheese maker’s warehouse -type store near Romeo’s. There, they make mozzarella on Wednesdays and Fridays and they were especially friendly because I knew “Martina.” They use milk from cows they own and make some pristine, soft mozzarella balls out of it. I walked toward home, satisfied that I knew the origin of all the contents in my hands, even as my blue Chuck-Taylors, probably assembled in China, took me over the pavement.

I heated up the tea and served it near a pile of Romeo’s goods, assembled carefully in the center of the table. My parents’ presence alone was like the tea for me, warm and soothing, after a chilled and choppy winter. It was enough to fix the house. Ghosts of nuns and darkness were expelled by familiar suitcases and scents, and voices, and bathrobes and hardcover books in English. And potatoes and eggs. The potatoes were soft and the yokes of the eggs were a rich orange color that both my parents’ raved about.

At that stage of semi-retirement, they had taken to growing their own *orto*. It

was quite a leap for Manhattanites who, even for all their years in California, had never taken a shovel to soil. My dad, whose Irish father had supposedly eaten a potato every day of his life, attempted to grow a potato patch. My mother was more devoted to her boxes of tomatoes and zucchini and herbs. Both were shocked when they actually saw and tasted results.

*Arte & Artigiani*  
**Art & Artisans**

*“I saw cold and bright colors--ahhh that's the influence from Rome--and the characters--  
ahhhh that's from The Lombardia school...and so on...”Ana*

## **The Zap Moment**

Arm behind his back, cards in fingers, the boy's hand hovers above two more cards tucked in the back of his tunic. On the sly, he can pull what he needs. His opponents don't see them. Which will he play? He leans forward as the other player ponders his own cards with an unnervingly calm poker face. A man stands behind him with bug eyes that imply the stakes are high. The feathers in the caps flip in both directions; the cards could fall in either favor. The tension is taut; the tricks are perched on the edge of the sleeve.

Something of the cunning trickster runs in Italian blood and this painting nabs that spirit. Caravaggio's "Card Players" takes me back to the day that I walked into the house at Erta Canina and met Ana. I was interviewing to become a housemate in one of the vacant rooms of the servants quarters of a villa that rested on top of the hill overlooking Florence.

Ana with wavy Spanish brown hair to her shoulders and inquisitive aquamarine eyes studies me through wire-rimmed glasses from across the kitchen table. She tossed a

few questions at me and led me to view the house. Before I even knew the house led out to a giant garden and olive grove that overlooked the town, I was taken with the front room and its simple kitchen and living room. Upstairs, when I saw the room for let, I was hooked immediately. It had high ceilings, light yellow walls, a geometric black and white tile floor, and best of all, a view directly onto my favorite spot in town: *San Miniato al Monte*, the Romanesque church on the top of the hill.

She had covered the walls with close-ups of the card players' faces. She had drawn a pencil grid over each one and drafted an overall map of gesture and stance. She was making a professional copy of Caravaggio's "Card Players" known in Italian as "*I Bari*." It would be sold through a gallery downtown.

Apart from the tourists and heaps of gelato, Florence still acts as a grand host to artists. It serves artists as a kind of *maestro* as they flock here from all over the world. Artists act as apprentices in the museums, in the clean architectural spaces, the countless courses of figure drawing, and the numerous studios of the *Accademia di Belle Arti*.

Many pass through Florence on their way to the Berlin or New York art scenes to get a taste of the classical, the ideal. Here they will stand stunned in front of a simple Michelangelo at the Bargello, to sketch the lines that mark the tension and struggle in the curved hip of woman "The Rape of the Sabines" in Piazza Signoria, and seek evidence of Giotto's epiphanies in the Uffizi.

Ana, like them, came from Spain to let the city bestow its riches on her craft. She is trained and talented enough to copy great masters' paintings and sell them. When she first got to town, she started making copies for what she refers to as the lowest kind of art dealer. But she produced so many paintings—and so fast—that she gained a good

reputation. She was quickly building a repertoire and was selected for private commissions in between.

Manolo, her father, is a dedicated painter and teacher. With arched eyebrows and proud Spanish poise, he has an uncanny knack for communicating in languages he does not speak. When he and Jekke, Ana's Dutch mother (Dutch and Spanish, not a bad combination for a painter!) came to visit us for a summer month, he took his easel and chair out every morning and came home with watercolors of archways and fountains.

With a severe expression, he peered at Ana's Caravaggio copy with his thumb and forefinger formed in a circle over his eye to view it under a crisp, focused lens and see if a painting "holds its own light" by blocking out any interfering rays. He examined her work for a long time, then nodded in approval.

Now I walk around in museums with my hand formed in the circle over my eye, trying not to bump into anything. It does allow paintings to emerge on completely different terms. Rembrandt holds up remarkably well under that scope. The people in his portraits look absolutely real. They seem to be breathing right there in front of me.

After a few months in the house, Ana and I discovered our mutual admiration for Rembrandt. We would gaze at prints of his self-portraits in books. We couldn't get over the image of the young man versus the old. I remember us looking at each other with horror. The contrast between the young Rembrandt, perched brightly on the edge of his chair, and the distraught and exhausted old man was so pronounced. What does life *do* to a person?

Recently, she was gracious enough to allow me to interview her. While completing the Caravaggio commission, Ana was experiencing her own artistic

breakthroughs.

M: What are some of the paintings you were commissioned to do?

A: I have a “hand” for a few groups: The Baroques such as Caravaggio, Chardin (French Baroque painter), some Macchialoli (Tuscan Impressionists), some French impressionists' landscapes (Pissarro, Monet), some Vermeer, miscellanea Renaissance, including some Rafael and some Lempicka.

M: What was your favorite? What was the most challenging? Why?

A: It's hard to say, with each one I learned something, but I think the Caravaggio marked a before and after: quality of the original, difficulty, and pleasure following the logic of the painter on a trip to Rome to see his masterpieces live. But the Impressionists are also close to my heart, mostly Pissarro, with a snowed view of Paris-just the three primary colors, a myriad of grey tones and such depth: a total economy of resources with outstanding results.

M: Can you talk a little about the gallery and the Florentines or other clients who commissioned you?

A: My longest and most fruitful gallery working relationship was with Manfredi Tozzi, who owned a gallery in *Via Maggio* and permitted me to paint regularly for almost four years. The paintings were meant mostly as a complement of real antiques, or for luxury homes all over Tuscany.

M: How did you approach the projects? How did you know which materials to use? How faithful were you to the original materials?

A: Well, I've always tried to use them as case studies- not as literally from an art history or restoration perspective. But as a painter it is impossible to reconstruct past



environments and pigments. I think as a painter and learn from the original as much as possible. That, in the end, kept me closer to the original and allowed me to add a special quality to the final result--more a production/interpretation than a copy.

M: What kind of research did you need to do to discover the original methods and materials?

A: First, I need several reproduction (pictures) of the original, general, details, and preliminary drawings, if available. Then I go for the whole catalogue of the artist, if possible, or his/her most relevant pieces, to try to see the common elements along their career, and try to place the painting, with the before and afters. After learning about the support, measures, and basic technical details (oil on canvas, oil on panel...) I start asking myself how to best start. As the periods I'm able to approach are very specific, you can learn the basic technical aspects by reading books: the pigments used in a certain period, uses of under-painting, glazing and then try to adapt this information to my own guessing of the painting.

M: Did you learn a lot about the artists' process and their way of seeing the world as you worked?

A: That's the best part of the whole process: when you have a hint of the painter's experience, thoughts, tricks, genial solutions...it's always a hint, because if I could "read" them I would be as accomplished as they were [she laughs]. With the Caravaggio, the best thing was that it is a piece painted when he was young, so I saw so many elements there. Then, talking to a good friend of mine, an art historian who was able to reconstruct his life for me--his masters, influences and career--like I saw cold and bright colors—ahhh, that's the influence from Rome--and the characters--ahhhh that's from The Lombardia school...and so on...

While living at *Erta Canina*, I jumped on a painting lesson opportunity given in *plein air*, in our back garden. I was one of a few students who took individual classes from Ana. Through the winter she had been doing lessons with a guy from a nearby town in exchange for firewood. The biggest room in our unheated house had a tiny 18th century-style fireplace that, along with other visitors and roommates, we had spent a good chunk of time in front of. Then we stole to our rooms dressed in layers and holding hot water pillows. Still, I could see my breath in the morning.

Anyway, I took my stab at watercolor through Ana. I proved to be a less than diligent, easily distracted student. Nonetheless I gained some priceless points of perspective through our few sessions; it turns out that good lessons in art are also lessons in seeing.

An examination of leaves in the olive grove that overlooks the city brings on a play of memory. What color are you seeing versus the color you *think* you're seeing? Of course your memory prompts you to view trunks as brown, leaves as green, and so on. But that is just not the case, leaves may have four or five colors in them and none of them green.

I love keeping company with visual artists for this reason. They have a hypersensitivity to their environment that allows them to experience life on a different frequency than I do. There are moments where they crack open the world a little bit for me. The afternoon sessions were full of that. (Much better than the time I befriended a flock of geese thanks to the hypersensitivity another artist friend.)

I shut my eyes and worked hard at removing the preconceived notions I carried

about what I see. The assumptions dictated by my memory actually shut out a lot. It was as though my eyes were cleansed, the junk notions and debris fell away, at least a bit. Where I thought I should see brown on the olive trunk, I actually saw gray and black with a hint of purple. Maybe even a touch of blue-green. It was a multifaceted surface in the late afternoon light.

In the distance, the atmosphere receded in a fading cloud of grays and deep black-blues. Leonardo Da Vinci coined the term *sfumato* (*in a veil of smoke*) to describe how the atmosphere becomes less crisp in the distance. I had just learned the notion and though I did not know how to depict it by hand, I knew I was gaining a new sense of sight in that period.

A discussion about greens ensued; “Pissarro’s greens” hold a lofty position in Ana’s esteem. She points to the leaves on the olive tree and claims that no painter has ever achieved a faithful reproduction of the silvery undersides. It is a color impossible to mimic, apparently, even for Pissarro.

Cross-legged on the grass, with the blank watercolor page in front of me, we turn our attention to a black grape vine that is climbing through the garden above our heads in the distance. She asks me to simply stare at it. We gaze at it for a long time, and I want to break the silence to tell her this feels like Buddhism. She eventually tells me that there would be a moment, as I stared, that the vine would just snap out and reach my comprehension, and that I could then grasp its essence and paint it. Like a *zap*.

Here was magic seeing that I was not capable of, apparently. But I tried. At one point, I slashed a quick horizontal streak across the page, but I don’t know whether it actually *zapped* into my comprehension or whether I just figured it was time to make a mark.

Later, I began to understand this revelatory power of subjects on painters, though I never quite attained the skill (or patience?) to achieve it. It is the transmitting moment or state that allows portrait artists, for example, to get past feature and expression, and to grasp something of the character or essence of a person or thing.

Back in Florence, Ana did portraits of friends for fun, just to see if that magic transmission would come through and they could see themselves on the page. Maybe Leonardo's transmission forces were extra acute and that's why Mona Lisa's enigmatic nature (perhaps tinged with his own) is able to unnerve and engage the minds of so many.

A few years later, I happened to visit Ana's parents in Malaga. She was still in Italy, but she was *also* in her parents' home. There was a self-portrait in oil hanging in her room. In the painting she sits, wearing a green blouse. Her brown hair gathers in neat waves around her temples and falls down to her shoulders. Her clear eyes are caught in a hyper-alert gaze that also betrays a sort of sweetness. The portrait exuded such a strong presence that she seemed to actually be in the room. Something about her real character was transferred to the canvas thanks to a prolonged *zap* moment.

## *Zecchi*

I don't think they'll let me back in the U.S. with a jar of insect blood. They might think I'm carrying a disease or that I'm a vampire fanatic or possibly a terrorist. So I pack my brown oak gall pigment and my blood ink up in a plastic bag and sadly store them away in the armoire.

When Filippo visited Stefano, they didn't stop chattering about music. Stefano only paused to slip out of his office at the Cortona Library and disappear into the adjacent room for a second. He returned and, without missing a beat, dropped a book, as thick as an unabridged edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in my lap. *Thunk*. Then, with no explanation, he tossed some white gloves beside me on the leather couch. He continued to chatter to F as I slipped on the gloves, bewildered. When I opened the book, I went into a sort of trance.

In red and black medieval lettering, I saw *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri* scripted on the title page. Nearby, the year 1331 was scrolled in small red numbers. It was one of the first copied editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*! I turned the pages with my gloved fingers. Each page was so thick. Though there were hardly any illustrations, the prose was printed in small brown-black medieval script with elaborate illuminated capitals in red at the beginning of each section.

Dante worked on *The Divine Comedy* from 1308 until the time of his death in September of 1321. His words must have been very fresh at the time the manuscript was made. The language inscribed on the pages was to become the foundation of standard Italian and there it was in one of its very first incarnations, in my lap, in my hands.

I finally interrupted Stefano and made him explain a thing or two. "Oh yeah, there

are all kinds of old manuscripts in this place. Use the gloves so the oils in your fingers don't damage the pages. The pages are mostly made of goat or sheep bladders." His words were clipped, efficient. Then he turned the discussion back to a far more interesting topic in his mind: PJ Harvey.

Stefano did not know that I played around with lettering. I grew up with pen and ink sets, something my family was happy to provide for me because it meant I would stop drawing and writing on the walls. With those sets, I discovered probably the only thing that ever truly came naturally to me.

Half seriously I wondered if I was an illuminator in a past life--an Irish monk even. Could I have copied and illustrated great prose or great tales, thereby preventing them from disappearing forever? Could I have worked in one of those Irish monasteries Thomas Cahill describes in *How the Irish Saved Civilization*? I may have rescued great knowledge from barbaric medieval thugs by copying Aristotle, Plato, and other great thinkers.

Or maybe I was one of those women who held a job as a scribe or illuminator at the end of the commercial manuscript era (before the onset of the printing press) who secretly produced my own stories. Or maybe I should stop entertaining this dorky fantasy and just accept that looking at old manuscripts makes me feel warm and fuzzy and that's just that.

I made money cranking out wedding envelopes for my mother's friends' daughters when I was a teenager. The chore was a bit tedious, but relaxing at the same time. After those wedding projects, I had set my lettering and graphic calligraphy aside, dismissing it as an obsolete art. Who cared? Who made real money doing it? What was the point anyway?

Working in Florence a few years after my encounter with Stefano, I started frequenting a store on *Via dello Studio* that my artist friends talked about. That Dante manuscript was still tickling my mind. Ultimately, I had the Zecchi brothers and their kids to thank for my new red ink and for giving me back an art form.

In the 1950's, the Zecchi brothers decided to make the original recipes of Medieval and Renaissance pigments available to the local art community. Some hadn't been available for decades and others for centuries. One brother managed the store while the other researched and traveled the world to capture the organic materials that were used in Giotto, Botticelli and Michelangelo works, as well as tons of other early paintings; for a time—several centuries—these pigments had become virtually extinct, replaced by manufactured chemical paints or acrylics.

Lapis lazuli, for example, an expensive stone, was once used primarily for the blues of the Madonna robes in altarpieces. Greens made of crushed malachite, yellows of saffron flower or ochre, warmed the gowns of the angels around her. The Zecchis brought in the royal blue stone from the Middle East, crushed and placed in a jar alongside an array of other colored powders, all from natural plant or mineral sources. They relied heavily on Cennini's *Craftsman's Handbook* from the early 1400s, which lists important ingredients and practices for artists. Cennini also dishes out advice that many artists would surely scoff at today, like don't drink too much alcohol if you want to be truly good.

Near the powders stood a shelf stocked with inks. I saw the Carmine Cochineal pigment and paused and lifted the crimson bottle. The thought of using the red ink thrilled me because it contained a traceable history I had read about. Using the ink

seemed like it would call on some old way of being, like a dead vernacular, that I might be able to experience in some small way. I took it to the counter.

My new ink was made of the blood of cochineal, an insect found on cacti. It has been used in manuscripts since antiquity and became a common red in illuminated books, court documents, and letters. The carmine-cochineal insect also thrived in the Americas. Native Americans throughout the north and south Americas used to pluck the insects off of cacti leaves and dry them. They would then extract the pigment to use in dyes for tapestries and clothing. On a trip through Colca Canyon in Peru, I had actually seen the insects set out on mats to dry in the sun near an indigenous settlement.

On some winter nights, after I discovered Zecchi and after I had purchased the appropriate items to accompany my ink, I chose to stay in. I would sit at the oak desk with dip pens, quills, jars of ink, textured paper and a computer full of quotes and prose to copy. As I listened to music and penned my lettering I could excuse the fact that it seemed like an entirely pointless pursuit by recognizing that this process provided a meditative refuge. Furthermore, I now felt I was participating in the long history of language. Italic and gothic, or uncial (a medieval script) alphabet forms flowed cautiously from of my hand as I attempted to keep my rhythm and slant consistent.

Florence is famous for resurrecting Roman and Greek knowledge and culture after the Middle Ages. So many statues and books and ideas that were considered obsolete forever have emerged from the rubble heap of discarded treasures in this town. The ink and my discarded calligraphy had done their time on the heap too. Maybe the Zecchis are, in sense, doing for many artists what the Medicis did for civilization.



### **Book Binding**

Everyone in the Salvadori (Filippo's family) house has to take an afternoon nap. I

simply can't most of the time. I'm not wired that way. So, I spent the silent, shade-drawn hours after the lunch drinking espresso and poring over the several editions of a magazine called the *Encyclopedia della Cultura Contadina*. (*En-chi-clop-a-dia*, as they say.) With my pocket dictionary next to me, I learned words like plow and hay. The numerous magazine editions cover everything from the art of flask making to drying apples to the origin of the term *vin santo* to Roman customs to local songs.

Roberto, my father-in-law, came in the dining room once while I was reading about flask making. In this case, flask referred to the wicker or straw coverings of large glass oil bottles or regular wine bottles. I was looking at a black and white picture of a gathering of women weaving the flasks in long skirts surrounded by piles of stringy straw. He saw the photo on the table and it sparked something in his memory--Roberto's aunts and grandmother used to make such flasks. Meanwhile, Marta had relatives who were glassmakers and made the bottles themselves. He launched into his story about the whole trade, now mostly obsolete.

Like Marta, he seemed happy that I took an interest in things that were familiar to them when they were young. If I had any questions about an article in the magazines, they were quick to respond, and as informative as the magazine itself. Roberto spent Septembers on his grandfather's property near Empoli with a band of kids and locals helping with the *vendemmia* or grape harvest—he recalls they all had rowdy good times. Though he spent most of his life in cities, he is no stranger to *contadino* or country customs.

As I became busy with other books, I abandoned the *encyclopedia magazines* for a spell. Once I went looking for it and couldn't find it. Roberto had taken it away. Weeks later, he said, "Come with me to pick up the *Encyclopedia*. Trust me, you'll like where

we're going.”

Not knowing what to expect, I agreed to meet him after lunch in the town center the next day, as he would be out running errands. On foot, he led me to the top of the hill in Arezzo to a building behind the Medieval City Hall. It seemed an official government building. We wandered down the hallway to a studio-room in the very back of the building.

There, three women worked among countless rolls of paper, manuscripts, and hand-bound books of all sizes. They were bookbinders and document restorers.

Roberto introduced me to them and one took the time to show me around. She led me over to a table where a seventeenth-century handwritten document was spread out for careful scrutiny. Most of the ink of the handwritten document was faded and the paper was quite worn around the edges. It looked as if it might disintegrate right in front of our eyes. It was a court document, like a will or testament, which apparently held meaning for a local family. The handwriting, though artful, was antiquated and hard to read.

It was the women's job to restore the document. The process of mending paper fibers and drawing out the original vibrancy of the ink would require hours of craftsmanship.

The nearby library in Arezzo is housed in a historical building with a facade that is covered in stone family crests, Medici and Strozzi included. The library must have a magnificent stock of illuminated books. I had seen advertisements for courses on illuminated manuscript restoration and I had met a person who conducts paper arts and bookbinding courses in the library itself. Italians have much to keep and are experts at

keeping things.

When we finished looking at the document, another of the craftswomen arrived with Roberto's order. They had taken all the magazine editions (there were more than fifty) of the *Encyclopedia della Cultura Contadina* and bound them, by hand, in three book volumes. I examined the fabric spine of the first volume.

The binding was cloth that had been tightly stitched then laminated. All the thin magazine pages were fitted on more noble paper and assembled, not as if they were editions in themselves, but threaded into whole books. And to top it off, the artisan pulled out another smaller bound book in which she, with great precision had cut out the black and white photos in the edition and bound them together in a kind of glorified album, again hand assembled.

Roberto presented the three large volumes along with the smaller one to me as a gift. The set is, undoubtedly, one of the best and most thoughtful gifts I have ever received.

### **The Errand**

I've been sent on an errand: I'm picking up a handkerchief. It's raining and dark. I hurry over the wet stones up the narrow street towards Signora Gina's apartment. She has a hard time making house calls now. The handkerchief will have an elaborate "C" stitched into it. I will also pick up two pairs of my pants, bright blue corduroys and jeans. They are two in about 35-years worth of pants she has mended for the Salvadori family.

Signora Gina has repaired Filippo's pants since he was a kid. Any snare in his father's suit jacket or mother's dresses or school and work clothes of his brother were taken into Signora Gina's care. I see how she has worked each of the tears in F's jeans thread by thread.

I've slept between linen sheets from his grandmother with borders Gina has re-embroidered. It is better to have one or two sets of good sheets that you treat with tons of TLC for ages than numerous sets of sheets on which you throw away your money--sheets that don't feel that great and tear easily. The same thing goes with pants and shirts. "*Chi spende piu spende meno*," they say. Who spends more spends less. Buy yourself one good pair of pants, make a friend like Gina, and you will spend less and have them for life--much better than tossing something out to buy another.

Like a doctor, Gina made house calls in Arezzo. When I met her it was the first time I stayed at F's family home. I liked her immediately when she visited even though without realizing it, I was underestimating Gina both as a seamstress and a businesswoman.

She is almost playfully friendly but she has a stern eye. Her gray-white curls are modestly cut and she wears plain clothes. She has the air of a business-like neighbor. Business in the home, that is. Addressing clients she has known for a lifetime in the formal tense of Italian speech, accepting a coffee, listening to family news, then putting on her reading glasses and exhibiting her handiwork with a detailed explanation, and finally accepting a sum of money.

She greeted me warmly that rainy night. She possessed a reserved pride in her work, and for her home. She is now a widow who lives alone. She gave me a tour of the side room, dining room, and then her room. In her room, she gave a hesitant smile and

waited until my eyes fell on the wall next to me.

Irises, a whole garden of them, were stitched out in painstaking detail on the wall on a huge tapestry. It could easily have rivaled any Turkish rug and was even reminiscent of the famous tapestries of the Middle-Ages in its detailed handiwork. The blues, blacks, lavenders, purples, and yellows were just right. Even the shadow of one petal on another was stitched into perfect place. I examined it in awe. It could have been in a museum. “You did that? My God, it’s so beautiful. So detailed and well crafted! You’re an artist,” I exclaimed honestly, bowled over by her handiwork. She nodded with quietly satisfied smile.

She invited me into the dining room. She offered a coffee and had me sit in one of the tall wicker chairs at the table. I apologized that it took me a while to come and pick up my belongings as I had been helping a friend in a store in Florence.

“Oh, I know what it is to take the train there and back every day. I worked in Florence for years,” she said. “In fact, I missed the train one night and I was afraid I’d have to sleep at the station! But my husband drove in to get me.”

“What were you doing all those years in Florence?”

“There was a British company near Palazzo Pitti. They liked my handiwork.”

If walking through Florence today, you will find it worthwhile to look closely at the city that began the mercantile tradition in Western Civilization. Beneath the tourist craziness and the heaps of imported materials or mainstream stores that have taken over, one can still see traces of the old mercantile tradition that was very much alive until not so many years ago.

There are *bottegas* in the *Altr’Arno* on the other side of the river where wood workers, chandelier makers, and bookbinders, though they may be few, still tinker away.

Some preserved stores like The Old English Store on *Via Tournabuoni* or *La Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella* will take your breath away. They have beautiful, elaborately crafted wood interiors. Most have sturdy countertops, glass doorways under arched ceilings, precise woodwork, and special compartments specifically crafted for each of the goods. One music store that was an old optical instrument store quietly boasts a stunning antique setting that, like some of the other stores, is protected by the city of Florence itself. The stores will remind you of a certain integrity in craft and commerce that is not so evident today. You can see the integrity in goods made with care. Affluent British gentlemen and gentlewomen came flocking to Tuscany once upon a time in search of the best clothes of the Italian handmade tradition. For some, the answer was Signora Gina.

The talented young seamstress Gina was noticed by one of the finest companies in Florence and commissioned for years. She revealed this information in bits, quietly alluding to them as she had to her irises.

Now, tapestries and fabrics in the area are mostly made by the Chinese from synthetic materials. The tourist haze has plastered storefronts with mini Davids and mediocre leather. The English tailoring company has closed. Gina's eyes aren't great and her hip bothers her.

The "C" stands for Caterina and the handkerchief is a gift from Gina to my niece whose forehead will need to be wiped after she is baptized. As she draws her fingers over the fine fabric, the detailed swirls and garnishes become even more pronounced and eye-catching. When my coffee cup is empty and my pants are paid for, I slide the wicker chair out to stand up. "Don't push it in!" she says quickly, "If you leave your chair just like that, it means you'll be back."

***Pane/Bread***

The word *company* comes from the roots *cum* and *panis*: with bread. Company is with whom you share your bread.



## **San Miniato**

They always knew how the elections would turn out before the results were announced.

“How?”

“Easy,” Marta says, “everyone had to pass our window on their way to vote and we knew exactly what they’d vote for.”

“There goes Gianni--oop--- we lost that one.”

Marta was born just before World War II and grew up in a small town called San Miniato Basso, just below Pisa near the mouth of the Arno River. It was kind of town where everyone knew that her father, Gino, hated milk. So, when he lost a bet, he was

forced to drink a glass of milk and a crowd of townspeople would show up to tease him or egg him on.

San Miniato is situated near the *Via Franciigena*, a Roman route--it is near the intersections of two main arteries that lead to Lucca and Florence and Pisa. So it has had its share of visitors. Raimundo was one passer-by who came through early in Marta's lifetime.

According to her, he showed up with a group of American soldiers who were greeted by Gino's pig. The pig went out in the road and sat in the middle, blocking the motorway. The GIs descended on the town bearing chocolate and cigarettes. Marta remembers Raimundo as her favorite. A slight blond child, Marta was feisty, and one of the first of many kids to gather around him. Raymond spoke a little Italian and befriended the storm of kids easily.

The family ran the local bottega or general store, but they didn't always sell their wares for cash. Instead, fruits and vegetables were brought in from the Valdarno (peaches, pears, cabbages, spinach, etc.,) along with eggs, bread, *salumi*, oil and wine; the customers traded their goods for sheets and dresses and dishes and towels and other supplies. They also incorporated a *pelliceria* or tailored coat store for leathers and furs. On the side, Marta's mother went into homes and cut hair. She would come back with a chicken or a basket of fruit or vegetables, and who knows how much information.

Their store was a sort of headquarters where neighbors could huddle and talk, especially in the hours before dinner. Naturally, the store became the hangout for kids and adults. Everyone got nicknames. Marta's was *Velena*, meaning poison, because she was a little spitfire who played rough. Lucky for me, her daughter-in-law, she tempered

the *velena* over time.

Bread was cooked in town in a wood-fired oven and, according to Marta, they only made it once a week. F catches this part of our conversation and makes a face. He likes his white *pane Toscano* fresh every day or it pains him to eat it (unless in another form like bread soup or *panzanella*). “But it was better bread,” she said, “it lasted a whole week and was better for you.” They called it *pane nero* and it had the consistency whole wheat or whole grain bread.

The bread man would bring a loaf to Marta’s store in exchange for some items. Her family would put it up on the rafters and cover it with a cloth to keep it in the right air path and away from the cat.

When the baker’s oven was cooling, the townspeople would squeeze their own recipes in the oven. For that matter, anyone who fired up an oven if he or she had one, could expect to share the heat. They were outdoor wood-fire ovens, many built with shards of glass in the bricks to help retain the heat. Marta remembers women with plates covered in dishcloths marching down to whichever oven was lit. At times there were lines, and, depending on the phase of heat, various pastries or bread would be cooked.

Baked cakes and tarts and cookies were other common morsels to line up with. Marta had a little satisfied grin when she told us how the town would fill with the odors of bread and sweets in the summers.

Sometimes they would bring over the big bottles of beans for *i fagioli in fiasco*. White beans with some oil, sage and garlic in globular Chianti bottles were placed on the hot ashes, positioned so the glass couldn’t break. If they left them in the embers overnight, the beans would slowly soak up the wood heat and seasonings and emerge with a softness and flavor nurtured by the hours.

Listening to Marta and her husband Roberto talk about the post-war years was like hearing stories about the Great Depression. I'm reminded of American sock puppets and porridge. But they seemed to be experts at making lemonade out of lemons, so to speak. However, that period and previous bouts of poverty--as they do in most cultures--worked their way into their local cuisine. Some of the best so-called gourmet dishes come from tough times.

Just as they used all the heat generated in their ovens, they had to make the most of the bread they baked. Back in Marta's childhood, the average person had a diet that consisted of much more bread than it does today. Even if it lasted for days, most bread would go stale after a while. Aside from that, they, and most other Italians seem to have more than a hundred solutions to aging bread problem, only the very last of them being throw it away. The best solutions produced revered winter soups like *ribollita*, or summer bread salads like *panzanella*. When F was small, Gino would give him wine-soaked bread with a little sugar.

Even now, it pains them to throw bread away. The bread they buy at the bakery near *La Pieve*, the Romanesque church from the 11<sup>th</sup>-century in Arezzo, goes stale after a day or two and the leftovers stack up. If they don't save them to cook with, they toss some out on the porch and see what winged visitors may show up--or save some for the neighbor's chickens and enjoy the fresh eggs in return. Or they turn it into soup or like *aquacotta* or *pappa al pomodoro*.

The word *company* comes from the roots *cum* and *panis*: with bread. Company is with whom you share your bread. I guess the layers of this term may have deeper connotations than we realize. Even the making of bread would have been a collaborative effort. All that togetherness---no wonder they could predict the outcome of elections.

## Juniper Bread

“Watch out for Beppe, he’s a crazy driver. You may not make it out there in one piece!” F called to me as I rushed out the door. Well, I’ll risk it, I thought. Beppe had obviously made it past eighty-years-old with himself behind the wheel. Besides, a few months living within medieval city walls were causing me feel my every breath, like I was trapped in a too-tight outfit after a big meal. This form of claustrophobia may be syndrome, as I had heard one of the locals echo the exact sentiment in his smug Aretino accent, patting his belly and looking around with squinted eyes, “*Arezzo mi sta stretto.*” Arezzo’s tight on me.

Arezzo is what some call the naval of Italy. It is between Florence and Rome and it’s surrounded by four valleys: the *Casentino*; the *Valdarno*, the *Val di Chiana* and the *Val Tiburina*. Winter lasted until May that year. Before spring officially arrives, the fifteenth-century city walls enclose you in a series of dark narrow streets. Conversations lag, buildings grow gray and heavy with the stillness of centuries. Even our dinner plates look repetitive. Spring hits each year like the pop of a champagne cork. Colors lighten;

people fill the cafés and streets. After an unusually long winter, my cork was ready to pop out of city limits. An invitation from our neighbors for a May afternoon at their farm in the countryside was most welcome, if only for a chance to take in the horizon.

Beppe, our neighbor, drove slowly--very slowly. As cars zipped past us, he and his wife Antonetta chattered from the front seat. From the back seat I watched the town give way to fields. I'd heard rumors that Antonetta, also in her eighties, was a master of many practical arts. Her grandmother and mother had stood her on a stool as a child and taught her roll dough into fine silky waves for filo or *sfoglia*. She could also embroider sheets fit for a queen and till a field quickly and efficiently. I'd heard that she was prepared for life in ways that people no longer were.

She grew up in a family like few remaining; she was self-sufficient, ran a mini-community from the farm (where we were headed). Her family had relied on itself for everything, and made an art out of it. "When you earn things with your own hands, you don't take them for granted," she pointed out. As we drove, both expressed alarm at how drastically things had changed in their lifetime. When I saw their farm, I was to understand how drastically.

As we dipped over the top of a hill, Beppe exclaimed, "This is the *Val Tiburina*..." He turned to look at me in the back seat with wide eyes, making me nervous about the road he wasn't watching. With all the right emphasis and implication, he whispered, "...where the Tiber River begins." That was one to sit with for a minute--Tiber River. Rome. The entire Roman Empire depended on a trickle of water from this valley. I'm not even sure I am capable of grasping the full impact of that notion. We continued on through the winding roads and morning-lit trees until we arrived in Anghiari.

Anghiari is a hillside town with a road that swoops down into a flat valley below-- the kind of road you might love to sail down on a bike, something Antonetta's done many times. Just at the curve in the swoop when it hits the valley is a marble sign marking the famous battle of Anghiari. Beppe stopped the car and lead me proudly over to the sign. We stood on the side of the road and he read it aloud as I read along.

*"Qui, fu la battaglia di Anghiari in 1440...L'onerevole Leonardo Da Vinci..."*  
Here marks the place of the battle of Anghiari in 1440, rendered in paint by the honorable Leonardo Da Vinci..." Beppe turned to look at me from under his brown hat to see my reaction before bolting back towards the car. He was so alert and quick in his movements, he reminded me of a fifteen-year-old. Maybe he is eternally fifteen. I ran to keep up. As we took the next turn off the main road onto the narrower lane towards the farm, they explained that there are remains of the battle, which took place between the Republic of Florence and the Milanos during the Lombard Wars, buried beneath their land and every once and a while a piece of old military equipment surfaces.

Coming to a stop in front of a small house on the edge of the property, Beppe suddenly bellowed, "Be careful when you get out of the car, Antonetta! If anything happens to you, we're *finished*."

There was a sober note of truth in his phrase. She took it in, and nodded. A bad fall near the fireplace had broken her hip and laid her up for the winter. She had been in a lot of pain and her invalidity had been like a broken wheel on a carriage, forcing them to stop their working rhythm and face the thought of life without independence.

"I can do it. Don't worry," Antonetta said with determination, pulling herself out of the car and moving her still-agile four-foot-eleven body swiftly toward the back door of the house, swinging the cane in her left hand rather than relying on it. Her grey-

auburn hair moved in wisps and her face upturned as usual, not from too much pride, but from being petite and managing to face the world anyway.

The little house was a storage area Beppe and Antonetta had converted into a place to stay when they came there. It faces a grassy courtyard. A three-story classical façade of a nineteenth-century house looms tiredly, but beautifully across from it. A barn and a stable finish the frame of the space, with openings that give way to the carefully divided herb gardens and other plots of land. The grass courtyard in the middle used to be a bustling space, full of passing family members tending to their chores.

The smell of tobacco drifted in the warm breeze as a cigarette company had taken over some of their larger fields and was using another old farm nearby to dry the leaves. Beppe still has his vineyard sectioned off in the distance that he manages on his own “because I want to drink good wine,” he explained with a shrug. They still have an *orto* and larger vegetable plots and rabbits and chickens. He darted off to tend to various chores. That day Antonetta took it slow inside the little house. They refused my every offer of help and invited me to roam around and look.

The façade of the old home had a few cracks in it and some worn window frames. The empty stable was crumbling on one side. The farm was stacked full of precisely neat piles of branches from many different types of trees, all tied together in separate bundles. Three fully dressed scarecrows or *spaventapasseri* were propped up in the back, buttoned shirts tucked in, hats on their heads--one even had an overcoat. I admired the completeness of all their outfits and realized they were the same size as Beppe. Must be his old clothes.

Soon, Beppe appeared and set down a few onions and offered to show me the big house. We entered the dim home and paused in the large foyer with high-ceilings. We



then ascended a large stone staircase. It brought us to the first wing of what turned out to be a huge, rustic, neglected home with elegant architecture. We roamed through the many family apartments, all dusty with squeaky doors that haven't been opened in ages. Some of the doors we even had to shove hard to open. Furniture had been moved haphazardly around the place.

An old ceramic bowl used to wash faces rested in the corner, antique beds shoved in the middle of rooms, armoires haunted hallways. Rooms led to more rooms, to wings with their own kitchens, and I could understand how a mini, self-sufficient civilization in the form of an extended family had thrived here. Even the attic boasted ample space with its tall ceilings and windows.

We trailed back down the stairs and Beppe showed me a large wooden box where the family used to keep the bread they made. "Now you'll meet Tonino, Antonetta's brother," he said, knocking on a door we hadn't been through. There was no answer but we pushed through anyway and the musky smell of the house disappeared behind us, replaced by the smell of pipe and fireplace smoke. We found Tonino asleep with his head on the kitchen table. The pods of the *fava* beans he had eaten for breakfast were strewn in a pile around him along with a few pieces of bread and a scattering of crumbs. Behind him loomed a large fireplace and next to it a cone-shaped vat with a drain in the bottom where they once washed their clothes.

Tonino was the only one left in this massive home, like a lone pirate on a shipwrecked boat, still managing somehow. He never wanted to leave, and kept to his own quiet ways while his siblings moved off to different areas. Two kittens had followed us in from outside and they moved quickly around the kitchen, hopping up to see if he

left anything interesting on the table. “Tonino!” Beppe woke him up to introduce me. He lifted his head, studied me for a second and put it down again.

I wandered back to help Antonetta in the little house, the kittens at my feet. I set the table, then went out to pick a few leaves of sage for her to add to the chicken. She apologized that her meal would be simple as it’d been a rough period. I told her not to worry. I was impressed how she threw very little away. Scraps were tossed to rabbits or cats or set aside to be put to use in some other way. She washed her hands with half of a lemon and it seemed to work just fine.

As she asked, I went out to call the two men to the table when lunch was ready. I could see Tonino in the distance; he had a pipe hanging from his mouth and a hoe in hand, tilling one of the fields with swift, mechanical concentration. Beppe had disappeared to his vineyard. I took in the quiet of the open space, pleased that my eye could travel over long distances before it met the horizon or the hilltop town up the slope. The silence was broken by a few birds and the scraping of Tonino’s tool. I approached him cautiously. He just grunted and kept at it when I told him lunch was ready.

Finally, we all made it to the table in the little house. Tonino barely spoke. He ate with the same concentration that he used in the fields. He had a special knife and a special cup at the dinner table. The knife was left over from the family’s silver collection that the Germans stole during the War, along with their chickens. His sister watched over him protectively at the table, filling his plate and cup, patting him on the back, checking on him with a glance every few moments. He seemed like a son to them. His physical presence, however, was essential to the continued existence of the farm.

I asked about the stacks of wood in the barn and Beppe rattled off a few different names of trees. One of them was juniper and Beppe recalled how he and his father used to make bread in an outdoor wood oven when he was a child, by using juniper branches. The juniper gave off a perfumed scent that seeped into the bread and filled it with the flavor of the tree. I wished I could taste that bread but it felt like it belonged in another life where all that furniture was in place and Antonetta rode to and from Beppe's house in a nearby town on her bicycle while her mother's breadbox stood full.

I inquired about Antonetta's legendary filo dough and she looked away sheepishly. "Once a professor came to dinner for Antonetta's *sfoglia* and he said it went down just like silk," Beppe said gesturing to his throat.

"It's been a long time since I made it. I don't have it in me these days," she said matter-of-factly.

I looked at the three of them around me at the table. Modern times came in and swept out this way of life, yet these three were hanging on, absolutely essential to each other. I could see the 15-year-old in each of them. On some level, maybe people don't really change that much. It was almost like they were running the farm in their own rebellious fashion while the real grown-ups were out of town. At the same time, they were seeing it all end and were wondering and fearing what was next.

*Questi Sono I Miei Vivi e Questi sono I miei morti*  
**These Are My Living and These Are My Dead**

Sunday, the great day of rest according to the Bible, unfortunately applies to the bakers of Florence. Stores are closed, bread remains unbaked. As a rule, you have to use the bread from the day before or make your own. Or go without. It just so happened that my roommates and I were in need of some, and we had recently discovered a rare baker-grocer who graciously fired up his oven and opened his doors on Sunday.

So I went down the hill to his store and waited in line for a loaf. As I was waiting, I noticed an elderly woman in a black and white Sunday dress heaving items on the sales counter. Her hair tucked in a hat, a white cane designated for the blind propped nearby, she hunched over to speak to the counter girl who helped her sort out coins and bills.

I eventually got my crusty brown loaf and stepped back out into the overcast afternoon. Not far ahead of me on the narrow sidewalk, the elderly woman was slowly walking. Her nylon-covered legs and her black patent leather shoes with small heels made cautious steps. Heavy shopping bags hung from each arm and obstructed the use of her cane.

I couldn't just pass her. So I inched up next to her and asked if I could carry her bags. She flashed me a relieved smile on her wide face and said, "*O, si.*" Her eyes were clouded and unfocused. I lifted the plastic bags from her and let her guide me slowly towards her home. The bags seemed to be full of ingredients which she may have

intended to use for a meal that day, including bread.

“Thank you, dear. I’m blind, you know--can’t see a thing. I could find my way, no problem. I know my way home so well as I’ve done this walk so many times. It’s just these bags that slow me down.” There was no trace of a complaint in her voice, and her mouth, when closed, was upturned, unpursed. She had an expression made more kind by severely open, ethereal eyes.

“I’m just so glad I could find bread today,” I replied.

She asked about my accent and where I was staying. She had been in the neighborhood for many years, she explained. We came to a doorway at the base of a steep road, originally intended for ox-carts. She pulled out a large key and opened the door smoothly.

“Come in, *tesoro*.” Her studio was dim, with hardly any windows. It had a speckled marble floor and smelled of laundered linens. A large bed, a table, an armoire, and two oversized dressers dominated the small room. She directed me towards the simple, almost dark kitchen and I set the bags on the counter. I eased out into the main room as she began to unpack.

The dresser to the left was covered in framed photographs. Most of them were color shots. I thought it strange that a blind person would have so many photos on display. “Those are my living,” she called from the kitchen. She could intuitively sense where I stood or maybe she could make out my outline. “Aren’t they beautiful?” She appeared in the doorway as I looked at the healthy faces of what must have been her children and grandchildren.

“And these are my dead,” she said proudly, pointing to the dresser on the right where even more photographs stood on display. Many of them were black and white,

though a few were in faded color. Most of the frames were silver. “*Mio marito*” was a boy in uniform next to middle aged man in a 1950’s style portrait, and “*mia mama e mio babbo,*” described a couple with composed expressions. She mentioned “*fratelli, sorelle,*” a black and white with shades of grey--also gone. Gone? She spoke as happily of the dead as of the living, as though they all belonged to the same world.

Here on these two dressers, she had a trail of pictures stretching deep into the past and another reaching out into the future. Could she *see* them there? Or did it matter? I couldn’t bring myself to ask. She seemed about to settle in so I decided to head home. She thanked me profusely as I began to go. Bag of bread in arm, I walked up the hill, thinking of the meal she might have between the living and the dead.

Both of my roommates, Ana and Jose, were sitting at our kitchen table when I arrived. I placed the bread on the table and one of them pulled out a jar of Nutella. Nutella is thick like peanut butter, but made with chocolate and hazelnut. We spread the concoction on the bread. As we ate it, in full color the nutella coated the roofs of our mouths I told them about our neighbor and how she is suspended between her invisible “*vivi*” and her ghosts. I told them that I suspected that she, as I certainly would if I lived alone, might talk aloud to them.

Years later, I think of her as I place the first photograph of “my dead” on my desk. Before, I only framed the living. The first was a black and white photo of my dad at his own desk in the 70s or 80s. Elbow on the table, head leaning on his palm, he grins, his eyes caught in mid-laughter. Now that expression, quintessentially him, is frozen in time and permanently stuck there as he resides in another, unreachable realm. Yet, his words and responses to my thoughts sound constantly in his voice and I think perhaps I keep his company all day, picture on not.

Maybe she knew what couldn't be seen, that even on the day of rest, there is bread for the living and the dead.

*Compagnia/ Company*

We all laughed and ate like boisterous kings.

**Feeding Pigs with the Count**



Noble features: Farnese, Medici, Strozzi? A Roman or Calabrian might be able to pick a Tuscan out of a crowd. Large almond eyes, wide cheekbones, nicely-drawn wide mouths. Add in a perky ski jump nose for the women and a softened, but determined beak for the men--you begin to recognize the features as you see them in the faces you pass on the street. They're not as beautiful as Botticelli faces, but they are not unlike them either.

The man sitting next to me at the wedding rehearsal dinner had all of these features. Though dulled by his sullen demeanor, his face was an attractive composite of them. He nodded during conversation, not seeming to hear a thing. At a certain point, his melancholy air was too heavy for the occasion. I didn't know him, but I began to tease him, just to see if I could crack his mood. He smiled.

Only the next day, when he came to greet us at the castle entrance, was he outed as a count—or the shadow of a count living in the family castle among all the trappings of royalty and grace. The melancholy count was hosting our friends' wedding in his hilltop castle.

The ceremony was to be held in a tiny chapel next to the castle and only the priest, the bride and groom, and the wedding party could fit inside for the mass. The rest of us waited out on the grass between the castle and the chapel. Nobody seemed to have qualms about talking on their cell phones or smoking *during* the ceremony.

I ended up having a great conversation with a tall, skinny guy who was a little less formally dressed than others about gypsy festivals held in the south of France while the priest recited scripture in the sweltering (they would tell us later) chapel. Around me, men in perfectly tailored suits and women in September dresses huddled together and murmured to each other on the lawn.

The bride finally appeared at the chapel door in her elaborate dress. Radiant with a dash of terror in her eyes, she waved to everyone and hugged a few children. The groom was close behind. Her man (instead of maid) of honor, a tall gay man in his fifties, and a sweat-covered Filippo, the best man, emerged.

Dinner was served in the great dining hall. Two enormous fireplaces framed the cluster of round tables. Chandeliers hung above us. We sat facing the bride's parents. Far from their own province and friends, they fumed, wide-eyed and suspicious, as though they were at a murder trial instead of their daughter's wedding. The poor bride gave them consoling glances and at one point reached over and brushed her father's cheek with her palm. Her groom and former professor, who planned the wedding, looked on, worried.

Slices of lard on little toasts were served as the first course. *Lardo di colonatta* comes from the Carrara area, but this may have been a more local version of the most prized part of the pig that makes one think more of silk than of, well, lard. A white layer with peppered edges shaved on the bread was so delicate that it seemed to coat your mouth in a gentle caress. A long feast ensued and we struggled to have conversation with the others at our table.

After dessert, many of us went to dance to Morrissey songs in the castle foyer as a line of boar heads looked on from the wall above. It was only when the guests began to leave that I realized the count whom I had noticed wandering occasionally among the partiers had spent most of the evening lurking in an adjacent drawing room.

F and I were the only couple the bride and groom invited to sleep in one of the castle rooms. We joined the count in the drawing room for a little while before bed. It is interesting to see a man at home in his castle, literally. Looming by the fireplace with his dog, he got up from time to time, preoccupied, and paced around like a modern-day

Rochester.

Eventually we climbed the steep, dark stairway, past the boar heads and family crests. St. Francis of Assisi had once slept at the castle too, it is said. His name is written in the family ledger from the 1200's. I wish we could have written our names in that family ledger, several pages later. St. Francis reportedly left his cloak there and it was held in the family's possession for centuries before being given to a museum.

It appears St. Francis got some much deserved respite from sleeping in caves and fields. I'm not well versed in the saints' lives, but I came to know about St. Francis because of the countless paintings of the man, scattered throughout the region. His hands marked with red stigmata markings in some, brown robed and preaching to birds in others.

His presence is also evident in the natural looking "Franciscan ceilings," made of wood beams and painted with ornate designs. They make some large churches welcoming and intimate. Besides humility, he is said to have brought reverence for nature into the church. Like many greats, did he tap into a forceful aspect of the people among whom he worked? Did he speak to the birds to acknowledge a love for nature already characteristic of agrarian people? St. Francis above all else promoted the value of living humbly without possessions to serve God. It was his wish that no elaborate monument be constructed in his memory upon his death, Contrary to that wish, the Church built a large cathedral lined with gold in Assisi.

I woke in the shadows and walked across the stone floor to try and peer out the bottle-thick window but could not make out any shapes beyond it. I can't say I slept soundly in the castle. The walls seemed too loaded with stories.

In the morning, the count offered us coffee. We followed him to the kitchen; it had another giant fireplace plus a long wooden table with benches. Covering the table and counters were dishes, platters and leftover roast from the wedding party. The count rummaged through the debris looking for clean coffee cups.

When we sat down to coffee at a table on the lawn, the count leaned back in his chair and told us that he also had an apartment in the city. "It is hard to maintain all this property on my own." We looked out over expanse of land below. Low, tree-covered, hills spread out for acres upon acres of castle property. A lord of the manor without *contadinos*, much of the upkeep seemed to rest on his shoulders alone and he glared at it begrudgingly. He told us that his wife and young children were in the apartment in the city. Let us hope they were not trapped in the castle attic.

Earlier, he had found some *porcini* mushrooms from somewhere on the property and assembled a row of healthy brown and gold nuggets of different sizes. We sat near them and lounged in the sun with the bride and groom, their union acting as an omen of our own. We let our legs dangle over the castle wall, a bigger ivy-covered wall loomed behind us.

The count, who had been cleaning the kitchen, could be seen hauling sacks of garbage into the back of a jeep. He said he was headed out road to feed the pigs. Maybe he caught my expression, because he paused and asked, "Do you guys wanna come?" F and I jumped up and headed for the jeep and let the bride and groom face their new status in the brightening sun.

We rattled over the long dirt road in the jeep, windows down. The count seemed

more easy-going as we passed groves of oak and chestnut. He even laughed when F referred to a pig as “*Il re della tavola.*” In a three-course meal, especially among F’s friends, pork shows up in different forms multiple times, and they refer to the animal as the “king of the table.”

Finally on a valley stretch, a group of black and white pigs were huddled. When they saw the jeep, they came tearing toward the barbed-wire fence with chorus of high-pitched grunts.

These kings were getting party leftovers. They were the black and white *Cinta Senese* pigs, the most highly prized of the Tuscan porkers. They are a fundamental part of Tuscan identity and cuisine and because they were once endangered, rigorously controlled by regional regulations. If sold on the market, they are supposed to eat only nuts and organic grains. But since these were destined to friends of the count, they could dine on whatever he decided to give them, I suppose.

He grabbed a bag and climbed up on a fence post and flung the scraps of tomatoes and peppers, roast beef and crumbs, and maybe a few slivers of lard in a colorful spray above them. He emptied the bags with a gusto that almost matched that of the hungry pigs.

When we returned to the castle, the catering help had arrived to clean up. A plump local woman who seemed to be an old friend set a spread of leftovers on a table outside along the castle bench with paper plates and plastic forks. A handful of friends arrived. Along with the caterers, the cleaners, the count, and the married couple, we took our places on the bench.

The bride looked far more comfortable in her hooded sweatshirt with “Brazil”

scrolled on it than she had in her gown. The groom looked positively relieved that the party was over--and so did the count.

Formalities disappeared with the silver forks that were soaking somewhere. We started in on the same meal the pigs had devoured down the road. The catering woman loudly teased the count and the others. His features lost their sullenness and became animated. We all laughed and ate like boisterous kings.

***Fiera del Mestolo***  
**Festival of the Wooden Spoon**

Because almost every culinary delight is now available everywhere year around, it is easy to lose track of the source of our food. Almost all of us in the western world has had a plate of curry or a hot espresso or a dish of polenta, come fall or spring, drought or rain. We savor these delights with scarcely a notion of their origins. Gone are the days of waiting for a crop to ripen or flour to be milled--or are they? Witness "The Festival of the Wooden Spoon," still in some Northern Italian towns, such as Tuscany's Arezzo and

Lippiano-Monte Santa Marian Tiberina. *La Fiera del Mestolo*, akin to our harvest festivals, signifies that the polenta flour is milled and ready.

Traditionally, cooks would emerge from their kitchens to obtain a freshly carved wooden mixing spoon for the polenta season. They had to be careful not to get spanked...unless they wanted to.

Black and white photos from Arezzo's community archives taken in the 30s and 40s show groups of people peering into stacks of wooden spoons in the local square. Back then, country people would bring vegetables, eggs, preserves, salamis, meats, and livestock from the surrounding countryside to exchange for sheets and plates and copper pots in the town.

The yearly ceremony of selecting a *mestolo* was spiced with a not-so-subtle courting ritual, mostly among adolescents. If you received a whack on the bottom with a mixing spoon, it meant someone was smitten with you. I can imagine many a flushed face among the young marketers, their behinds either struck or neglected by the *mestolo*.

Over time polenta has been made from all kinds of grains. Polenta consumption can be dated back to the Romans who ground what they called Pultem on stones and served it with meat or cheese. Pultem was usually made with farro, a native Italian grain. Nutritious polenta made from wild Italian grains such as chickpeas, faro or millet was commonplace until Northern Italians began to rely on the corn crop in the seventeenth century.

Following the introduction of maize from the Americas, polenta most typically was made from corn meal, known as *grano saraceno* in Tuscany. A staple for the poor, it was usually prepared in copper pots known as *piaolos* and was, in some areas, more common than pasta.

The most common now is made from *Gran Turco*, otherwise known as corn flour. Maize seemed quite exotic when it first arrived in Europe after the discovery of Americas. At the time, because of trade with the east, and the furs and tapestries and spices that came in on the ships, exotic things were associated with Turkey. Therefore, it became known as “Turkish grain.”

At today’s *Fiera del Mestolo*, most people are too polite to reenact the spanking ritual. Booths surround the stands of mixing spoons, peddling shoes, clothes, candy, tablecloths and a few handmade leather goods. A mass of internationally manufactured items like plastic beads and balloons also claim a large presence. Roasted pigs are displayed proudly and many festival-goers indulge in a slab of *porchetta* on a sandwich as they walk from stand to stand.

The *mestolos*, or wooden spoons, are hand carved for the occasion. After the festival, cooks recede into their kitchens, armed with *mestolos*. Throughout the autumn they cover their tables with delicious recipes like truffle polenta or porcini mushroom polenta, polenta with fresh herbs and Polenta with black leaf kale.

Maybe some still share the polenta with the ones they once wooed by the whack of the spoon.



*Ana e la Cipolla Infinita*  
*Ana and the Infinite Onion*

A scrap of an onion is about to play the starring role in my dinner. Ana doesn't want to purchase anything until every bit of every single vegetable is used. There is no such thing as using half the onion and letting the rest wrinkle up only to be tossed at the end of the week: "Waste not want not!" That's why onion pasta is for dinner. "Gonna be disgusting," I think.

Ana doesn't seem worried. Along with onion pasta, I'm about to digest a lesson in poverty, hospitality, and manners. They're all connected, apparently.

Ask the girl about history, and she'll start with the dawn of civilization in the

Fertile Crescent. Keep asking and you'll find her well-versed in just about every century since. This means she has the back-story on anything from playing cards to compasses to tea.

She is a fantastic conversationalist because she can view any topic many different angles. On top of that, she has a saucy Spanish sense of humor (a banana is never *just* a banana, at the mention of rabbit she can make a man blush) and she's a great cook. She can rock any dinner party.

In fact, the onion may have been left over from one of her dinners. The onion also might have shared, as onions often do, a basket with tomatoes and some of those Italian bell peppers that are curled like knotted fists. The basket stands on a shelf next to basement stairway alongside her plants. (A few years later Ana would instruct one of her students to draw a scene from the Sistine chapel on the basement wall.)

Sometimes, she serves dinner in her airy art studio-bedroom upstairs near the fireplace and managed to have at least eight different countries represented among her guests. Friends at the European Institute in Fiesole and artists at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* gathered around her mini seventeenth-century fireplace, listened to her flamenco music and her jokes. I was always impressed by how she could hold such a broad spectrum of visitors in rapt attention with stories and jolts of humor.

Downstairs from that fireplace, in the same servants' quarters-turned student housing that we share, I was surprised at how tasty the onion pasta actually was. Olive oil glistened in a soft golden layer around the *orrecchini*, a slight addition of herbs complementing the sautéed, dime-sized portions of the purple onion.

For the first time, I was able to concentrate on the flavor of the onion per se and

discover its goodness--lively, sweet, fleshy, slightly bitter, and not at all overpowering. Perhaps the onion was even happy for its chance to take center stage for once. I confessed to Ana that I expected much worse. She laughed.

“You can really make the most of your resources,” I remarked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” she answered.

My comment launched a whole conversation and, incidentally, a lesson in history and manners. Poverty and wealth are the makers of hospitality. Which, I was about to discover, is connected to a *complex* system of manners that someone probably wrote in a backward hand like the one in which Leo Da Vinci wrote his notebooks. I had not quite found the mirror to decode it.

Ana has the decoder. Not that she had ever known poverty first-hand but she grew up partaking in an ongoing culinary history. Look at the Tuscans and their bread soups. For her, that resourcefulness meant cooking fish on the beach of Malaga, Spain. Born in Southern Spain, she functioned on what she called “*meridionale*” or Southern manners. Making what you’ve got stretch out to the furthest reaches of its potential is something people who have known poverty in their history understand. “What would you do if you just have one potato and you’re hungry and your neighbor comes over?” she asked.

“Hide it?” I said, kidding.

“No! You share it with him. Because the next day he might have one and you won’t. And when he offers you part of his, you are grateful and you don’t forget it.”

Later I read one of Cato’s principal pieces of advice on beginning a farm. It was written in his *De Re Rustica (On Agriculture)* in the second century B.C.E.: ensure the

love of your neighbor. Interdependency creates some unspoken rules and I had already broken most of them. A person hosting out of town guests offers the first dinner out but the guests must pay for the following meal. People coming to visit or stay with a family bring the woman of the house a gift, not so much the man. Of course one never goes to any meal at someone's house empty-handed. One must always be careful not to show someone up with over-the-top chivalry or generosity. Each host and guest plays out demonstrative acts of kindness that are genuine, but often neatly agreed upon. Everything has its measure.

If I were willing to have a toe shot off for each of the times I've screwed up, I'd have none left. I'd almost gladly give a few toes at least. For the most part, I grew up with a straightforward style; social history is a bit scarce in California where I'm from. Especially among college students; "no thanks," "yes please," "eat it if you want," and "you owe me five dollars and 60 cents for that beer" are all perfectly fine.

Compared to that, the Italian's manners feel as elaborate as the ceiling of a baroque church. Abroad, I constantly stumbled through the complex set of social negotiations that were completely foreign to me. Ana's version of hospitality seemed akin to the Tuscan, and even to the Western Irish, two places I visited and where I tripped up in the delicate dance of refusing or not refusing--of taking some, but not too much.

For example, I didn't know that when I casually told an Italian friend who had invited me to her home near the sea for Easter vacation that (at the time) I didn't like most fish, I was venturing into dark territory.

She called her mother to break the news. Her mom had just purchased days' worth of the best fish mostly because I, the guest and a foreigner, was coming to stay with them. I had no idea she'd put it in the freezer and would deprive the whole family of

the fish while I was there. I didn't have the finesse to get myself out of that one, so I just felt awful. They *all* didn't have to miss out. I can still feel the little brother's glare.

Ana admitted to being taken aback by American and sometimes British straightforward, no nonsense manners. I explained, "They're being honest, not offensive! In our world, if you want something, you ask for it, if you don't, you refuse. If everyone's on a budget, you split the check at the end of an evening out."

"Yeah, but you miss so much that way!

"So much confusion," I retort.

I experienced a flashback to a drizzly Western Irish town where I was identified as "the American cousin" merely by walking down the street. Flash!—I began see Ana's point. My parents' bright rain pant/jacket ensembles—my mother's magenta and my father's yellow, and my black outfit made of a teenage attempt to counteract them—may have helped the relatives spot us. We were due the following day, but thought we'd sneak up on the down to check it out first. So much for alien stealth.

We agreed to meet some cousins for a night at the pub. The following day we took the country road up to one of the houses on the farm where my grandmother grew up. My father was delighted to see the farm he hadn't visited since he was a child. We arrived to find that the cousins had pulled out all the stops--all of them. The wine and whisky and soda flowed and flowed. We were treated to a five-course meal that began with a French soup and ended with three different desserts. Our hostess was a lovely woman with a broad smile and a bun piled above Audrey Hepburn eyebrows. She had labored over our feast for hours, even though we had barely met them. Even at 14, the

idea that I could refuse one of the cakes made me shudder, though I was stuffed.

At a visit to my grandfather's family farm in Mayo a few days later, we found that relatives had slaughtered a lamb for the occasion. Again, we were grateful, and a bit awed. We ate every scrap of lamb on our plates.

Over the onion pasta, I tell Ana about an episode of Ireland's sitcom, *Father Ted*. Two nuns go out for tea and gossip and end up beating each other up amid fifty empty teacups because each refuses to let the other to pay the bill. I insist that I find our manners refreshingly clear and insist that she shouldn't take them the wrong way.

On the other hand, once I went to a birthday dinner in the U. S. for twelve people and someone pulled out a pad of post-it notes to attach the amount to be charged to each of the several credit cards the poor waitress was given. So I guess we have our own brand of confusion.

Ana's talents for stretching an onion as far as it can go have helped me learn to be as innovative in simple ways when it comes to maximizing and saving and sharing; thanks to this system, I learned to like fish. I never show up empty handed. It's a language, and I guess I have developed a sort of phrase book, but I have yet to be the baroque dinner guest.

*La Sagra di Venere*  
The Feast of Venere

In Venere, an eleventh-century statue of two peacocks drinking from the same fount was discovered a few years back. It is an image found in other parts of the region as well and is said to symbolize eternal life. Our friend Andrea's cousin found it on their family property, and it now lives in the Arezzo Museum of the Middle Ages. The cousin found it near a ruined building that used to be a family chapel. Filippo and I came upon the statuette-frieze one day in the museum with Andrea (Italian for Andrew) and his partner Cristina.

Andrea and Cristina were already some of my favorite people with whom to look at art--possibly because of connections like this, but also because of their gentle but astute observations that seemed to enhance everything we saw. For example, at another exhibit Cristina noticed the reflection of the museum lights inside a hollow Roman statue of Minerva. The reflection breathed life into the statue, gave a glint to her eye as she stared off in the distance. Similarly, the woodwork in one of the little side chapels at *La*

*Verna*, the home of St. Francis' cave and church, seems vastly, almost impossibly, intricate. Andrea, dissecting the techniques and touching the finely carved crevices, made it seem even more so.

They're both from land along one of the bends of the Arno river, a short distance away from *Ponte Buriano*, the bridge that can be seen in the background of the Mona Lisa. In September when apples droop from branches and mushroom hunters seek out their secret treasure spots, dinner tables undergo a transformation. The cool cucumber salads and melon dishes of the summer are forgotten and autumn makes its debut. Fall is a fantastic time in Venere and in the entire region. The earth starts dishing out some of its best yearly offerings. Fresh game appears with mushrooms, new oil, new wine, chestnuts, and polenta. Venere, for Filippo and I, has been the best place for fall meals. Andrea's family hosts unforgettable dinners. In September, the mushroom feast and the *Sagra di Venere* kick off the fall.

Mushroom hunters, like Andrea's father, Aldo, and brother, get hushed and protective when they talk of their mushroom hot spots. They had been extremely busy before their finds were sprawled out on the long table for twenty or so dinner guests to enjoy. The mushroom dinner was thrown together spontaneously because they had struck it rich in the woods.

The feast stars six different plates for six different kinds of mushrooms. Aldo hunts, Louisa cooks, and a table of twenty friends starts with the *gianarelli* mushroom salad with a vinaigrette and a crisp white wine. The shaved raw mushrooms with their white flesh and orange tips make a good looking and soft salad, and the citrus squeezed on with the light white wine made for a delicate initiation into an increasingly hearty meal.



We move on to two different kinds of pasta, one of *pappardelle con i porcini*, the other made with goose sauce. I sit near the head of the table with the family patriarch who was in his early 90s. He had spent time in England during the war and seemed delighted to lean over and deliver a few phrases in British English.

The third course consisted of huge flat porcini caps that are grilled on top of steak fillets. They have a similar consistency and enrich the flavor of the meat. Two mushroom side dishes were made of *russole*. They all possess different consistencies and shapes.

We could hardly bear to glance at the display of cookies that followed. But the chilled grappa or *digestivo* looked very appealing. At first I thought there were blueberries in the bottom of the bottle of blue-purple liquor, but when I tasted it I realize that it was made with myrtle berries. Cristina brought up the myrtle berries from Sardinia at the end of the summer, and Louisa made this delicious icy concoction. I and another American friend at the table could have downed the whole bottle ourselves, very happily, but manners prevailed and we resisted after a second helping.

Francesco, or Frank, the patriarch, asked me in his accented British, if I would like cream in my coffee. He grew up in Venere and had spent just about all his life there, save for his time in England. I believe his parents and grandparents had as well.

Cristina's Campulucci family home, just a stone's throw from Venere, is much like a *Casa Colonnica*, or standard Tuscan farm house with the traditional cellar, the low ceilings, the well, *orto*, and rows of fruit trees. The home was once used as the village school. Andrea's grandfather Frank even went to school in Cristina's current house when he was a child. Andrea went to another village school-in-a-house until it was closed in the 70s, after which he was bussed off to the city school in Arezzo.

Beppe claimed that Filippo was always "on the moon." In the international music

world F is absolutely on the pulse of things, but that is light-years away from Beppe's world of wine and juniper bread. I thought our whole generation must be "on the moon" in a certain sense--totally detached from the old rhythms and rather inept at the crafts and land cultivation that kept people going for so long.

Andrea and Cristina fall somewhere in between. With dazzling blue eyes, they both looked out at us from across the table. They are a graceful couple, raised with all that old knowledge, but like many, living outside of it. Save for the fact that Andrea enjoys pruning the trees. He's an architect and she's a teacher and neither has much interest in going back to keep up the land on which their families toiled for decades or more.

They don't have a need. They can easily tell you about lunar planting or how to make cheese or build a brick oven, but they do precious few of those crafts themselves. In the next breath, you'll see that they're quite detached as they switch topics to Joy Division or Chicago sky-rises or Yves Tanguy. But the season's offerings and their family meals bring them back again.

Around the time of the mushroom feast, Filippo and I returned to Venere for the yearly *Sagra*. Every year, all the families in the village of Venere gather their recipes, fresh produce from their *ortos*, and whatever they have procured from mushroom hunts-- or regular hunting-- and have a huge September festival. I think it quite likely that it is a tradition leftover from when all the town families were helping each other harvest the vineyards.

*Sagra* is a word for feast. These take place all over Tuscany. When polenta is ready, there might be a *sagra* of polenta or a pecorino cheese *sagra*, *sagra* of pigeon or an olive oil *sagra*. It isn't always so specific. It can be a hunters' *sagra*, or a town *sagra* to

which all the inhabitants contribute something different. Many little towns in Tuscany have their own *sagras*.

In Venere, weeks before the mid-September town feast, the families get together to initiate preparations. The geese are gathered for pasta sauce *Salsa D'Ocha*, the boars are prepared, and the late summer fruits and vegetables are appraised. In the days before the festival, the families spend countless hours in preparation.

When they are ready to go, they create a giant buffet-type mini restaurant in one of the fields. They bring in beer and wine, sometimes a DJ or a band, a dance floor and carnival games. Locals come in from the city and around the region, pay the cashier, grab a glass of wine or beer and a ticket for either the *primo* or *secondo* course or both.

Andrea's brother and another friend stuff napkins in their collars for man-bibs and compete to see who can eat the most. I wouldn't be surprised if the two of them knocked off a whole boar in one sitting. An old record player, someone's grandfather's motorcycle and other objects from the past are assembled on a table as a reminder that these *sagras* have been going on a long time.

At one dinner Andrea got to talking about architecture. He told us about International Style. The use of local materials and methods gave way to a cleaner, anti-ornamental style that prized a building's function. Instead of the natural progression of a country's architecture (Renaissance to Mannerism for example), the drastic departure of style was used all over the world. In a sense International Style derailed the narrative of native architectural evolution. Basically, a clean look was achieved through a conglomeration of ideas and materials from all over the world. Japanese or American materials and shapes might have been used in a building in Milan. Industrial, mass-produced materials were, in fact, part of the look.

Andrea has built some new structures and certainly admires minimalist spaces and, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright's use of lines and glass. But his current project restoring an old villa turned the conversation back to the native style. We agreed that it is interesting to see how history tells itself in the buildings. One can trace the wood and stucco and stone taken from the area to make them. We talked of the resurgence of that local style, the use of local materials and what it would mean to backtrack and resume the narrative.

It seems that Andrea's distinction between international and native style could be applied to character, too. Sometimes he and Cristina would speak suddenly about wells or the pigeon coops in abandoned farmhouses. She has been seen with a dazzling basket of green and purple peppers and eggplant and cucumbers from her family's summer *orto*. It seemed only natural for them to invite us to a dinner of game with pellets still in them, or to the mushroom feast or to the *Sagra of Venere*.

At those times I can detect the native materials in their character right back to the peacocks drinking from the fountain. F and I, and many of our other friends have been shaped in the International or Modernist style. By remaining connected themselves, Andrea and Cristina help connect us.

## Conclusion

In Romanesque churches constructed between the ninth and twelfth centuries, there isn't much decor. The simplicity is comforting. On some pillars or paintings, simplicity is occasionally broken by outbursts of fantastical Medieval creatures: half birds, half reptiles entwined with bulls and dragons and goats. The robust animal spirit of paganism throbs in the paintings and columns.

Even though I'm not religious, I take great solace in the Romanesque churches. Unlike giant gothic cathedrals or packed marble and gold covered baroque interiors, they say little, but so much at the same time.

Florence's Romanesque gem *San Miniato al Monte* is aligned with the sun. It was built on a hillside sacred to Etruscans. On the dawn of the spring equinox, the sun rises directly behind the altar, fills the church with light, then rises directly above the point of the triangle of the edifice. Over the altar the phrase "We welcome the sun from the orient" is written in Latin. I had heard the rumor, then woke before dawn on the spring equinox and watched from the *Erta Canina* bedroom to see if it was true. The sun did indeed come up right above and pause momentarily on the uppermost point of the edifice.

In the lower crypt of the church, a series of mismatched columns look like a petrified forest. The monks sing their vespers there every evening. The religious icons of the interior are infused with undercurrents of a sort of pagan mysticism and the structure was built partially with scraps from the Roman Empire.

In Arezzo, *La Pieve* has similar mismatched columns on the exterior. Inside, it is plain except for those mixed creatures peering quietly from the columns, a Franciscan ceiling, and an eruption of rich color on a gold-lined panel painting near the altar.

When I stay with the Salvadoris, I go to the bakery right next to it each morning to buy the daily bread. Then I take the bread in its brown bag that crinkles in my fingers and spend a half hour or so in the quiet space. It has become a sort of ritual.

I brought my parents in to *La Pieve*, and to a whole series of intriguing Romanesque churches—*San Minato al Monte*, *La Pieve*, and *Sant'Antimo* near Montalcino. My father took one step inside *Sant'Antimo* and commented that it must be a place built by agrarian people. Of course, when he said it, I could see that those creatures spoke to a mystic connection to the land.

Italian cultivation methods extend from the land, to the plate, to the community and are enhanced with knowledge of preservation, mythology, folklore and a sophisticated appreciation of natural flavor and quality.

This way of life is held together with bolts of common sense and harmony. Though the old world is layered and sometimes smothered with the new, if you scratch the surface, there are traces of a way of living that has been intact for centuries. That way of life is fading, however, and valuable information about surviving unstable economic times may fade with it, along with a long strand of knowledge full of stories and tricks. The industrialized food phenomena hit Italy sixty years ago, along with the trend of working in factories that eventually emptied the fields of *contadinos*.

The European Union is plowing industrial fields over many crops, once full of enough variety to feed many families. The diversified farms are being covered in grain or other massive plots of vines or fruits to sell to an international market, quite like the American food industry. In the midst of this, the concept of continuity strikes me as something essential. How can we live a healthy life if we're cut off from the knowledge accumulated over many centuries?

The kindness the families who know what it means to live close to the source and provide for everyone has values that we can all learn from. The art of preservation, the intuitive conservation, and the naturally procured, carefully tended dinner tables keep much intact, even amidst chaos and problems.

Those Romanesque spaces, and mostly my mornings at *La Pieve*, came to epitomize what I discovered in Italy. Bread in hand, an afternoon lunch with friends and family ahead of me, and a beautifully crafted interior. All were tied together in a rhythm that was natural and sound.

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## Vita

Meghan McCormack was born in northern California. She obtained a B.A. in English Literature with a minor in Art History from Sonoma State University in 2001. She studied and worked in Italy for a total of four years. In 2008 she began to work towards an MFA in Creative Writing in the University of New Orleans Low-Residency Program with a concentration in Nonfiction-Literary Journalism. *Close to the Source*, her research-writing project took shape in workshops and over the course of two UNO International writing seminars—one in France and one in Mexico.