

Made With Love -The Italian Way

Three Grandmothers from Tuscany

Lele & Mimma & Franca



LE DIACCE



PODERE CIONA

Written by Lorraine Segil



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Chapter One: Introduction

Mimma, Franca and Lele - How did it all start?

In a life that included about 200 days a year of travel, while I was busy running and growing my business, I decided to take a vacation with my husband, and newly-wedded son and daughter-in-law. We decided to hike for a week in Italy, and take some cooking lessons. Little did I know that meeting Lele, Mimma and Franca, the chefs and grandmothers of Tuscany, would change my life.

I realized while surrounded with the aromas of tarts baking, pasta cooking, chicken roasting and tiramisu cooling, that life is more than money, travel, clients and accomplishments. Life is for feeling, tasting, laughing, and doing the soft things that bring creative and lasting pleasure. At that moment I began to re- think my past life, and plan a very different future. The epiphany lasted even after I returned to my frenetic schedule. And finally, on January 1, 2007, I sold out the last portion of my business to my partners, and began a journey into a gentler, more creative and family-centered existence. The first step into my new life, was onto a plane and over from the USA to Tuscany, to spend another week with my new Italian grandmother friends. Now we had some quality hours in which they began to share their thoughts, dreams and memories with me, along with amazing recipes, short cuts, hints and solid grandmotherly philosophy. I promised them that I would write their stories, and help them leave a legacy for their children, grandchildren and generations to come.

Hence this mini-book and my relationship with these three remarkable women, whose recipes and insights, love and flirtatiousness, inclusiveness and joy of full living, opened up the hidden areas of my life that had been waiting to flower and bloom.

And so it can be for many of you who are readers of this book, who are strong men and women and realize value from the driving force of taste and smell, food for love, slow eating for conversation, commonality out of cooking together and learning tolerance by tasting. I am told by my family, that I am a pretty good cook. I like to make swift easy appealing meals from ingredients always present in our pantry, with unforgettable tastes and family memories embedded in cooking and eating experiences. The grandmas' message of love and connectedness is something that I and my family now live every day –and so, although there will be a series of books for you to choose from on The Little Farm Company website, this is the first – my gift to the grandmothers of Tuscany for the changes I made in my life after meeting and cooking and living with them.

I heartily recommend that you contact, visit and cook with them – it will change your life - their website is www.podereciona.com and you can email mimmaferrando@alice.it directly. Mention my name in the subject line – Lorraine.

Thank you Franca, Lele and Mimma!



PODERE CIONA

Franca's home, her vineyard and olive grove in Tuscany, Italy

Chapter Two: The Background Story

I was too excited to sleep. I was in Tuscany – and my new adventure was about to begin!

It was five in the morning and I was staying in the guest house of Franca, the grandmother from Tuscany who was going to share her story with me that day. The sun was barely rising but I was wide awake.

I went into the wood-beamed living room and opened the shutters, sliding back the wooden slats one by one as the windows, frosted in the cold, opened to let the night cold in. I could barely see the outlines of the grapevines that surrounded the home. Gradually the time passed as I dreamed of risottos and Tuscan prosciutto, wanting the day to begin so that my adventure could start, interviewing the three grandmothers, the country chefs who live in the glorious hills of Tuscany.

Finally at 7am the early morning light started to bring definition to the sky and the waves of mist that floated through the hills which undulated around the whole property. Wrapping myself in my blankets, I ventured outside, to see the beauty of Tuscany in its morning pristine beauty. The first feeling was of silence. Not a sound...just heavy air, with mist lifting, as yellow and pinks colored the skies....I tiptoed around the house, filled with brick, wood, antiques, pictures of family and friends. Then I came upon the teaching kitchen. It used to be a flat, a small apartment for Franca's daughter who has since, in the tradition of her mother, aunts, father and grandparents, become an adventurer – working for the Red Cross in the middle of Africa, in many ways treading where no one else has tread. Everywhere in this glorious home, which looks as if it was built in the 1800's yet has been totally rebuilt with under-floor heating and a kitchen with every important utensil

needed by a country chef, there are reminders that this is Chianti in Tuscany and that life is all about food and wine – everything to do with wine. For Podere is a working vineyard, not just a place where people come from all over the world to learn to cook and appreciate Italian cuisine Tuscany style. It's a place which grows, harvests and creates its own wine which is sold worldwide –a boutique winery in Chianti...but more about that later when we sample the home created recipes and share with you the delicacies that come from the kitchens of Franca, Lele and Mimma. So maybe this is the time to begin the story.

Mimma and Franca, sisters, with their very close cousin Lele, grew up in family that cooked together – as do most Italian families. They were career women in other fields, and followed their husbands across the world to Kenya, London and Brussels in their careers.

However in their 60's they began to spend more time cooking for family and friends, then friends of friends and soon people were coming to their glorious homes and guest houses in Tuscany from Australia, Canada and the USA, and the magic began.

They realized that it was not the cooking lessons that people remembered – although of course they cooked and used the tips and recipes. The magic was in the warmth of human contact, the fact of being hugged, touched and loved, encompassed in the atmosphere of joy that these women created in their homes for their own families and guests. It was the feeling of being accepted by these grandmothers for who they were, no matter their ages or circumstances. It was not their status or wealth that mattered when they gathered around the kitchen table - many of the guests were captains of industry, career women and men at the peaks of their careers, but rather who they were.

Over the week that these guests spent with the grannies cooking in their Tuscan homes, each individual opened his or her life, soul and relationships to the group. People spoke about long lost loves, about pain and pleasure, children who took the wrong path, and those who found their way.

And then the guests returned home.

But the memory of their Tuscan moments of closeness accompanied by the smells of good food in a kitchen full of wine, laughter and tears, remained with them for decades. The cards, notes, emails, photos keep coming – many years later – from families who relate to these grandmothers as if they were indeed their kin, updating them on births, marriages, lives and deaths.

And what Franca, Mimma and Lele realized was that they had tapped into a huge need, a deep wanting in those of the Anglo Saxon cultures, for all the things the grannies represented which many guests felt they lacked - namely

- Family connections and closeness
- Using cooking to transform someone from sadness and depression into happiness and peace of mind
- Building confidence and self esteem through cooking for children and teenagers
- Multi generational respect and love

As Mimma, the oldest of the three told me,

“Our cooking is not that spectacular – in truth it is country home cooking of Tuscan style. You won't learn from us how to skin and de-bone a rabbit – rather how to make a tasty risotto with whatever you have in your

pantry. Nor will you learn how to spin sugar into a complicated dessert – but rather how to make a quick and easy pastry for an onion tart. But the real takeaways are all the other sensual, feeling and believing ‘gifts’ that people gather from our time together. We have seen it over and over again – three generations of families cooking together where the youngest and the oldest can each contribute something valuable – and age is of no importance. The generational belief systems just fade away when all are around the table chopping, cutting, grating, tasting and eating together”.

Her sister Franca adds,

“And we don’t cook fast nor do we eat fast – and of course there is always wine from our vineyard that flows freely during the cooking and eating”!

Franca and her husband Franco own Podere Ciona – with a Chianti Classico, and a Merlot grown, harvested and created right there on their property as well as olive trees from which they make their own olive oil. The land is part of their souls. In the winter of 1985-6 there was a terrible frost which was 20 degrees below zero and the sap of the olives trees froze. The grape vines were dormant and the roots very deep so they were not affected. But the olive trees that died had to be cut down. It was like burying a member of the family. Only if olive trees were at a certain age did the roots survive. Franca used to produce 1000 liters of olive oil on her property and now they only generate 27 liters, just enough for her immediate family.

The Many Faces of Tuscany



Lele tells with tears coming to her eyes;

“You could hear the trees dying - all the trunks were slowly becoming black and you could hear them cracking when the sap inside became ice, and then the ice would fracture the bones of the tree. There were cracking sounds all over the valleys. Finally, all the trees went black and we cried. Tuscany cried. The landscape was different. It was bare. Before the freeze, there were so many olive trees on the hills which filled our hearts with joy as we went around the area. Then we saw nothing for a long time until the young trees grew – it was heartbreaking”.

This is part of the magic – that the land, food and wine are part of the soul. Franca tells how,

“The first contact every day that I have is with nature – we have no curtains, I need to see the natural light, the moon, the sun. It is part of our being. And we see this in children who come from American or Canadian or even Australian cities – they have never seen a chicken, nor do they understand that milk comes from a cow not a bottle. We show them by taking them to local markets so that they see that certain vegetables and fruits grow

in some seasons and others grow in different ones. Vegetables come from the ground; they have soil in them. Many city children think vegetables come in a plastic bag. The cooking experience must show respect for the whole process of life – not just the details of a recipe”. Below are some of the delicacies that are found at outdoor Italian markets.

The Produce of Tuscany



Lele adds;

“Believe me, the giving is not just one way. Each guest teaches us and gives to us in their way. It is sharing each other’s lives in a way. We all have grandchildren, husbands, families. And we have learned that you cannot rely on the children or grandchildren to fill your life - what happens if you are waiting for them to visit and they don’t come and then what will you do? So this magic has given us a meaning outside of our families. It is strange – our guests learn from us how to connect with their families, and we have learned how to emancipate ourselves from ours. An irony perhaps?”

Franca was born in Como. Her father was an engineer and land surveyor working all around Italy. Franca is the youngest in her family. Mimma is her older sister. In those days, every time a mother was to have a baby, it was traditional that the young pregnant woman would go back to her mother and would have her babies there. Babies were not born in the hospital but rather at the home of the about-to-be grandmother, along with the family doctor. So Franca was born in the country house in a small village called Uboldo. And she was there for the whole of World War II. It was safer to be there since Milan was being bombed. Mimma, Franca and their brother were all together in their grandmother’s (Nonna’s) house during World War II.

Vineyards and Country Living



Mimma remembers the early years of her marriage when she was a school teacher and even though she was working full time, while her children were small, making two good meals a day for your spouse and family was considered a duty for any bride or young wife. Mimma recalls that her own mother cooked but was really

not attracted to cooking but was drawn to do other things, unusual at that time in Italy. Her grandmother (also the grandmother of her sister Franca and cousin Lele) was a huge influence in all of their lives when it came to food. She was a widow and had lived with Mimma's family for many years; her name was Nona (Grandmother) Clara, and she was always a mentor to the girls, and they cooked with her from very young ages.

Pines and Walks in the Woods



Their interest in food began when they were very young. There was no television and nothing to do in the village except play with other children. When they were together at home, the theatre was the kitchen. There was always a crowd of women in the kitchen busy, doing something, making something that smelled good and they knew would taste delicious. Franca and Mimma with their cousin Lele had nannies to look after them but still, it was during that time, as girls, that they knew they had to know how to run a household, cook and do all that is connected with being a homemaker. With that as the goal, they were allowed into the kitchen and asked to help in minor tasks like cleaning peas. They were given practice with leftovers if cakes or pasta were being made. They were given a bit of extra pastry or pasta to make themselves, so as to learn to use a rolling pin. This was not for fun, but rather as training. They were asked not to play with the food but to do it well. And they were not permitted to go out to play until it was.

The young girls soon found that by hanging around the kitchen doing these small tasks, they learned to know all the family stories. They also discovered the stories about neighbors and their families. Many times they didn't really understand what was going on, so not understanding created great excitement and the feeling that they were a part of the family and village theatre! To this day they do remember the coziness, smells and voices and the love. All three of the grandmothers become tearful as they remember those times, now with the understanding and wisdom of their age and experience. Franca laughs as she recalls,

“If one of the village girls got pregnant without being married, of course, that was a great topic for kitchen conversation”.

Now the three little girls didn't have a clue about how babies were made and arrived. In any event, the older women used the word 'BUYING' a baby so that the young children would not understand the scandal. For years the three girls thought maybe the village girl didn't have enough money to buy a baby and they laugh about it still today.

So how did this 'new' career of teaching cooking to Americans, Australians and Canadians come about?

While I was interviewing the three grandmothers, when we came to discuss how it was for them in the 'beginning', they became animated as they remembered how it all started.

“As you know, cooking is a very creative process,” Mimma begins. “What we have is not a cooking school it’s a life experience. Our oldest pupil is 80 years old. He stays in touch every year. Our youngest student is 7, and has come to visit and cook with us on a number of occasions with his family”.

” Absolutely”, says Franca. “This is about sharing food, the cooking experience and the ‘convivium’ of being together where the food is the means not the end.”

It is all about family



When Lele moved to Tuscany, the very first thing she did was invite her closest relatives, who also happened to be her best friends, Franca and Mimma to come and visit. They came with their families and loved it so during their visits that within a few years they decided they all wanted to live there.

“Over the years,” Mimma explained, “ we found ourselves homes here and settled down. All three of us are impatient, creative and wanted to keep busy with something that made us happy. So we would cook with each other and of course every time we did, we invited our friends – there was always too much food. Then friends invited their friends, and soon those were people from the USA, Canada and Australia. Of course we welcomed everyone into our kitchens as if they were family. And we shopped together, laughed, drank wine, and ate slowly and generally behaved as we did normally. Then something strange started to happen. People were drawn in by this warmth, the touching and hugging and laughter. So they started to return year after year, and to bring their children and parents, aunts and uncles. And then they would write and call and involve us in every event in their lives – births, marriages, engagements, deaths, happy times and sad ones. We saw such an acute yearning for our kind of love, for the kind of honest togetherness that we have in our kitchens and around our cooking, especially in those from the USA. That’s really what it’s all about – people want that simplicity and affection and so over the past 10 years it has evolved and now, through you, we want to write it down to leave this as a legacy – not the wonderful recipes or brilliant creations that we made, but rather the love we have spread, the multi generational understanding and tolerance we have grown, and the lessons of love and self esteem that have been learned by those who have shared our lives in this way.”

Why now? “Well,” Mimma muses, “I really do not see any other reason for the popularity of what we do other than the warm feelings that we give people, we help them find soul, love and comfort through food and togetherness in cooking. You know, we do not cook especially well. I would say we are good cooks not excellent – it’s the warmth and the fact that people who come to stay with us feel that we have lots of energy and joie de vivre. And that this sparkle is in women that are old – Lele and I are both over 70. Yet we do not seem to suffer from our age but rather feel that our age has helped us to see the world a certain way – with gratitude and humor, and we pass that on to our husbands and families.”



Grapes, vineyards, walks and wine

I felt the peace and quiet of Tuscany as we sat around the kitchen table and talked. Mimma, Lele and Franca, all spoke at once, laughing at each other's jokes and teasing each other, with the comfort of three friends and relatives who had spent a lifetime doing just that.

"It's what we do" Lele said. "Sitting around the table and talking – Mimma will say - why you don't come down tonight and we have a simple meal and talk –and we do, even though we may have been together the whole day!"

Mimma added, "This is what people have lost – they have lost this habit of sitting around the table, cooking, eating, cleaning up together. This is often a question that we ask of our guests and clients – why don't you eat together? How fast have things changed for these same American families who just two generations ago came from Europe or Asia, seeking a better life in the new world, and how quickly did they lose the sense and value of family gatherings? How did that happen? It seems to be a problem of the US, Canada and Australia – people spend so much time running after the consumption of goods – like buying a new car or house, or television. They run so much and spend so little time preparing food, sitting and talking to each other about themselves and their lives. And one talks so well with a glass of good wine and food that has been prepared by your own family. Let's think of slow food rather than fast food; let us preserve the authentic, the true and the real. For example in the European Union there is something called Lardo di Collonata –it is lard from a small village near Florence where they create exquisite marble containers which do not however, correspond with modern hygienic rules. Now in Europe there is a movement which is very aggressively trying to protect all this. Another example is coffee - instead of drinking a good Neapolitan Express we will all go to Starbucks. All these things are great – but its also important to remember and preserve the good things of life and the activities that feed our souls, so that we, as people, are not just eaters at the end of the day but rather appreciators of everything that nature and life can give us".

“And even though we are now moving through our seventh decade,” Lele exclaims, “Mimma and I feel as young as we ever did.”

Mimma agrees, “And our guests tell us that we still have a charm and strength in us and that is worth so much. You know, many women around 70 can really become very fragile especially when they have problems with families or children or are left alone because of life.”

Franca adds “we have many groups who are just women who come to visit with us and learn to cook and in many ways they are the most successful ones since they have camaraderie with each other. We find that women, who come alone, are willing to reveal themselves quite rapidly and are not paralyzed by the differences in age. From joining together to cook the same risotto and sitting around the same table to enjoy it together, something happens and the age difference seems to lose importance. That reminds me about one of our clients who is Japanese. His wife comes every fall to be with us, and she shared her husband’s comments with the three grandmothers. He says of the grandmothers, “Your charm is that you are old ladies – if you were young you would not be able to tell me anything.”

Franca grimaced, “we didn’t like the way he described us as old, since he thought that age in a woman is something that is worn on their bodies and faces to entertain others. Nevertheless his wife explained that in his culture, this was the ultimate compliment.”



Mimma mused, “Our stage in life is called maturity. Only by getting older can you really start to understand true values and if this is maturity then we are reaching it. We are doing something very important here and we have confirmed this from the reaction of the people who come to us to cook. We give people the pleasure of exploring all their senses – life is so involved with concrete things – so with us they learn the pleasure of touching, of eating something beautifully prepared without fuss and pretension, and this confirms for them that they have been involved in making something that has value. It has been very meaningful for people around us”

What is it that is the special magic of these three women? They all agreed on the answers.

“We give each guest total unconditional acceptance of themselves just as they are – not *who* they are. We really don’t differentiate between people according to their status, or money. As they appear to us, so they are and we treat all of them the same. The most evident characteristic is that everyone who comes to stay and cook with us is in need of warmth and love and we can and do give it to them while they are with us. And that is what they yearn for and why they return.”

Franca explained.” When the guests arrive in the afternoon, they are shy and don’t talk much. By the end of that day after being with us for a few hours, they open up and let themselves be touched – in Italy we do not kiss everyone all the time, but it is normal to touch people often. We have the impression that to be touched is something which is not easy for people from the US, Canada and Australia. They feel uncomfortable- they are not used to it!”

Lele agreed. “But after a few days they let themselves go – they start to tell stories of their lives and sorrows and we find that instead of going back to the recipe of food they talk now about a recipe for life. When they sit in the class and eat, the conversation is never about details and techniques about what they have done but rather the recipe of how to build a better world. That is what keeps us doing this. Making a difference in the way people see the world.” That is exactly what my family felt when we first cooked with Lele. Here is a risotto recipe that Lele made with my son, daughter-in-law and husband, when we cooked with her in Tuscany. I have made it many times since then, remembering always her admonition: “RISOTTO WAITS FOR NO ONE!”

Risotto with Asparagus from Lele in Radda in Chianti in Toscana



Sautéing onions

INGREDIENTS:

- Arborio rice – two handfuls per person
- Two bunches of asparagus – the white kind is divine and only during certain seasons in Europe but well worth finding.
- One onion
- Water
- The right pot - so that you don't have to stand and stir forever, do not choose a tall pot but rather a large frying/sautéing pan.



Asparagus – white and green

PREPARATION:

1. Making the stock: when you make risotto you need stock –normally you can make yourself a vegetable stock by boiling two tomatoes, onions, carrot, celery and other vegetables then straining out the solids (put in your composter) and using the liquid. HOWEVER when making a risotto with asparagus you

cannot use vegetable stock since it overwhelms the flavor so use a water based asparagus stock (see below).

2. Take the onion, chop it quite finely and put salt on it and olive oil and sauté. Chop the heads of the asparagus. Put them into a small pot and boil them separately. You don't add the asparagus heads to the risotto until the end since they are so fragile
3. Feel where the asparagus becomes hard on the stem, and break them off at that point and then you peel all the asparagus. In the stockpot you put the hard parts along with the peels, with lots of water so that you will have enough stock. Make sure that this stays at almost boiling while the risotto is cooking.
4. Take the rest of the asparagus (the good parts) and chop into small pieces and add to the pan where the onion and olive oil has been sautéing.
5. When you have added the pieces of asparagus to the onions and olive oil which are already soft, add a little boiling stock if it is dry and let it sauté until its color changes and then add the rice – use two handfuls per person; add the rice and stir it just a few times carefully once so that the rice and asparagus all mix, then add a couple soup ladles of boiling asparagus stock (liquid only) until it is covered and let it sauté.
6. Come back every now and then and make sure that it's covered with stock or add more of the boiling stock, arrange a bit and leave it alone. Keep doing this but you don't have to stand there all the time, until the rice is ready. Every 5 minutes or so you add more boiling stock – you could add the stock from the small heads of asparagus now too since that tastes so good! Continue doing this until the stock in the mixture tastes right and that the rice tastes cooked.
7. LELE'S RULE: RICE WAITS FOR NO ONE- dinner guests must be sitting at the table when it's time to serve risotto!
8. In the meantime grate LOTS of parmesan – you must use fresh parmesan – to get ready to add to the risotto when it is all ready with a large chunk of butter in the middle of the mixture. However, DON'T STIR IT. Just add the butter, and put the freshly grated parmesan on top of that and then you cover the risotto and let it sit for a little while so that it all drips and blends in. REMEMBER ONCE READY THE RISOTTO CANNOT WAIT – everyone must be sitting down and ready or it will become mushy.

Alternatives:

Pumpkin: You can also do this with pumpkin – take pumpkin and cut it in half – carve out all the pumpkin and sauté it with onion and olive oil until soft like the asparagus and use normal vegetable stock. And then when the risotto is ready for the added butter and parmesan, you serve it IN the pumpkin.

Porcini Mushrooms: If you use this with porcini – soak them in hot water, and filter the hot water and use that for flavor.

Mimma added.” When we have teenagers and children visiting us, showing them things from nature is remarkable. We mentioned that we have found that for many of these young people, milk is something in a bottle. The idea of a cow and how the milk comes out of a cow, and then how it will taste at the end of a process as it is put into a bottle and then what the sensation of milk is when you drink it. That is a remarkable experience for these children. American and Canadian children approach food and drink in an unnatural way; ingredients come from the supermarket, all cleaned up, in plastic or boxes or cans. The experience with us as we go to fresh markets, and get milk from cows and eggs from chickens, is like opening a Pandora's Box for them!”

The women all agreed that cooking is a unique way to help young people build self confidence.

“We find that they may often start off feeling awkward but if we encourage them – teach them to read the labels on items then that way we can teach children to understand that what they put into their mouths is not just an envelope of shiny paper but its more than that and comes from nature,” Lele added. “When fruit is picked from orchards and trees or salad that comes from the ground, is dirty with soil and you have to wash and dry it, they learn that when it comes to food and cooking, there should be no instant gratification.”

Mimma commented, “There seem to be so many health problems for youngsters now as they worry about their food – they tell us that carbohydrates are fattening which really is not true at all – it’s the quantity of sugar that they eat with the carbohydrates. In the US it seems that there is sugar added in everything. To our European taste-buds, to find sugar in potato salad is just awful – our first impression about food in the US is that it is sweet. It seems to be a way of life in the US, to add sugar to everything. So the lesson that these children take away from the time they spend with us is that it is important to take the time to sense and enjoy and think and talk when they are around food. They need to learn how to relate all the objects that they see in bottles and jars and cans, with the soil, sunshine, water and human activities and need for an effort to produce that food, as opposed to sitting and watching television and opening packets.”

Lele added, “And by the way, this approach is also now affecting our Italian grandchildren. We see that the US way of life is influencing all of western culture and this side of it is not something we like very much”.

“Our approach is really very simple”, Franca adds, “its nothing complicated or intellectual – just the pleasure of developing the kind of warm feeling that comes from being together and doing things that please a family and their dear ones. We build confidence in a family to be a team and belong to a unit and this is very important for all ages since this cooking affair helps to reach across the generations”.

Mimma laughs. “Often we all find that we don’t agree with our children – but a good dessert is a good dessert and there is nothing to disagree about there!” This is an unusual but well loved family recipe called Grape Cake.



Grapes

Schiacciata con l’ uva (grape cake)

INGREDIENTS:

- 16 ounces or 500 g bread dough (you can use packaged pizza dough)
- 2.2 lbs or 1 kg black grapes (seedless are best)

- 8 T sugar
- Couple of sprigs of rosemary
- 2 T extra virgin olive oil

PREPARATION:

1. Spread half of the dough on the bottom of a large rectangular cake tin.
2. Scatter over two thirds of the grapes, pressing them down and dusting with 3 T of sugar.
3. Sprinkle some olive oil.
4. Cover with the remaining dough, closing the four sides well to avoid berries becoming loose.
5. On top of the second layer of dough scatter the remaining grapes, pushing them down.
6. Dredge with the remaining sugar.
7. Sprinkle over a few rosemary leaves and the rest of the olive oil.
8. Let rest for approx half an hour then bake in a hot oven until a nice gold crust appears.

She recalled that her granny (Nonna) was very old and traditional but when she was in the kitchen she was the one in charge and the result was so lovely that everyone in the family forgot what could have divided them. A favorite recipe for the easiest ice-cream is below.



Gelato

Gelato alla panna (cream ice cream)

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 3 to 4 T sugar
- A pinch of cinnamon

PREPARATION:

1. Cook the ingredients for ten minutes stirring all the time.
2. Let it cool.

3. Freeze in an ice cream maker.
4. The simplest possible ice cream, but how good!

It takes all types to make up our complex world, the three grandmothers agreed. But again – a good dessert is just that – a good dessert and that is something everyone can agree upon.

YOUR NOTES:

Chapter Three: Cooking with Reluctant Teenagers

Often families come with teenagers to stay with the grandmothers, and to learn to cook. Many of them arrive less than thrilled to be there. This recipe is guaranteed to make any teenager take the earphones off – at least for a few hours!

Mimma recalls the family who brought their 11 year old daughter Jennifer with them. She was just entering the ‘sullen’ phase. She had earphones in his ears and her cell phone on which she was playing video games.

Lele gives special lessons to teenagers every summer, so she understands them well.

“They can be very interested or not interested at all” Lele says. “You have to woo them in with love and hugs”.

Jennifer and her parents were renting Lele’s guest house (which is actually a restored tower) and she was nosing around the kitchen, ostensibly disinterested. So Lele (who does a lot of hugging) pulled her in and got her working on leftovers, mixing some leftover ground meat into balls for Polpette di Bollito

“So you can roll that into some balls with me right?”

The young girl nodded and took one ear piece out so as to hear Lele better. Soon they were giggling together like youngsters, and she was hooked! Jennifer was so thrilled with the experience that she nagged her parents to come the following year again, and that time, 12 years old, she stayed for a month,. She is now 15 and is still in close contact. To say she was transformed would not be an understatement. Her mother told of how her confidence grew. Lele gets tears in her eyes as she recalls that last time Jennifer was there she said to Lele as she left,

“Lele – don’t die any time soon. I want you to stay alive to make all the arrangements for my wedding one day!”

Here is the recipe that wooed this young teenager into the charms of the grandmothers’ love.

Polpette di Bollito (Meatballs from Leftovers)

INGREDIENTS

- Leftovers from a meat dish
- Flat leaf parsley chopped
- One clove garlic
- Half cup of freshly grated parmesan cheese
- Stale bread soaked in milk or one potato
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil or butter



Italian Parsley, Garlic, Parmesan and Olive Oil

PREPARATION:

1. Take the leftovers when cold and grind them
2. Then chop a bunch of flat leaf (Italian) parsley and one clove of garlic and add a half cup of Parmesan cheese (freshly grated). It is tempting to get the already grated kind, but believe me; it just doesn't taste the same.
3. Then depending on how much meat you have, add either one boiled potato or stale bread that is soaked in milk and has most of the liquid squeezed out –
4. Add salt and pepper
5. Make small balls or ovals out of the mixture.
6. Then roll each ball in breadcrumbs and fry in olive oil delicately or in butter
7. Serve the balls hot with salad

Chocolate Salami for the Pre-Teen:

This is something that younger children can create while you are making dinner.

INGREDIENTS:

- One egg and one yolk
- 4.5 lbs or 2000 Grams sugar
- 5 ounces or 150 Grams unsweetened cocoa
- 3.5 ounces or 100 Grams butter
- 7 ounces or 200 Grams dried biscuits - look in market for square plain biscuits

PREPARATION:

1. Put plain biscuits into a plastic bag and break with rolling pin into pieces but not powder
2. Beat the eggs with the sugar then add cocoa and add butter already softened but not liquid
3. Add the biscuits and if it's too hard then add one tbsp pineapple or peach juice or white wine.
4. Then take aluminum foil and roll into a shape of salami and put it in the fridge and when hard slice it like salami.

Note from Lorraine: I am allergic to chocolate – so instead I use decaffeinated coffee powder – any brand – instead of cocoa. It tastes delicious!

Mimma provides an alternative version of the above recipe – which is equally tasty.

Salame di cioccolato (chocolate sausage 2)

INGREDIENTS:

- About 10 ounces or 300 Petit Beurre Rich Tea biscuits
- About 5 ounces or 150 g sugar
- About 5 ounces or 150 g butter
- 2 T bitter chocolate
- 1 small glass of Marsala wine



Butter, Dark Chocolate, Marsala Wine, Small Butter Cookies and Sugar

PREPARATION:

1. Crumble the biscuits into a bowl.
2. Add the melted butter, the sugar and the cocoa.
3. Blend the mixture adding gradually the wine.
4. Give to the mixture the shape of a sausage, wrap it in aluminium foil and place in the refrigerator for a few hours before serving.
5. Cut into slices and serve with a light custard -I make up Birds Custard (available in specialty stores in a powder) as a short cut, or some whipped cream

One can never have enough dessert recipes. Here is another one that Mimma says all adults and children adore. As with many of the recipes from the three grandmothers, it is simple and tastes amazing!

Croccante alle nocciole (Hazelnut praline)

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup sugar

- Just a little water with some orange juice
- 1 cup of hazelnuts



Fresh Orange Juice, Hazelnuts, Measuring Cups and Cooking Utensils

PREPARATION:

1. Make a dark caramel by heating the sugar and water.
2. Then add the hazelnuts and stir with a wooden spoon. Do not worry if at first the caramel stiffens, it will soon dissolve again.
3. When the hazelnuts are well distributed and all lumps dissolved, pour the mixture over an aluminium baking sheet.
4. When cold peel away the praline and break it in pieces. Delicious!

YOUR NOTES:

Chapter Four: The Art of Eating Slowly

Slow food – what the grandmothers call eating at a slow pace - creates ‘convivium’, conversation, sharing of feelings and quality family time.

Mimma explains;” We have many clients from the United States. It is very hard to give advice to those from the US culture. When we talk to an American middle class person we have to be very careful not to be offensive. The American way of life to most Americans is the way that things should be –many of them look at Italians as if they were in a zoo. They consider Italians to be very picturesque – they think all Italians sing well, and Italy is sunny all the time. Americans come to Italy to have an experience, an Italian experience. It is certainly not like a safari in Africa, like, perhaps, going to Kenya, but unless our American visitors have a certain degree of cultural education and have read books and history about Europe and the Roman Empire, Italy in the modern world and so on -they do not have a realistic understanding of Italian culture. So we have to be very careful not to upset them – since we are with our guests every day.”

Franca agrees.” The reaction comes later through emails and little messages and that is when we see that we have planted a seed and made an impact”.

Lele remembers one family in particular.” Life can be very sad – a couple of years ago a family started to visit with us. They came five times, perhaps it was even six times – that means for six consecutive years – they came as a couple. The first time they visited we realized that neither of them had even cooked. The next year they came with their children then with their grandchildren. The wonderful part was that when the family returned home, they sent regular letters and emails, always keeping us informed about what recipe they had tried and how it went, and sharing news about their family reunions, and where they did this and that. Now the husband John is terminally ill and his wife, Anna, wrote and told how at Xmas they did a certain meat recipe and it filled the home with good smells and joyful memories and in many ways, that cooking experience together as a family, filled them with courage to push forward. She admitted that although they have their moments, their times with us, their three adoptive grandmothers, will always be remembered as some of the happiest times of their lives.”

Mimma added,” To be included in a family drama as part of the real life of an American family – just because they came through to Tuscany to spend a week here and there with us, is such a rare privilege. The link with our clients is very strong. And the meaning is all very simple – nothing complicated or intellectual – just the pleasure of developing the kind of warm feeling of being together and doing things that please us, our dear ones and the clients and friends they bring with them to our homes.”

Here are some recipes that this family remembered making with the three grandmothers, as the happiest times of their lives.

Christmas pâté has emotional meaning for our grandmothers since it comes from THEIR grandmother. It is a recipe that they normally had at the Xmas season. Since as you know, Lele is the cousin of Franca and Mimma so their mothers were sisters, and thus the mother of their mothers (their grandmother) was the master chef of the whole family. They remember with tears in their eyes, the smells and tastes of their grandmother’s

kitchen. And how fortunate we are to have this memory from them, so we can share in those tastes for generations to come!

Pasticcio di fegato della Nonna Ida (our granny, mother of our mothers)

INGREDIENTS

- 4 ounces or 100 grams each of veal, veal liver, pancetta
- 8 ounces or 200 g butter
- A pinch each of thyme, marjoram, 1 bay leaf
- 1 glass dry Marsala wine
- 1 small glass Cognac
- A rectangular pate mold
- Gelatin

PREPARATION

1. Brown gently all the meat, liver and pancetta cut in small pieces in some butter
2. Add the herbs
3. After 10-15 minutes pour in the Marsala and let it evaporate while cooking slowly
4. Whisk the whole mixture in a food processor until very smooth, then add the butter and the Cognac
5. In a rectangular mold prepare a thin base of gelatin (follow the instructions on the packet)
6. Put in the blended mixture
7. Line and cover with the rest of the gelatin
8. Keep in the fridge for at least 12 hours
9. Just before serving sit the mold in warm water to be able to unmold the pâté

You can decorate the plate with sprigs of holly or rosemary. This is rich but fairly easy to make, and will be a dish that your guests will not readily forget.

Following is a recipe which is particularly wonderful during the asparagus season, for breakfast or a light lunch. In Europe there is a season of white asparagus – large thick and fleshy which are very desirable. However, you can use whatever asparagus are available in your area. But they must be fresh – canned asparagus do not work.

Asparagi con le uova



Farm Eggs, Asparagus, Freshly Grated Parmesan, Butter, Salt and Pepper

INGREDIENTS:

- A bunch of asparagus
- Salt
- Butter
- Freshly grated parmesan ¼ cup
- Eggs – 2 eggs per person
- Freshly ground black pepper

PREPARATION

1. Peel the ends of the asparagus stems and cut off the hard part. Wash thoroughly. Tie them in small bundles. Stand the bundles of asparagus, tips upward, in boiling salted water.
2. When asparagus are cooked (sample a piece from the cut end to make sure), place them on a clean towel to drain properly.
3. Keep warm. Melt the butter and put it over the asparagus spears.
4. Sprinkle with Parmigiano. Fry two eggs per person and then slide them onto each plate next to the asparagus tips.
5. Season with ground pepper and serve immediately with crusty bread.

NOTES:

The flavor of asparagus provides a real challenge in choosing the right wine to accompany it, since the vegetable's delicate scent can easily be overwhelmed. Choose a light-bodied white wine.

For those of you who eat pork, prosciutto is a delicacy of Tuscany that the three grandmothers use in many dishes. Here is one that is unusual and also as a side benefit, teaches you how to make homemade breadcrumbs.

Maiale alle briciole saporite (tasty breadcrumbs)

INGREDIENTS:

- 3.5 lbs or 1- 1.5 Kilos of pork loin in one piece
- 6/8 slices prosciutto crudo (raw)
- 8 ounces or 200 grams fresh breadcrumbs
- 2 Tbsp fresh rosemary
- 5 sage leaves
- A good pinch of rock salt
- Olive oil and butter q.b. (quanto basta)



Prosciutto Crudo

PREPARATION:

1. Chop sage and rosemary very thinly and add the rock salt also chopped finely.
2. Toast about 8 slices of bread, then put them into a plastic bag and pound the bag with a meat pounder or any instrument you have that will crush the toast into breadcrumbs
3. Mix the sage, rosemary and rock salt with breadcrumbs, olive oil and softened butter until you make a paste.
4. Cover the pork loin with the breadcrumb paste
5. Place the slices of ham on aluminum foil, and place on top of them, the piece of meat covered with the paste.
6. Wrap the slices around the meat.
7. Cook it in hot oven for about two hours, turning the meat once to obtain a nice and crisp crust.
8. Carve the meat into thin slices with an electric knife.
9. Serve immediately

And while we are on the topic of pork, here is another recipe with simple ingredients including both chicken and pork. However if you prefer, you can replace the pork with ground beef.



Freshly Ground Beef

Involtini di petti di pollo ripieni

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 chicken breasts, filleted (I take off the skin too – but it is not necessary)
- 8.75 ounces or 250 ground pork (or ground beef)
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 tablespoons fresh rosemary leaves
- Freshly ground pepper,
- A pinch salt
- Dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons of olive oil

PREPARATION:

1. Sauté the garlic at a gentle (low) heat in the oil then add the ground pork (or beef) salt and pepper and the thinly chopped rosemary leaves. Cook for about 10 minutes, stirring the meat. When ready put the pork (beef) aside.
2. On the flat chicken fillets sprinkle salt and pepper. Spread the pork (beef) filling over the fillets and roll up each fillet firmly.
3. Tie each up with a string.
4. In the pan where you cooked the pork, add butter and the chicken rolls. Cook them briefly, turning them to brown them all over. Put them aside.
5. Add the wine to the pan and scrape cooking residue with a wooden spoon.
6. Pour the cooking juices over the rolls and serve at once.

NOTES:

Mimma notes that this recipe has been interpreted from one of Marcella Hazan's classic Italian recipes. As she says, her pattern of cooking "can accommodate improvisation each time it is taken in hand".

And finally in this section I want to share with you a recipe that Mimma made for my family when we were with the three grandmothers, and which many restaurants now commonly offer in the USA. It is a recipe for cheese focaccia which is just divine but must be served and eaten as soon as it comes out of the oven!!

Focaccia al formaggio

INGREDIENTS:

- 7 ounces or 200 g all purpose flour
 - 3 Tbsp olive oil
 - Salt
 - Cold water
- For the filling:
- 500 g stracchino (any soft creamy cheese will do)
 - Milk to moisten
 - Salt and pepper

Chapter Five: Kitchen Therapy for Couples and Families

Flirting and Cooking

Mimma and Lele were born two months apart and have always called each other Twin Cousins; the younger one by two years, Franca always had to cater to the older girls' needs. And slight shadows of those roles still show in their loving communication with each other – as Lele told one story and Franca thought of another one, she waited until her beloved Lele finished her story. There was always tolerant acceptance between them all. Sometimes, as when they were young girls, as a little fun thing to do, at the beginning of each lesson, Mimma and Lele decide which of the men students they will flirt with. Now realize they are in their seventies, so this is flirting that is not meant to evolve into anything but fun in the moment. So they announce early on to the wives that all must realize that their flirting will eventuate in absolutely NOTHING so that no one need fear or be concerned about it – just enjoy.

And so they flirt and Lele, a stocky woman who holds herself with great confidence (and smokes like a chimney, apologizing all the while as she chain smokes on the in-between cooking breaks) is always stroking, touching, holding hands, hugging the cooking students, and cannot possibly walk even two steps without holding someone around their waists. So the love flows from her and Mimma and Franca – and as they get excited about a story or a personality their voices raise, especially Franca, into a little squeak filled with laughter and giggles, as they remember earlier days when they were children in the kitchen of their mothers and grandmas. This loving warmth is what their guests come back for, yearn for, connect with them about. The food is the vehicle.

“You can see it happen before your eyes” Lele says with a giggle. “The most uptight of men who come with patronizing approaches, humoring their wives, those are the ones that after a day of my hugging and touching, holding their hands, giving them tasks and flirting with them all, they just melt. And we love to see it –we have realized that so many people in the USA are afraid to touch each other. And of course we in Italy love to touch and hug and show love and friendship. It's not just men – it is women too.”



Isn't love wonderful?

Of course it helps that the cooking and meal is accompanied by delicious wine and liquors. Here is an especially romantic recipe. Since it takes a few months to be ready, the Grandmothers always have an amount on hand from former classes so that the families can taste the future results of their work, right then and there.

Franca explains. “We also teach patience – not something that Anglo Saxon cultures bring a lot of – for example our Rose Liquor recipe – it takes three months to cure. So we make it with our guests, and then we have them taste some we made some time ago, so they learn that their patience will be rewarded”.

Franca's Rose Liquor - Here is her recipe – and it tastes like roses!



Sweet Smelling Roses, Sugar and Grain Alcohol

INGREDIENTS:

- About 3 ounces or 60 grams of very perfumed rose petals – variety doesn't matter but must be perfumed
- 10.5 ounces or 300 grams of grain alcohol
- 10.5 ounces or 300 grams of sugar
- 10.5 ounces or 300 grams of water

PREPARATION:

1. Wash the petals and put in a blender with 100 grams of sugar and a glass of alcohol – put the puree in a jar that can be tightly closed and add the rest of the alcohol and let it rest for 10 days shaking the jar now and then
2. Make a syrup with the rest of the sugar and the water – let the sugar dissolve over low heat that is – when it is cold pour it in the jar and let it rest for a week. Shake it occasionally but not as often as in the first 10 days
3. Filter it with cheesecloth (you could use a paper filter but that will take very long) and put in a bottle (canning jar) which can be closed very tight and let it rest for 3 months

The Grumpy Old Man

One day an elderly couple came to stay with the grandmothers, to learn to cook. They told the grandmothers that they wanted only to cook 'healthy' dishes. Everything this couple ate at home in the USA was healthy but boring, so very boring. It was good for them but there was no joy in its creation or its eating.

Franca notes, “No wonder he was grumpy. And wouldn't you know, as we started his week of being with us, our gas failed and we had no gas, no heat nothing in the kitchen on the first day – and the workmen were in the property working on this at 7am but we had to start late due to that. So that made him even more grumpy saying ' I shouldn't have come to this at all'”. So we started to work our magic on him. We chose him for special tasks. We praised him. We loved him - we hugged him. And slowly he changed from the grumpy old man to one who was like a little child again – offering to help, closing his eyes with joy as he ate something he had actually contributed to making. He loved it all. This is the menu that we wooed him with, along with our special sauce of love and positive affirmation”.



Whole Fish, The Taster, Italian Parsley

Grumpy Old Man's Recipe – Healthy Fish in Salt

INGREDIENTS:

- White meat fish scaled and cleaned but in one piece
- Flat leaf Italian Parsley
- One clove of garlic
- Olive oil to taste
- Sea salt
- Whites of eggs beaten(2-3)
- Cooked rice
- Pine nuts roasted lightly on a cookie pan

PREPARATION:

1. Use any good fish which is white meat - and here is the secret – have the fishmonger or butcher scale it and clean out the inside but don't break the fish!
2. Inside the fish put flat leaf Italian parsley, a clove of garlic, and olive oil
3. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees
4. Mix a lot (Quanto Basta - QB) of sea salt together with the beaten whites of 2-3 eggs and make a paste like plaster with the salt
5. Then completely plaster the fish on top and under
6. Cook it on a cookie pan until the plaster is biscuit colored and hard at 350; then bring it to the table and with a hammer break the plaster at the table and serve!
7. Use a small fish to experiment to start until you build your confidence!
8. Serve with cooked rice that you sprinkled with a ¼ cup of roasted pine nuts that have been put on another cookie pan into the oven for 5 minutes (on 400 degrees) until lightly browned And the best part? There is NO smell of fish at all. Serve with some fresh tomatoes drizzled with olive oil.



The Critical CEO

Once there was a very powerful business executive from the USA, a CEO who managed many thousands of people. He was humoring his wife who wanted to come to cook with the grandmothers of Tuscany. Of course he had to check them out first and after scouring the internet for their school process and cooking lessons (as they called their curriculum) he found nothing. He tried to dissuade his wife from going and suggested another location in Italy, more elegant, more sophisticated, as he put it, a ‘proper cooking school’. But, unlike most other things in her life with her husband, his wife was, on this occasion, adamant.

“I want to do this one” she said, “my friends told me it’s an experience”.

Grudgingly her husband came along. The first few days he ‘observed’ a minute or two then took off on his own adventures, arriving only for dinner. His wife on the other hand, as Lele put it, began to blossom. She initially held back, not volunteering for any tasks. Of course that was all that Lele needed. She and Mimma have an approach for those who hold back. They give them tasks immediately and then praise them with huge applause and hugs as they complete those simple tasks (positive reinforcement is their cooking tool of greatest significance) and, it always works this way, soon the shy ones are giggling, sharing and participating with joy. And then they start to talk.

“It’s therapy,” Lele always says. “You would not believe what they tell us – affairs and loves of their lives that are in the past, children and problems and joys, career goals met and friendships lost, school days, childhood, parents – we get it all and we love it. They cry and laugh and so do we!”

So after the second dinner, the CEO decided to “spend a few moments on his way out’ at the third lesson and was stunned to see his wife as she had been when he first fell in love with her as a young girl. She was animated, laughing, participating, hugging Lele and other members of the group, and after a few delicious glasses of the wine that Franca and her husband Franco make in their own vineyard (wine is ‘free”, by the way, during their stay with the ladies of Tuscany) – she and her husband started to flirt with each other, and he forgot all about his ‘other’ activities for the day. And as they left hugging and kissing their fellow students and the three ladies of Tuscany, the wife whispered in Lele’s ear, “he told me there was no need for a curriculum, Lele, we learned to find each other again – and that was nowhere in any website that he researched. Thank you!”

This was their favorite meal – of course the CEO was in love with his wife all over again, as well as having gained his new found confidence as a chef! Lele admonishes, “You have to keep this secret and don’t tell anyone how you made this; and you must go for the walk”.



Love At Any Age and Taking That Important Walk!

CEO Secret Recipe for Chicken – a perfect dish for a non-cooking husband to make

INGREDIENTS:



Chicken, Lemons, Olive Oil

- One two pound roasting chicken
- One lemon
- Two cubes of chicken stock
- Needle and thread
- 6 medium red potatoes
- Rosemary sprigs
- Two cloves of garlic
- Olive oil to taste
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Salad from chopped fennel, celery, carrots and sun dried tomatoes with olive oil and salt to taste

PREPARATION:

1. Take the whole 2 pound chicken (I only use organic ones) and take out the giblets and the little bag inside with all the innards in it. You can discard that if it grosses you out, or reserve it if you want to make chicken stock later
2. Take one lemon and wash
3. Put it inside the chicken with two cubes of chicken stock (out of the wrapper – OK maybe that level of specificity is going too far!)
4. Then take a needle and thread and sew up both sides of the chicken – as Lele puts it - the caesarian-cut and the neck side
5. Pre heat the oven at 350 degrees. Don't break the skin of the chicken
6. Take 6 medium sized red potatoes and dice them each into four pieces
7. Clean rosemary off the stalk and chop it
8. Chop a couple of cloves of garlic (or use the already chopped garlic as a poor substitute if you can't bear getting your hands dirty)
9. Put all of the vegetables into another Pyrex dish, add a couple tablespoons of olive oil over the potatoes mixture, salt and pepper to taste, and put that dish next to the chicken in the oven
10. So now you have the vegetables and the chicken in two separate Pyrex dishes in the same oven if possibly on the same shelf in the oven, cooking away

11. Remember there is no need for salt and pepper and no oil to be added to the chicken- use the oil for the vegetables only
12. Make sure the chicken is well tied up
13. Cook that chicken in the 350 degree oven (about a two pound chicken) for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour. The chicken will get fat and then all the skin plumps back
14. Now its time for you to go for a walk. Walk for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour
15. Then take the chicken out of the oven, throw away the lemon (the cubes will disappear)
16. Then you need to test that the vegetables are done, and serve
17. Add a nice salad – clean and chop fennel, carrots celery and sun dried tomatoes – add a few tablespoons of olive oil and salt

And serve!! This chicken has a great flavor.

Cooking with Children

This is a good recipe for multiple generations to work on. The grandparents or great-grandparents can handle the hot oil, while the children do the rest of the tasks. Its fun too! It is a recipe for leftovers that Lele learned very young. She made it for me in her kitchen. You can use cooked meat or leftover turkey or chicken which can be ground.



It's All About Family

Meatballs from Leftover Turkey (works well with chicken or other meat too)

INGREDIENTS:

- Brown and white meat turkey – your choice, sliced
- 1-2 Onions chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic chopped (use fresh garlic only)
- 2Tbsp Olive oil
- 1 16oz can of chopped tomatoes in liquid
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Rind of one lemon
- 4T of capers (drained)
- Rice brown or white, prepared according to the package

PREPARATION:

1. Take brown and white meat (or whichever you prefer if not a mixture) of leftover turkey or any other meat that you prefer.
2. Slice the meat
3. Chop one or two onions depending on how much turkey meat you have (more for more less for less!)
4. Chop a couple of cloves of garlic
5. Heat some olive oil (two tablespoons) in a skillet
6. Add the onions and garlic and cook on medium to low heat until golden
7. Puree a can of chopped tomatoes in liquid, in your blender
8. Add that to the mixture
9. Add salt and pepper to taste
10. Grate the rind of one lemon and four tablespoons of drained capers (if they are salted you will need to rinse them in a sieve or colander to remove the salty taste) to the skillet with the mixture
11. Finally add the turkey slices or ground meat, sauté at low heat for a few minutes until covered with the sauce
12. In the meantime cook a cup of long grain or brown rice in the rice cooker according to instructions or make your favorite pasta al dente, and ecco! You have a brand new dinner for the family. And it took you 15- 20 minutes to make (including the pasta!)

Building Self Esteem through Food and Cooking

”Of course you are the boss in the kitchen” says Lele. “It is important to build self confidence so that is why we always start with dessert! Why? Because while you making everything else, if the dessert fails, you can always make another one! This idea that you can fail and recover all in the same meal experience, it’s an amazingly liberating feeling for people who say they can’t cook especially for children.” Here are some simple recipes that taste wonderful.

Crostini al tonno-Tuna fish toast (serves 6)

INGREDIENTS:

- 6 ounces or 180gm Tuna fish canned (drain the oil)
- 2 ounces or 60gm of unsalted butter, softened
- 1T Flat-leaf parsley, thinly chopped
- 1T Red onion, thinly chopped
- 1 teaspoon Fresh lemon juice
- A pinch of pepper
- 12 slices of French baguettes

PREPARATION:

1. Preheat your oven to 350F or 180°C
2. In a bowl flake the tuna

3. Add butter parsley, onion, lemon juice pepper mixing thoroughly
4. Toast the slices in the oven and spread the mixture on the hot slices
5. Serve at once

Gamberetti Marinati(*Marinated shrimp*) (serves 6)



Lemons, Shrimp in Shell, Italian Parsley, Olive Oil, Salt and Pepper

INGREDIENTS:

- 4.24 cups or 1 litre water
- 2.2lbs or1 kg shrimp in the shell
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 2Tbsp flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- 2 Tbsp or 50ml.Extra virgin olive oil
- Pepper - a good pinch
- Salt to taste

PREPARATION:

1. Put shrimp in boiling water and put a lid on the saucepan
2. When the water boils again, cook for two minutes
3. Drain and cool the shrimp under running water
4. Put the peeled shrimp in a bowl
5. Season them with salt and pepper and pour the lemon juice over them
6. Marinate for 24 hours in the fridge.
7. Drain the shrimp, arrange them in a dish
8. Sprinkle with the chopped parsley and drizzle with olive oil

Franca starts to giggle.

“Do you remember the time I put all the condiments we normally use into smaller containers so as to easily get access to them but I didn’t have time to label them all? So Lele sweeps in (she is very dramatic) and together we started with our 8 students to build a fabulous dessert with pears –and when the dessert was ready, one of the women students was asked to taste it and she said “that’ser.....interesting’. So this was not the

normal reaction – normally people roll their eyes in ecstasy - so Lele and I immediately realized something was very wrong. . . .so we tasted it and found that Lele had added salt not sugar. So it became a huge joke, we threw it out and of course created a whole other dessert before even finishing the end of the meal – no problem, no panic, no recriminations and no pain. That experience built self confidence and reinforced what Lele always starts with - the fact that you are the boss in the kitchen.

When we cooked together the first time I met Lele, I was with my husband Clive, son James and daughter in law Donne, who is a physician (a pediatrician). Lele was showing us how to make a delicious and yet simple savory onion pie (see Chapter on multi generational cooking). Donne asked Lele about adding salt.

“How much do I put in?” she said, poised with her pen to write it down. Lele laughed and hugged her.

“Quanto basta, QB!” she said, the Italian mother’s measurement – “whatever is enough” or ‘to taste’.

Mimma notes that people from the Anglo Saxon cultures especially Americans and Canadians need specificity.

“When we started to write down our recipes” Mimma recalls, “the important part was to measure accurately, especially for Americans. That required some serious discipline on our parts!”

Franca adds, “The point is to relax and have fun – taste the food all the time while you cook! The best instrument in the kitchen is you. Use your hands to feel the texture, taste, look, smell and that way you get so much information about how the food is developing. Someone gave us a thermometer for the kitchen and we never use it. Oh, maybe once we used it for a dessert but otherwise we use our hands.”

“What about the mother daughter combination? Do you remember them?” Franca said. “I do! The mother and daughter were English, and the mother was very particular – everything had to be written in exact quantities – she had a real problem understanding QB – and she nearly drove her daughter mad with her need for detail. Now the daughter on the other hand, was a QB person – she liked to taste and experiment and was more relaxed and free wheeling. Both of them were in awe at the fact that the cooking experience generated incredible results – great success – no matter what the approach that was used. They wrote at the end of the week “We couldn’t believe it – no matter what we did – measure or no measure – the result was the same – fantastic! Thank you dear friends for showing us that there are many ways to get to the same result and that we should be more tolerant of each other’s approaches to life!”

As Lele says often, “Life is about “Fa bene al corpore e anima” – you must feel good, both body and soul, mind and spirit”. Franca adds her favorite phrase “don’t set your arm in a cast until you have broken it! We worry so much about stuff that never happens!”

Lele remembered a very uptight woman who had come to them for lessons. “She was a very important woman executive – from Seattle we think – and she arrived but her luggage didn’t. And that was all she could talk about. And she nagged the leader of the group she was with constantly, pestering everyone, complaining incessantly. The first time we bring the group together, it is for wine tasting. We do that deliberately since the wine loosens some inhibitions, and the tasting allows for casual conversation – and of course we are in Franca’s vineyard and the glorious Sangiovese grapes and stories associated with their purchase of the vineyard, its Etruscan past, their history and so on. People love it and we love to tell it – its part of us. But this lady was

Chapter Six: Favorite Meals



Pour the Chianti Classico with your Pasta for a perfect Tuscan meal

One of the most singular ingredients that you will eat in Italy, are the white beans called Cannellini. Here is a great recipe for one of Lele's favorites. It takes a little longer than some of the other recipes in that you have to soak the beans overnight and then the next morning you have to boil them for about an hour. After that the recipe moves along quite fast. And the result is very much worth it, especially on a cold winter's day. Of course you must serve this with your favorite Chianti Classico.

Pasta e fagioli

INGREDIENTS:

- 17.5 ounces or 500 gr. dried borlotti or cannellini beans
- 8.5 cups or 2 liters vegetable broth or water
- 1 celery stalk with its leaves, finely chopped
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 7 ounces or 200 gr. pasta corta such as ditalini or pasta fresca such as maltagliati
- Freshly grated parmesan



PREPARATION:

1. Soak the beans overnight in cold water
2. Rinse and drain them. Cover with water and bring to the boil
3. When the beans are soft (at least one hour), purée about two thirds of the beans
4. Cook the celery and the onion in olive oil until soft then add to the soup and cook for another ten, fifteen minutes
5. Add the pasta to the soup (if too thick add a little hot water) let it cook and remember that in this kind of soup pasta does not need to be “al dente“
6. The bean and pasta soup should result quite thick and creamy and you will serve it with olive oil, freshly ground pepper and Parmesan cheese, freshly grated

Notes from Lele

Borlotti, also called cranberry beans, are large and kidney shaped with beige and claret markings. When cooked they have a nutty flavour. Cannellini, smaller than Borlotti and very popular in Tuscany, are white and kidney shaped. When cooked they have a mild flavor and fluffy texture.

Minestra di baccalà e ceci (salt cod and chick-pea soup)(serves 6)

INGREDIENTS:

- 4.25 cups or 2 liters of water
- 10.5 ounces or 300 g dried chick-peas
- 7 ounces or 200 grams salt cod
- 10.5 ounces or 300 g. ripe Roma tomatoes peeled and cut in little cubes
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 onion thinly chopped



Onions, Roma Tomatoes, Salt Cod, Olive Oil and Chickpeas

PREPARATION:

1. Soak the cod in water in the fridge for 36 hours changing the water 4 times
2. Soak the chick-peas in water for 12 hours
3. Drain and set aside
4. Remove skin and bones from the cod and chop it in small pieces
5. Put the oil in a sauce pan on a low heat and warm it

6. Add onion and then the cod
7. Fry them gently for about 10 minutes
8. Add water, tomatoes and chick-peas
9. Bring to a boil and cover - simmer for about two hours
10. No salt is needed.
11. Serve very hot

Soups are soul food for most cultures and the Tuscan culture is no different. Especially when the winter nights are chilly or the fog rolls into the vineyards, the following recipe is for a heartwarming soup to serve with crusty fresh bread.

Leek and Swiss Chard soup (Zuppa di porri e bietole) (serves 6)



Olives and Olive Oil, Swiss Chard, Freshly Grated Parmesan, Butter and Leeks

INGREDIENTS:

- 3 leeks cut in slices (1cm thick)
- 14 ounces or 400 grams of Swiss chard trimmed and cut in small pieces
- 5.5 ounces or 150 grams of Arborio rice
- 4.25 cups or 2 liters of Chicken stock
- 1.75 ounces or 50 grams of Parmigiano Reggiano, freshly grated
- 1.5 ounces or 40 grams of Butter
- 2 Tbsp or 20 grams of extra virgin olive oil
- Pepper and salt to taste

PREPARATION:

1. Melt butter with olive oil in a large saucepan
2. Put in the leeks and cook them on a low heat for about 15 minutes
3. Add Swiss chards and stock and bring to simmer
4. Cook for about 15 minutes stirring now and then
5. Add the rice, salt and pepper and cook for another 20 minutes with a lid on
6. Serve immediately adding the cheese in the individual bowls.

Chapter Seven: Just Desserts

Even though there are some dessert recipes earlier in the book, I have devoted this chapter to more. Some recipes have unusual ingredients – one in particular that is perfect for people who have gluten allergies – which my son does. It uses chestnut flour – and Mimma tells me it is one of her favorites and that she prepares it in the fall with very fresh chestnut flour (essential!). I despaired of getting this ingredient in the USA but after a short internet search, I found a company that was happy to ship the flour to me and so making this wonderful dessert became easy!

Castagnaccio

INGREDIENTS:

- 7 ounces or 200 grams of chestnut flour
- Cold water – just enough to make a pouring mixture without lumps
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- A few sprigs of rosemary – fresh is best but a pinch of dried is ok too
- A handful each of pine-nuts and sultanas (raisins)

PREPARATION:

1. Steep the sultanas in hot water
2. Pour the chestnut flour into a bowl, gradually add the cold water, stirring constantly to obtain a pouring mixture without lumps, and then add two tablespoons of olive oil
3. Set the mixture aside for at least half an hour
4. Oil a shallow rectangular tin
5. Heat three tablespoons of oil and throw in the rosemary leaves to flavor it
6. Pour the mixture into the tin, sprinkle the pine-nuts and the well dried sultanas over the top then the rosemary flavored oil
7. Bake at 220°C for 30-40 minutes
8. Now how easy is that!

Since we are on the topic of desserts – Mimma shared with me a quite wonderful recipe for Biscotti. How many times have you been to a small café and bought some biscotti and wondered how much more delicious they would be if not in a jar on the counter, but rather fresh out of the oven? Well here is the CLASSIC Italian recipe that will make you the envy of your friends. And of course, as always with the three grandmothers from Italy, they have made it simple, easy to prepare and delicious!

Franca insists that this dessert be served with Vin Santo – a scrumptious wine available from any good wine store.

Cantuccini

INGREDIENTS:

- 1.1lbs or 400 grams flour
- 10 ounces or 250 grams sugar
- 10 ounces or 250 grams almonds with their skin on; if you can't get these, non salted almonds are fine
- 2 eggs plus 2 yolks
- 4 Tbsp or 75 grams butter
- 1 tsp or 8 grams of baking powder
- Lemon or orange zest
- ½ glass Vin Santo

PREPARATION:

1. Mix sugar, eggs, butter and almonds together with the zest of the citrus fruit and a pinch of salt
2. Add the flour and baking powder
3. Shape short "fingers" of dough, put them on the oven pan and brush them with egg yolk and milk
4. Cook for approx. 20 minutes at 200°C / 400° F
5. When ready cut the "fingers" diagonally and put them again in the oven for 10 minutes

I love that this tasty dessert can be made within about 45 minutes.

This next torte is very typical of the Tuscany region, and in particular, is a traditional offering from Ferrara which is the town of Cristina one of the assistants who works with Mimma, Franca and Lele. The other exciting part of this recipe is that it teaches you to create your own pasta. When I first thought of doing that, it sounded rather intimidating. However the way that the grandmothers will teach you, it is again rather simple. Here we go!

Torta di tagliatelle

INGREDIENTS:

- 20 ounces or 300 grams of flour
- 7 ounces or 200 grams of sugar
- 5 ounces or 150 grams of butter
- 7 ounces or 200 grams of almonds - try to get with their skins on. If not possible, then non salted almonds are fine
- 3 eggs
- 2 Tablespoons lemon zest
- Confectioners or icing sugar
- Amaretto liqueur

PREPARATION:

1. First we will make the tagliatelle
2. Mix about 10 ounces or 120 grams of flour and 1 egg. Let it rest for about 15 minutes then roll it flat to about ¼ inch in thickness or even a bit less if you can but not so thin that it separates. Then cut it into very thin strips. Put it aside
3. Now we will make the base of the tart which we will call the dough. With the remaining flour prepare the dough adding about half, or 100 grams of sugar, 2 egg yolks and a pinch of salt. Put it aside
4. Prepare the filling
5. Peel and toast the almonds, grind them (I use a coffee grinder) and mix with the other half, or 100 grams of sugar, about ¾ ounce or 25 grams of butter and lemon rind. Add some liqueur
6. Line the mould with the dough, add the filling to cover the base, and cover with the thin strips of tagliatelle. Pour a 1.75 ounces or 50 g melted butter on top of it all
7. Cover with parchment paper and bake at 350 degrees F or 180° C for approx. half an hour
8. When cold pour over 2 small glasses of Amaretto liqueur. DELICIOUS!



Almonds with Skins, Sugar, Butter and Amaretto Liqueur

Grapes in Brandy

When the vines are heavy with grapes and the sweet taste fills your palette, there is always a desire to keep them longer than the season. Here is a novel way to enjoy the fruits of the vines for many more months.

INGREDIENTS:

- 12.5 ounces or 375 ml brandy
- Make syrup from: 8 ounces or 250 ml water and 8.5 ounces or 200 g white sugar
- A good bunch of seedless grapes – green or black

PREPARATION:

1. Wash the grapes carefully and remove the berries from the stalks, leaving a small stalk attached to each grape.
2. Prick with a sterilized needle.

3. To make the syrup, boil the sugar and water together until it has thickened, remove from stove and add the brandy.
4. Pack the grapes firmly into hot, dry, sterilized jars and top up with syrup.
5. Seal the jars loosely and sterilize by placing in a deep saucepan filled with hot water, bring water to boil and sterilize for about 25 minutes.
6. Remove the jars from the water and seal tightly.
7. Allow 3 months for maturing.



Grapes of all kinds

And finally, we end with a delicious and easy tart. As the three grandmothers say – there is no argument about a good dessert – it is something upon which everyone can agree!

Tuscan Fig Tart

INGREDIENTS:

Pastry:

- 3.5 ounces or 100 g of flour
- 1 ounce or 30 g of almonds without peel
- 1.75 ounces or 50 g of butter
- 1.5 ounces or 40 g of Sugar
- 1 egg yolk
- The grated peel of 1 lemon
- A pinch of salt

Filling:

- 14 ounces or 400 g of figs
- 3 egg yolks
- 3 Tbsp of sugar
- 1 ounce or 30 g of flour
- 4 tsp or 20 ml of white wine

PREPARATION:

1. Prepare the pastry. Let the butter soften at room temperature
2. Chop the almonds finely
3. Make a mound of the flour with a depression in the middle and put in the middle of it the chunks of butter, chopped almonds, sugar, lemon rind, yolk and a pinch of salt
4. Mix all the ingredients until you get a round ball of dough then cover and put in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes
5. Dampen a sheet of parchment paper and put it on the bottom of a cookie pan. Roll out the dough 1 cm thick with a wooden rolling pin covered with flour so the dough will not stick, and lift it carefully and cover the bottom and the sides of the pan
6. Prick the pastry which will prevent the sides and bottom from rising during baking, and bake for 25 minutes at about 375 degrees F until the surface becomes golden

The Filling:

1. While the pie crust is baking, prepare the fig mixture
2. Clean, peel and cut the figs in slices
3. Heat the wine in a pan
4. In a bowl mix the yolks with the sugar
5. Add the flour and the warm wine and continue to mix until you obtain a smooth cream
6. Pour the cream in a pan and cook it on a low flame stirring for about 5 minutes
7. Let the cream cool
8. By then the pastry will be done, let it cool a little, and then pour the cream over the pastry making sure that it doesn't flow over the sides
9. Arrange the fig slices over the cream in a nice design
10. Cool and serve



The three grandmothers, Lele, Franca and Mimma, hope to see you very soon in Tuscany where you alone, or with your family, can cook and eat together as they welcome you with love, good food, laughter and wine – please contact them by visiting their website at: www.podereciona.com or contacting Mimma Ferrando directly at mimmaferrando@alice.it. You can contact the author, Lorraine Segil at lsegil@aol.com or through her website at www.littlefarmcompany.com or www.lsegil.com