



Not My Mother's Kitchen

REDISCOVERING
ITALIAN-AMERICAN COOKING
THROUGH STORIES AND RECIPES

ROB CHIRICO

"A funny, loving, and oh-so-useful manual on food, family,
and survival when your mom is a terrible cook."

—MO ROCCA, host of *My Grandmother's Ravioli*

NOT

MY MOTHER'S

KITCHEN



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*Rediscovering Italian-American
Cooking through Stories and Recipes*

A Memoir With More Than 70 Recipes

ROB CHIRICO

With illustrations by the author



A BUNKER HILL STUDIO BOOK

To all of the mothers who dutifully slaved over the hot stove for us, when they would rather have been doing something else. And especially to my mother, who would rather have gone bowling.

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*My thought was you don't let tradition bind you. You let it
set you free.*

—MASSIMO BOTTURA (*Italian restaurateur and chef*)

Introduction



That's Italian! . . . Not!

My mother was an assassin.

This is a bold confession for a son to make, but it's true. My mother was an assassin—in the kitchen that is. Now please don't take this amiss. Outside of the kitchen she was one of the kindest, sweetest, and gentlest of people you could ever meet. As the writer Bill Bryson noted about his own mother, "When she dies she will go straight to heaven, but no one is going to say, 'Oh, thank goodness you're here. Can you fix us something to eat?'" I credit my love of books to my parents. Then there was music. Our home was filled with music—Broadway, jazz, Sinatra (of course), and even some opera. After all, we were Italian. But that was outside the kitchen. In front of the stove or at the microwave, my mother was the culinary equivalent of John Wilkes Booth. It has been alleged that Booth killed our country when he shot President Lincoln. My mother did the same to Italy. Martin Scorsese said, "If your mother cooks Italian food, why should you go to a restaurant?" Clearly, my mother never cooked for him.

Growing up, my conception of Italian food didn't differ much from that shared by most Americans. It was the food you were served in Italian restaurants: antipasto with olives and provolone, spaghetti and meatballs, veal Parmigiano, and lasagne with plenty of oozing mozzarella cheese. And yet, even before I ever stepped foot into a *ristorante* in Italy, the very word "restaurant" made me think of Italian food. That word evoked in me the pleasurable sensation I felt as I opened the doors and breathed in the aromas issuing from the restaurant kitchen. My sense of smell was so acute that my father once said that I had a "20-20 sniffer." Mind you, this was not a compliment, as his remark was in reference to my clipping a clothespin to my nose to block out the odor of our Friday fish cakes. At the time, though, the more pleasant aromas beckoned me to eat, not to cook.

So how does a boy go from growing up in a home where real food and a devotion to cooking were nonexistent to becoming someone who devotes considerable time every day to ruminating over the preparation and execution of every dish? I sometimes look back and wonder if my passion for good food was born out of self-defense: a

defense against malformed, nearly cremated hamburgers; frozen and canned vegetables overcooked to the point that you could practically use a straw to ingest them; and, of course, so-called Italian food that was about as authentic as UFOs and Elvis sightings. But *Cacio e Pepe* (page 133) and *Raw Summer Puttanesca* (page 149) were a long way off.

Self-defense or not, even as a picky little kid—who hadn't the faintest idea that he would one day be editing cookbooks, become the winner in a national cooking competition, or spend nearly a decade working in a restaurant—I must have had an inkling that there was more to Italian cuisine than dumping Chef Boyardee Spaghetti and Meatballs into a pot. When I did begin to realize that there was more, I wanted to cook. It should have been simple. So many people did it. What I discovered over time was that there was much, much more to it than I had imagined. I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking that all I wanted to do was go into the kitchen and cook. Why did that prove so very difficult?

Back in the early 1960s, our neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens, was a mix of Italian, Polish, Irish, and Greek families. On any given summer Saturday afternoon you could hear Sinatra, polkas, the Clancy Brothers, and bouzouki music streaming from different houses. By evening time, the aromas of home cooking began to fill the air. Mrs. Giorsos baked incredible butter cookies—which made up for the stench that filled the neighborhood when she was making her own lye soap. Mr. Berezowski had a special cache of horseradish that could singe your eyebrows if you just sniffed it. I loved it, and have since grown back a full pair of eyebrows.

But the best aromas poured from the kitchens of my Italian friends. The smells of bread baking and sauce cooking permanently bathed my cousin Gerard's home. It was particularly a treat when his grandmother (my greataunt) visited. Early in the morning she planted herself in the kitchen and spent the whole day rolling out dough and hand cutting pasta noodles. Or she would spend the day cutting up chickens for stew and chopping vegetables for her minestrone. (Had I only known at the time, I would have told her that her soup would be even better if she added a large piece of Parmigiano cheese rind.) Her spicy meatballs and tomato sauce came from recipes handed down from her mother, and, in turn, she passed the family recipes on to her daughter, my aunt Josephine. Nanny most assuredly had many of these same recipes, but my mother claimed that she never learned them because they were "Nanny's secrets."

In truth, I suspect that my mother was never interested in learning those secrets, let alone cooking the recipes. Most of my Italian friends seemed to have had families that tried to preserve at least a part of their culinary heritage, but the Italian food that we ate at home—save for the spaghetti and tomato sauce—came from the freezer or the closet: Celentano frozen *manicotti*, 4C canned Parmesan, Italian Hamburger Helper, and Noodle Roni. Occasionally there was the extra-hearty meal when she neglected to remove the plastic from the *manicotti*, which gave the cheese an entirely new dimension.

Such prepared foods were convenient for someone like my mother who clearly found cooking to be drudgery. Meanwhile, our neighborhood German delicatessen provided us with rare roast beef, potato salad, coleslaw, and other foods made daily in the back kitchen. That same deli on Parsons Boulevard—and I now apply the term "deli" loosely—has changed hands many times, and you can be sure that the roast beef

today comes in a Cryovac sealed bag while the potato salad and slaw come in ten-pound buckets. With plenty of options to spare her from cooking, my mother was free to pursue activities she found much more satisfying. She sold Avon products. She liked to bowl, and her trophies proved that she was good at it. She played mahjong with her friends. She was also something of a “window lady,” one of those women who enjoy spending hours sitting by the window, just watching the world go by.



“Nanny” at the stove

On the other hand, her mother, Philomena de Marco, Nanny as I will call her, loved to cook, or so it seemed. It later became clear that it was also obligatory—her duty as woman of the house. When I was ten, I began to accompany her to the Italian shops in the Corona section of Queens. She was illiterate, and her English was still a work in progress, so I served as her interpreter. Through the heady scents that emanated from the mountains of cheeses, and the sight of the huge salamis that hung from the ceilings

over the butcher counters, I was introduced to a world of cooking possibilities that lay beyond merely defrosting and baking a pan of store-bought lasagne. Those weekly trips opened my eyes to a new vista of Italian food. Still, having been fed a diet of decidedly non-Italian food, it would be a slow process before I would transcend the food I knew and reconcile myself to the food I was coming to know. The hypnotic cheeses aside, I was suspicious of anything unfamiliar. Besides, the barrels of dried *baccalà* and trays of squid were hardly tempting to me in the way that my mother’s canned Franco-American Mushroom Gravy over Carl Buddig packaged turkey on Wonder Bread was. If variety is the spice of life, and Italy is no stranger to spices, I was a stranger to it all when it came to the variety of Italian cuisine.

Then there were the atrocities. One in particular was frozen spinach (which, by the way, was the first vegetable to be sold frozen, courtesy of Mr. Clarence Birdseye, who perfected frozen foods in the 1920s). The “sort of ” chopped spinach my mother defrosted and cooked into a pulp made me wary of the spinach and ricotta ravioli Nanny made from scratch every Easter. Spinach was spinach as far as I was concerned, and whatever it was, I was against it. My ignorance constrained me from eating it for nearly two decades. Now, a week does not go by when I do not sauté baby spinach or any number of other simple greens with a bit of freshly chopped garlic and crushed red pepper in olive oil.

One day, as I sat on an overturned milk crate at one of the markets in Corona, I looked up briefly to watch Nanny as she griped and haggled with the store owner, Mr. Carmello. Their hands and fingers flailed about so much that you did not need to understand Italian to figure out what they were discussing. Before I could return to the affairs of Batman and Robin, his son Mimmo, who knew that this was their customary bickering, whispered to me, “Hey, kid, try this.” Racked with fear of the unknown, like somebody about to bungee jump off a bridge for the first time, I held my breath as he

passed me something on a wooden spoon. Now, if I was at home I would dispense with anything unfamiliar, but his broad grin alerted me that he was not out to poison me. As he brought it closer, I could see that the spoon had one small piece of their sausage on it. The sausage was covered with a thick mahogany sauce the likes of which I had never seen. At that point, however, I hesitated only briefly because the sausage, with a light dusting of grated cheese, was as alluring to the eye as it was to my nostrils. I thought I could almost see a tangible wisp of the aroma rise upward from the small spoon. It was almost like a wispy finger in an old Daffy Duck cartoon, beckoning me.

Ah, but when I tried it, it was the meaty sauce that was unlike anything I had ever tasted. Somehow the tomatoes were different. They seemed to have a salty sweetness all their own, without a hint of bitterness or artificial sweetness. Despite how much this sauce opened my eyes as well as my nostrils, I much prefer removing the sausage from its casings when I make my *Pappardelle with Spicy Sausage Sauce* ([page 144](#)) for a more meaty, concentrated flavor.

I imagine that Nanny could have made such a tantalizing sauce, and she probably did—but, compliant as she was to my grandfather while he was alive, she did not make red sauce very often. In part this may have been because my fully Americanized grandfather did not care much for pasta. I should mention here that theirs was a prearranged marriage. As was the case with the other five million, mostly southern, Italians who arrived on Ellis Island at the turn of the last century, she was hoping for a better life here. To escape *la miseria*—the poor conditions of so much of southern Italy—she was willing to face the unknown, and a language she did not understand, to wed a man she had never met.

On this side of the globe, my grandfather was born in New York City and considered himself more American than Italian. He even abandoned his given name Pasquale for the Irish-sounding Pat. With the Irishman “Big Tim” Sullivan leading Tammany Hall, which had provided work for ethnic groups when few others did, this was probably a good idea. As a construction worker on the Sixth Avenue El train, my grandfather much preferred the mammoth portions of steaks and potatoes that were served in the States to a humble plate of “spaggett.” With the stories of his parents’ homeland still in his blood, though, his Italian side would oftentimes break through at the sight of such American staples as oatmeal. He laughed and called it animal food, because that’s what he was told his father had fed horses in Italy. When I recall Grandpa’s stony-faced visage, I can still see him hunched over in the single chair he always sat in, reading the *Daily News* and puffing on his prized El Producto Queen cigars. He spoke little, and of that modicum of speech, none was reserved for complimenting my grandmother’s cooking, least of all her pasta sauce.

As a brief family aside, I really don’t know much about my father’s parents. They also came over in the great Italian wave of immigrants at the turn of the previous century. Two children were in tow, but my father, who was the youngest, was born here. His mother died two months before I was born, and his father lived in Brooklyn with the rest of the Chirico family. Oddly, they Americanized the name and spelled it “Cherico,” which almost sounds Native American. I saw little of my grandfather. This was because we had no car, and the time it took to travel to Brooklyn by train was tantamount to crossing half of the United States by covered wagon. Perhaps it was not

to hurt my mother by insulting her cooking (my sister and I were there for that), but my father rarely spoke of the food he grew up with. I knew more about what he ate in the Air Force—some meat extrapolation with gravy that he referred to as “S on a shingle.” My father never swore. He left that to Nanny and Grandpa.

Thinking back to Mr. Carmello’s red sauce, I may have relegated it to my visual and olfactory memory, because at one Sunday meal I was nearly floored by my mother’s spaghetti sauce. It was decidedly different. First of all, the color was more of a bright crimson than the usual bland puddle of dull red. And, like the sauce I had tasted from Mimmo’s spoon, it possessed a sweetness not born from sugar, but from the tomatoes themselves. No, it wasn’t as rich as the sauce I had tasted in Corona, but it was also not as bland as my mother’s usual sauce. After several twirls and forkfuls of spaghetti, I finally asked my mother what brand of tomatoes she had used for the sauce. Accustomed to the family’s often unwarranted complaints, she defensively pointed her fork at me and asked, “Why? What’s wrong with it?” I said, “Nothing,” because the sauce was really good. And I meant *really* good. I told her that she should keep buying those tomatoes. I read the label on the can, Luigi Vitelli. These were actually whole tomatoes, instead of the purée she usually bought. I much later learned that Luigi Vitelli imported Italy’s finest tomatoes from San Marzano sul Sarno in Campania. With no inducement besides “really good,” she resumed her requisite Sunday sauce-making with whatever canned puréed tomatoes that were on sale.

I think it’s pretty clear by now that enjoying Italian food at home was a rarity, as was hearing the Italian language. The main reason there was no Italian spoken was not because we were to be fully Americanized, as was the case in my father’s household growing up. My parents could not speak Italian. Just like the American English that we exclusively spoke, our meals were comparably limited in their ethnicity. Despite having no guidance in the preparation of Italian food, I somehow imagined that I knew all about Italian cooking, as if it were vicariously assimilated just by being Italian (and, as I wish the Italian language could be). This, of course, was an enormous blunder. My first attempts at making red sauce during my college years should be allocated to the Museum of Major Mistakes. Even I could see that the pathetic pot of viscous, bitter sauce could only be masked by mountains of grated cheese.

As I became more interested in knowing about food and cooking, I also discovered that there was more than just bad cooking; there was bad food—the sell-by-whenever packages that could sit in a supermarket shelf for weeks without witnessing the slightest metamorphosis. When I visited Italy for the first time in the late 1970s on a travel grant, I did not see this “miracle” of preservation. A shop that was filled with foodstuffs early in the day was almost empty by nightfall. The concept of shelf life had seemingly not reached their shores—yet. As I became more familiar with fresh foods and ingredients back home, I became equally aware that unlike the fresh food of my Italian ancestors, ours was overprocessed and filled with additives.

It was in graduate school in the ’70s, when I was given that travel grant to prepare for my PhD orals exam, that I experienced the Mediterranean diet and saw firsthand how Italians cooked and ate. Being in Italy afforded me the opportunity to experience the cooking of my ancestors. It inspired me to try to create the dishes I had never had at home. I also learned that you need not spend an eternity whipping up a fine meal. A simple plate of pasta with garlic, oil, and hot pepper can be as satisfying as a sauce

that has simmered for hours. Still, although I was awakened to the food of Italy and the Italian way of eating, I also came to more fully appreciate the fine foods and cooking my homeland had to offer.

While I strive to re-create many authentic Italian dishes at home today, much of my own cooking may seem quite individual next to traditional Italian fare—but so is Italian cooking from one region to the next. Most of the recipes I reproduce in this volume are variations on an Italian theme rather than a direct transcription. I like to think that my Bucatini all’Amatriciana or Balsamic Roasted Chicken are not far cries from the dishes I tasted in Rome and Modena, but I know that my version of a meat ragù in the style of a Bolognese (made with savory lamb and peppery rosemary instead of beef) might raise some eyebrows—if not a meat cleaver over my head. While some of the recipes here are my takes on the familiar, they are mostly the result of the years I have spent “dancing” with them in the kitchen. It may seem like a ridiculously moot point, but I personally prefer to think of this style of cooking as “American Italian.” While it may be rooted in Italian cooking, it is more often my American variation of it. And let us bear in mind that pizza is one of the world’s favorite dishes due to its having been made so popular here. With the influx of Neapolitan immigrants to the East Coast, their regional dish of pizza was more familiar to the Italians in cities like New York and New Haven than it was in Italy. It wasn’t until the 1950s that pizza began to catch on in the “Old Country.” Today, Italians consume a total of about 2.5 billion pizzas a year—thanks to their Neapolitan emigrants.

I see the blending of American and Italian foods and methods as a *matrimonio felice*—a happy marriage—just as each person in a partnership carries into it something unique to themselves and retains something unique unto themselves, and joined together they create a blissful union. I applaud tradition, but I continually experiment—just as my ancestors undoubtedly did. I also like to believe that my experimentation has taught me to be true to the ingredients at hand. I have seen restaurant and cookbook concoctions perpetrated under the name of experimentalism or, worse, creativity. As one venerable Italian told me, “Cook with your heart and stomach, not with your eyes and head.”

You may study and come close to re-creating a few of the “classic” dishes of a particular country, but it is far more important to appreciate the different flavors and ideas in the hope of expanding your own culinary horizons. As a cook of Italian descent, I hope to sensibly embrace that happy marriage between the foods and cooking from here and abroad. To hack a quote from *Candide*’s Dr. Pangloss, present-day Italian American cooking may just be “the best in this best of all possible worlds.”

Every Cook and Nanny, or Pass the Porkette, Please

The only cookbook I remember seeing at home when I was growing up was Peg Bracken’s witty *I Hate to Cook Book*, which my mother probably never read. If she ever did attempt to embark upon the recipe for a quick stroganoff, I can see her as a striking example of Ms. Bracken’s advice: “Start cooking those noodles, first by dropping a bouillon cube into the noodle water. Brown the garlic, onion, and crumbled beef in the oil. Add the flour, salt, paprika and mushrooms, stir, and let cook five

minutes while you light up a cigarette and stare sullenly at the sink.”

This is not to say that my mother did not try to cook in our rabbit warren. How could one be an assassin, even a kindly one, without a weapon? In my mother’s hands, every kitchen appliance or utensil was hers. Left to her own devices she laid waste to spaghetti, hamburgers, and even salad. “Fresh” was not a word she used, unless it was leveled at me—and deservedly so. I confess that, as young kids are wont to do, I routinely rudely complained about my food. As a child I may have known nothing about lamb, but I did not think that it should be the same texture as my canvas Chukka boots. Perhaps I have Bugs Bunny to thank for my enjoyment of raw carrots, but the little orange cubes that nestled together in a tin can with tiny, squishy, pallid pellets that passed themselves off as peas were a species in their own right. If it had not been for the fresh peas that Nanny once prepared, I might have concluded that most vegetables were of dubious merit at best.

Nevertheless, I don’t know if Nanny was out to preserve traditions and pass them on to anyone. This grey-haired, seemingly perennially aproned woman basically cooked the American meals that her husband and son expected. Save for holidays, when she cooked Italian, it was usually in small amounts just for herself. I have begun to wonder in retrospect if she did really enjoy cooking, or if it was just a requirement: the need to cook for and feed others. She once said, “If anything happens to me, what will happen to the squirrels?” I thought that this was a translation of one of those venerable Italian sayings that we do not understand until we are much older—and, hopefully, wiser. I still am unclear and hope that this is a sign for the need for longevity.



Please pass the lasagne, sweetie.

Furthermore, as to cooking in the Italian style back then, apart from making long trips to markets in Corona, the Bronx, or Little Italy, you simply could not find good Italian ingredients in our local stores. By 1960, even shops that began to stock Italian ingredients sorely lacked essential or merely common Italian staples: fresh basil, pine nuts, squash blossoms, cardoons, Parmigiano-Reggiano, extra-virgin olive oil (even the name “extra-virgin” would have produced sly giggles), and *pancetta*—let alone *guanciale* or *lardo*. This has all changed, thankfully, but even if you had heard of a curiosity such as *pesto* back then, our nearby King Kullen supermarket most assuredly did not

have the makings for it.

Judging from what he ordered in restaurants, my father’s palate was much more expansive than my mother’s. It was only much later that I figured out that he was forced to forgo many of the dishes that he had grown up with. As a pre-teen, there was

nothing to prepare me for *trippa*, which he ordered one time in an Italian restaurant in Little Italy. He gave me a taste, and my jaded palate only registered that interlaced web of cow's stomach lining as a bicycle inner tube exploding with broken watch springs. I would have preferred cat food. He praised the restaurant's escarole soup, but my mother could not, or would not, make that either. As it was for so many men of his generation, his sole cooking domain before he retired was the barbecue grill. I still recall the crisp snap of hot dogs and the great juicy steaks, all the while assuming that grilled food was supposed to taste like Kingsford lump charcoal doused with quarts of lighter fluid. It all tasted good back then. Of course, I now know that those chemicals are odious. Still, the burgers and dogs certainly "hit the spot" at the time, and it is with great fondness that I look back at the Fourth of July parties in our small backyard.

Then there was the way we ate. It was fine for us, but it was also not Italian. Our meals were served up just the way most Americans still eat at home: "family style." Unlike Italians in Italy, who ate a succession of courses, our dinner was basically a one-course meal. It may have consisted of several dishes, such as meat, potatoes, and a vegetable, but everything came out at once. If the dinner was spaghetti and meatballs, and maybe a salad, it all appeared and was eaten at the same time. There was also a plate of white bread and a side of butter. This was not in keeping with the history of the world and the devotion to the staff of life that serves us all; the Wonder Bread was there just in case we did not eat the rest of the meal. I loved its soft, pillowy texture, only much later to conjecture that this was because it was used to stuff pillows. That cold pat of butter, which tore into the bread, was there as a supplement to fill our bellies if we did not finish our canned peas and carrots and our pork tenderloin. This I later learned was not tenderloin at all, but a fatty, unctuous boiled Freirich *Flavor* Porkette, aka pork shoulder butt. At the time I knew better, or so I thought. The meat was neither tender nor a loin. I even wondered whether it was a shoulder or a butt, but what did I truly know?



Mom and Dad in their home in Queens

Least of all, did I know that we were stretching the paycheck until it bled? I'm not mentioning this to make you feel sorry for us (though sympathy is always welcome), but to point out that given that I was used to eating foods that were akin to plaster of paris, I was totally unaware of the wide array of marvelous foods that were available—foods that were both healthful and edible. As I did begin to learn, I naturally began to spend more on finer ingredients. My father was later wont to say regarding this growing partiality, "Champagne taste on a beer

salary." He had something there, since he could never imagine spending twice the amount of money on a box of imported De Cecco pasta over Ronzoni. I am certain, though, that my father had never read A. J. Liebling, who partially vindicated this penchant in *Between Meals* when he wrote, "A man who is rich in his adolescence is

almost doomed to be a dilettante at the table. This is not because all millionaires are stupid but because they are not impelled to experiment.”

Holidays were different. This was when uncles, aunts, and their entourage all arrived, and Nanny went all out. As befitting an Italian American household, we had to indulge in a requisite fifteen-pound trencher of lasagne before the other hundred or so dishes of glazed ham, roast turkey, fluffy mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes (sans marshmallows), crisp green beans, and salad came out practically at the same time. There is the old joke that goes like this: “The trouble with eating Italian food is that five or six days later you’re hungry again.” If the way Italians ate



A happy holiday conversation...

was a delicate sonata with several movements, a typical American meal was something of a loaded jam session. I also want to stress here that on a typical day, dinner was our main meal, whereas in Italy, lunch was and still is. Of all the statistics available on Italy and its varied economic problems, few are as eye-opening as the fact that at around one p.m. on any given day, more than half the population will normally be sitting down to a long and leisurely lunch. Our American lifestyle and working habits have sadly, but often necessarily, prohibited this slower paced tradition.

Slow Learner

During my graduate school year, I met my wife-to-be, Valdina. When we moved in together in her grandmother’s minuscule apartment on the Upper East Side, Soup Burg takeout bags were replaced with Gristede’s grocery bags. Cooking was becoming an avocation—a happy pastime. That cooking would evolve into a devotion was something I could not have dreamed of even on opium. My true early days as an aspiring young cook would not take place in that tiny apartment, though, but in Valdina’s family manse, a three-story house overlooking Long Island Sound in Stamford, Connecticut. Moreover, it was more of an accident that I only half jokingly attribute to boredom—an escape from suburban cocktail-hour conversation.

As art dealers, Valdina’s parents were continually throwing parties for friends and prospective clients. Not caring to socialize with most of the guests, I offered my services to Valdina’s mother in the kitchen. Gradually I took over the reins, and we were both happy to forgo our unenviable positions. At the time it was just a means of escape, but it did mean I had to cook—and however pedestrian it might have been at first, cook I did.

One thing about escape is that you also find others who wish to be in the same boat, away from the sinking ship of tired conversation. Usually the folks who were also bored with the party sought solace in the kitchen. Not surprisingly, they were also

probably the most interesting of guests, and I had many fine chats with fellow fugitives. During my time alone, I discovered that the kitchen had a small selection of cookbooks, thanks to a subscription to Book-of-the-Month Club. Among them were *The Joy of Cooking* (of course), James Beard's *American Cookery*, Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and, perhaps most important of all for me, Marcella Hazan's *The Classic Italian Cookbook*. It did not seem all that long before I graduated from being party chef and became would-be home cook. I was soon making our meals every night: lasagne with Bolognese and béchamel sauces, roast chicken with rosemary, and *pesto*. (I finally understood what could be done with the bushels of basil that my mother grew!)

After such a slow start, what followed seemed to happen so quickly. It was as if I had been doing this all my life, even with the dismal failures I have needed therapy to forget. After our move to Connecticut in the early '80s, I was suddenly no longer receiving turtleneck sweaters and sweat suits from my wife for my birthday, but Sabatier carbon-steel knives. Her biggest coup may have been the five-piece hand hammered French copper cookware that was on closeout at Bloomingdales for \$350.

It was particularly fortuitous that with much of Stamford still having a large Italian community, there was a fabulous supermarket appropriately called Bongiorno's. Its shelves were overstocked with every manner of produce and Italian food products that were almost impossible to find outside of New York City. Naturally, it helped that I was teaching at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Midtown Manhattan, and whatever I could not find locally was available to me in Little Italy. In retrospect I can see that I was just a novice, but I was a dedicated one. I still had many years of practice and experimentation ahead of me. Mistakes were bound to happen, and they certainly did. But it is no secret that we can learn from them and, hopefully, not repeat them. (Try adding lemon pepper to an onion soup. *No, don't!* A jar of lemon pepper has a place, but not in the kitchen.)

Again, it was thanks to my graduate school travel grant that I discovered how and what Italians in Italy ate. I learned that a small portion of pasta or a moderate bowl of soup was always a first course. In fact, even the starter course in Italy is called *minestre*, which literally translates as "soup" (but more on that later). A plate of piquant *Spaghetti con Aglio e Olio* (Spaghetti with Garlic and Olive Oil), also being a first course, was served in the same type of soup plate. Accordingly, this was followed by a second dish of, say, *Scaloppine di Vitello alla Pizzaiola* (Veal Scaloppine with Tomatoes), accompanied by sautéed spinach, after which might come a salad, and then fruit and cheese. This tradition dates back to ancient Rome. The Romans' expression for it was "*ab ovo ad mala*" (from eggs to apples). A customary meal in an Italian *ristorante* was a progression of complimentary and complementary tastes that all blended in harmony and pleased all of the senses.

For me, however, growing up eating mediocre fare, and then discovering that food should be anything but, it started me on a lifelong journey of how to cook. Still, this journey has been a long work in progress: a quest, if you will. And like any dutiful quest, when properly begun, it has no end. Is that a bit quixotic? You bet. Lastly, to quote the singular and feisty Jim Harrison from *The Raw and the Cooked*, "If I don't enjoy myself in this life, when am I going to enjoy myself?"