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Opening Extract from...

Gennaro: Let's Cook Italian

Written by Gennaro Contaldo

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GENNARO

LET'S
COOK ITALIAN





GENNARO

LET'S COOK ITALIAN

favourite
family recipes



PAVILION



To my lovely family

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THE FAMILY THAT COOKS TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER

Food brings people together. When I was growing up it was the favourite topic of conversation at the dinner table. This was the same table on which my mother would roll out fresh pasta, knead bread dough or bottle preserves. This table was our altar, a place where all members of our family sat to eat, discuss, argue, laugh, sometimes cry – we had the best of times around it. All my family cooked, including my father, who still liked to make his own meals when he was well into his 90s. My aunts, cousins, neighbours, friends, in fact everyone I knew, cooked – the meals weren't elaborate affairs, but this was good, honest family cooking.

When I first came to England in 1969 I found it odd that food was not a priority in people's lives – they mostly liked to grab a quick bite on the go or eat from a plate balanced on their laps. And, horror of horrors, pasta was out of a can! Of course, things have changed dramatically since then – the immigrants to this country have brought their national dishes and foods and we have been exposed to numerous cooking programmes on television, cookery books and magazines, enticing us to cook and experiment. More recently, with fears of GM foods and intensive farming, we have turned to organic, natural and seasonal produce. When I was young, we ate mainly locally grown food. Nowadays we can find all sorts of exotic things to eat, flown in from around the globe, but I still prefer to eat seasonally. I look forward to the first broad beans and peaches in summer, and some of my favourite produce in autumn – pears, walnuts and chestnuts.

As a parent, I strongly believe in implementing good eating habits from an early age, and showing my kids where our food comes from and how to cook it. I was taught to respect food; the chickens and rabbits we kept were treated humanely. We never wasted food and leftovers were always used. Now my girls really enjoy making bread, pizza, pasta or gnocchi with me, and baking cakes with their mum. They are fascinated to see what I bring home when I've been out hunting; they are not afraid to touch the game birds and aren't squeamish about watching me clean them. When I was old enough, my father would take me hunting – we only killed for food, never for fun – and he taught me a lot. My mother introduced me to wild herbs and mushrooms; I would go with her to the hills above our village of Minori and she would teach me to identify the different species. Food was all around us and dominated our lives. 'Cosa mangiamo per pranzo?' ('What shall we eat for lunch?') was a constant refrain.

Family life in Italy is changing. More women work outside the home, so they no longer have time to prepare fresh pasta and the other traditional dishes their mothers and grandmothers used to make. However, Italians still want to eat well, and even if their fresh pasta is shop-bought they will still try to ensure it's of good quality. Italians still talk about food a lot and, although their meals might be a little more rushed these days, the family still gets together for the evening meal around a table – and certainly always on Sundays.

It is so easy to buy everything ready-made these days that I think we forget we can actually make it ourselves. Take something as basic as bread; not only do my children and I have fun making the dough, watching it rise and enjoying that magical moment when it is baked, but I also know they are eating something good. For me, this is spending quality time with my family – and I am passing on some of my family traditions, which I hope will stay with them forever.

