

The Italian Wedding

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Beppi's Recipe for Melanzane alla Parmigiana

This is so easy. Why do you even need a recipe? My daughters were helping me with this when they were children. You just make the Napolitano sauce. What do you mean you don't know how? *Cose da pazzi!* OK, I'll explain it to you. This is what you will need:

- 2 aubergines
- 1 onion
- 1 jar of tomato passata
- 2 eggs
- plain flour
- salt
- pepper
- fresh basil
- lots of grated Parmesan
- a little grated mozzarella
- olive oil
- vegetable oil

This is my way of doing it. The best way, of course. First you cut the aubergines into rounds – not too thick but not too thin. Salt them and leave in a colander for an hour to drain. Then wash off the salt with cold water and pat dry with a clean cloth.

Now make the Napolitano sauce. Chop an onion finely, fry it in olive oil and then pour on the jar of tomato passata. Add basil, a little salt and pepper and then simmer the sauce for twenty minutes. Now your kitchen is smelling wonderful, eh?

Next beat two eggs with a little salt and pepper. Dip both sides of each aubergine round in plain flour, then in the beaten egg and shallow fry in vegetable oil until golden brown. Oh, and don't be mean with the oil. *Mannaggia chi te muort*, you

people, always so worried about the oil. Pour it from the bottle properly – don't just dribble it in.

Layer the fried aubergine in a shallow oven dish – four layers maximum – and cover each layer with some Napolitano sauce and plenty of grated parmigiano. Sprinkle mozzarella on the top and bake for twenty minutes at about 150°C.

(Yes, yes, I know two aubergines will be too much, but who can resist tasting a few pieces as they come out of the frying pan?)

Addolorata's note: Papa, I don't believe this. No wonder you have high cholesterol.

I

The mannequin was propped up in the corner of Pieta's attic room. The dress she'd put on it was nothing more than a roughly stitched calico toile but Pieta could see what it would become. The fine beading, the fall of the train, the sash tied at the waist. It was going to be magnificent.

This was the time Pieta loved most. When both the gown and the bride's future held so much promise. Later there might be disappointments, or even heartbreak. But right now, with the dress no more than a plain shape and all its beauty still locked away in Pieta's imagination, was the best time of all.

Usually Pieta knew the dress before she got to know the bride. Her vision of what she would create with her rolls of lace, tulle and silk was nearly always complete in her head by the end of the first consultation. It was later, at the endless fittings, that she would bend the bride to her will, but so gently and persuasively they always seemed to think it was their idea. Forget the fabric flower on the hip; get rid of the handkerchief hemline. Yes, yes, that's what you want.

At the final fitting, when the bride stood in the Mirror Room and they slipped shoes on her feet and put a veil in her hair, Pieta always felt sad. She was sending her creation out into the world and who knew how it – and the woman who wore it – would fare. For there were worse things than torn lace and grubby hems, Pieta knew that.

And this dress, the one clothing the mannequin in her bedroom, was different. More important than any that had gone before, more difficult to let go. Pieta sat in bed, propped up on pillows, and stared at the calico toile. This plain-looking thing

was to be her little sister's bridal gown and everything about it had to be perfect.

Pieta heard a door open and close and footsteps on the wooden floors below. She wondered who it was. Her sister Addolorata, too excited about all her plans for the future to sleep? Or their mother, who had gone to bed hours ago but might have woken and realized she'd forgotten to take whatever pill or potion she was relying on these days?

The footsteps sounded heavier now and there was another noise – a banging and crashing of pans and crockery in kitchen cupboards. It must be her father Beppi then. He was too restless, too busy in mind and body, ever to sleep a whole night through. And of course he'd be in the kitchen, nowhere else. In the morning, when Pieta went down to make her first cup of strong black coffee, there would be freshly-made pasta drying on the kitchen table, or a stock pan filled with a sauce of tomatoes and slow-cooked beef.

As if there wasn't enough food already. There were bundles of his carefully dried pasta wrapped in linen tea towels in the kitchen cupboard, and containers of his sauces and soups neatly labelled by her mother and packed away in the deep chest freezer. And still Beppi kept on cooking.

Pieta loved the food her father made but there was always so much of it. Sometimes she dreamed of leaving the big four-storey house they all shared, living alone and making her own meals. And then dinner would be a simple soup of Swiss chard, flavoured with a little bacon and eaten in peace instead of the extravagant portions her father served up amidst the noise and fuss that accompanied whatever he did.

Yawning, Pieta took a last look at the calico toile. Mentally she adjusted the neckline slightly and made the shoulder straps wider. Then she turned out her light, wriggled down under the covers, closed her eyes and was asleep in minutes.

Early the next morning Pieta came downstairs to find the kitchen exactly as she'd expected. Yellow ribbons of fettucine covered one end of the long pine table, dusted with flour and spread out erratically. The other end was crowded with thin shards of lasagne, and in the middle there was the tiniest space, where Pieta's mother Catherine had put her cereal bowl and a mug of tea.

Pale and tired, her greying hair pulled back harshly from her face, her flower-sprigged robe wrapped round her, Catherine spooned cereal into her mouth disinterestedly.

'Good morning, Mamma. How do you feel today?' Pieta pushed open the kitchen door and headed straight for the coffee pot.

'Not so good, not so bad.'

'Do you want some coffee?'

'No, no, I can only drink tea in the mornings, you know that.' Catherine jabbed an angry finger at the confetti of pasta covering the table. 'And anyway, I don't know where you're going to sit to have your breakfast. Look at this!'

'It's fine.' Pieta shrugged. 'I only want a coffee and a cigarette. I'll sit on the back doorstep and have it.'

'Smoking, always smoking,' Catherine lamented. 'When are you going to give up, eh? Your sister doesn't smoke. I don't know what made you start.'

It was the same every morning. Her mother was always the first to wake and would sit with the newspaper, clucking over the bad news stories, as the milk soaked into her cornflakes. Pieta would find her at the kitchen table, her mouth pursed as though she were eating something slightly bitter, and often she would read aloud a story that particularly displeased her.

If Addolorata had been working late at the restaurant she would usually come down and join Pieta on the doorstep for a quick coffee and an illicit puff of her cigarette before going back to bed to snatch a little more sleep.

But it was when their father Beppi got up that the whole

house seemed to wake for the day. If he was in a good mood he would burst through the kitchen door, sweep away his wife's half-eaten bowl of cereal and rattle it in the sink, noisily pour himself coffee, all the while calling, 'Good morning, my bella Caterina, and good morning, Pieta. Are you out there smoking? Come inside and eat some breakfast like a good girl before you go to work.'

It was different if he had woken in a bad mood. Then he would shuffle round the kitchen, pinching the bridge of his nose between a forefinger and thumb, and groaning noisily.

But this morning it was just Pieta, sitting on the step, drinking her coffee as she looked out over the small patch of garden where her father grew his vegetables, and listened to her mother turn the pages of her newspaper.

In the background, as always, was the rumble of London traffic but Pieta barely noticed it. She had been born in this tall house in the back streets of Clerkenwell and had lived in it all her life. When she sat here in her favourite place, eyes half-closed and the morning sun on her face, she heard only the sounds she wanted to hear – birds singing in the trees of the churchyard opposite, children shrieking in the little playground. This high-walled garden, with every inch of its earth cultivated and useful, was the safest place she knew. But she couldn't stay here all morning. One more cup of coffee, one last cigarette, and then it would be time to go. She felt the usual sense of dread at the thought of the day ahead.

'What's wrong? You look a bit pale this morning, Pieta.'

Her eyes flew open. It was Addolorata, of course, bending down to take the cigarette from her hand and sucking on it greedily.

'Nothing's wrong.' Pieta shifted sideways and her sister jammed herself in beside her. 'I was just thinking about something, that's all.'

'Worrying about something, you mean.'

Addolorata topped up Pieta's coffee cup from her own and

took a regretful last pull of the cigarette before handing it back to her.

The two girls didn't look like sisters. Addolorata was her father's child, all curves and untamed curly hair, with round cheeks and small brown eyes. Pieta had lighter eyes and darker hair that she wore in a neat bob, the heavy fringe grazing her eyebrows. In temperament they were just as different, and yet, while they had fought with each other all their lives, they had always stayed the best of friends.

'Are you working today?' Pieta tossed the spent cigarette onto the concrete path and stubbed it out with the toe of her slipper.

'Mmm, yes, and I need to get in reasonably early. I want to try something new. I've been thinking about orechiette pasta with broccoli and leeks braised in a little chicken stock, some lean bacon, maybe even some chilli and a tiny squeeze of lemon.' Addolorata's voice sounded almost dreamy as she described the dish. 'Why don't you come by the restaurant for lunch and I'll make it for you.'

'Maybe. I'll see if I've got time.'

'Just come in for half an hour. He can't expect you to work all the time. Even he must see that you've got to eat.'

'We've got brides coming in all day for consultations and fittings. I have to be there.'

Addolorata rolled her eyes. 'Honestly, I don't know why you do it. He steals your ideas, expects you there all hours, makes you do all the work.'

'I know, I know. But he's Nikolas Rose so he can do whatever he likes.'

'Leave him, Pieta. Go out on your own. You know you can do it.'

'Not yet.' Pieta shook her head. 'The time's not right. I'm not ready.'

'If it's money you're worried about, Papa will help you.'

'I know. He reminds me at least once a week. Just leave it,

will you?’ Pieta tossed another cigarette at her sister, who put it in her pocket.

Almost on cue, Pieta heard a rattling of pans in the kitchen and smelt an onion frying. And then, scissors in hand, her father appeared in search of fresh herbs, almost tripping over his daughters as he erupted out of the back door.

‘Girls, why do you have to sit out here like peasants, eh? Why do you think I bought those kitchen chairs? Go and sit on them like normal civilized people. And Pieta ...’ He raised his voice. ‘Have some breakfast. You need to eat more.’

‘No time, Papa, sorry. I have to get to work.’

‘Well, in that case come home at a reasonable hour tonight. I’m going to make a beautiful lasagne and I want all my family around the table to share it with me.’ He beamed at her happily and waved his little bunch of freshly-cut herbs in the air.

Pieta kissed him quickly on the cheek. As she hurried back through the kitchen and headed upstairs to be the first in the shower she heard her mother complaining: ‘Always the smell of cooking in this house, Beppi, even first thing in the morning.’

Not for the first time, Pieta wondered why her father had left Italy all those years ago. Why would such a brightly-coloured man fall in love with a washed-out woman like her mother? But then, what made any man fall for any woman? Pieta was nearly thirty and still she didn’t know.