

The Basic Art of Italian Cooking

Interview with the Author, Maria Liberati

I: Interviewer

M.L.: Maria Liberati

I: What prompted you to write your first cookbook?

M.L.: I never realized how interested people were in Italian food until I began seriously studying cooking. When I would be shopping at the supermarket, going through the rigorous tests I give my fruits and vegetables before I buy them, people would always ask me how to choose and use a particular fruit or vegetable. And then when I started to teach cooking programs, my students were always asking for specific recipes for different dishes that they had heard about but didn't know how to make. So with the encouragement of my fiancé, who is an architect in Italy, and my parents, I began to compile recipes that I had gathered over the years and put them together in a book along with stories about my travels in Italy.

I: How did you choose which recipes to include?.

M.L.: Most of the them are family recipes—dishes that I learned to make by helping my grandmother and my mother as I was growing up. Of course, these are the ultimate comfort foods for me. Penne arrabbiata, fresh spinach with garlic and olive oil, “sugo,” a sauce made with fresh tomatoes and basil—these take me right back to my mother's kitchen. Others are unique recipes that I learned while working with chefs throughout Italy. Many of these are for regional specialties that are almost synonymous with the areas that produced them—Crostini Napoletana, Lasagna Verde Bolognese Style, Spinaci fiorentina. Still others are treasured recipes I learned from friends who were kind enough to share them with me and show me how to make them. Learning to make many of these delicious dishes was difficult because I found that many of the best cooks—especially in Italy—don't use recipes or measure ingredients. You have to cook with them a few times to get a “feel” for how to prepare the dish and how much of each ingredient to use.

I: There are a lot of cookbooks out there; what separates yours from the rest?

M.L.: The one thing I want to convey is that what makes Italian cuisine so special is not just the food itself, although, of course, it is quite wonderful. What makes it special is the combination of how you prepare the food, where the recipes come from, the stylish way you serve it and the gathering at the table with loved ones to eat. What makes the book unique is that we tried to combine all of those aspects here. Food is my passion. I hope that preparing delicious meals for family and friends will become a passion for readers, too.

I: What can we in the United States learn from the way Italians view of food?

M.L.: Food nourishes not only the body but it also nourishes relationships. Cooking for someone is giving love. A study was recently done in the United States that showed that kids who sit down to eat together with their families at least five times a week are 85% less likely to have serious problems with drugs and crime. The study also found that couples who cook together and eat together have longer

and happier relationships. I see so many couples together in my cooking programs, which is wonderful. They realize, just like I do, that cooking, preparing and eating food together is not a chore, but a joy.

I: Who is your intended audience?

M.L.: I think the book will appeal to both experienced cooks and those who are new to the kitchen. The recipes that I included are fresh, simple and uncomplicated. Simplicity is one of the keys to a great Italian meal. This book will show readers how to make unforgettable dishes with basic, fresh, carefully chosen ingredients, just like the chefs have been doing in Italy for generations. In addition to the information on food, there is also much here for those who love to travel or who are 'armchair travelers.' I like to think that through the special stories of my life and travels in Italy that I share in the book, readers will feel like they are cruising around the country with me in my Fiat.

I: What is your favorite part of the cookbook?

M.L.: Even though each and every recipe holds a place in my heart, the stories are my favorite part because each time I read them I recall a special moment in my life in a special place where I enjoyed the wonderful dishes that I write about here. These stories bring back so many wonderful memories. My hope is that these tales will make the recipes more meaningful for readers.

I: Food and fashion models just don't seem to go together. Most of the time we hear of models not eating. How did these two things come together for you?

M.L.: I am asked this question frequently. But food and fashion really aren't so incongruous. There truly are aspects of art and design in food—in the way that you prepare it, in the way that you serve it and the way that you enjoy it. That is why most of us like to eat in lovely surroundings. I discovered the beauty of food at my grandparents' vineyard in Italy. Once I got the chance to work with some outstanding chefs in the many different regions of Italy and to experience the art of cooking with them, the sort of puppy love that I had for food grew into a mad passion.

I: What was your first experience with cooking?

M.L.: My first experience really goes back to when I was about four-years old and my paternal grandfather would take me on his Saturday trips to the Italian Market in South Philadelphia to shop for food. If it was wine making season—right around the month of October—we would spend all day looking for and tasting grapes. We would also get the ingredients for our great big Sunday family dinners at my grandparents. We would bring home freshly baked bread, fresh tomatoes, eggplant, mushrooms, and all sorts of other fruits and vegetables so 'nonna' (my grandma) could start preparing those unforgettable Sunday meals. Of course, I also have fond memories of spending time in the kitchen with my mom. My mom is an excellent cook, and like so many other good cooks, she rarely uses recipes. I learned at her side by watching and then by doing under her careful direction.

I: How did your interest and passion for food develop further?

M.L.: While I was modeling in Italy, I would spend my vacations at my grandfather's vineyard in the mountains of central Italy. There I discovered that my great grandparents had owned a well-known bakery in the south of Italy and that my great aunt had cooked for several members of the Italian Royal

Family. This sparked my dormant interest in food and cooking. I began consulting with chefs in the area and spent hours translating and reworking some of the old recipes left by Great Aunt Angelina. After I met my fiancé, we traveled to so many different parts of Italy and Europe, visiting friends and chefs that we knew. At almost every visit, I would spend time learning a new recipe or a particular culinary skill. Little by little I gathered all of this experience together and started conducting culinary programs for tourists in Italy.

I: You mentioned that you included some stories about your travels in Italy; can you give me an example of one of your adventures that we will read about in the book?

M.L.: One of the most exciting things that happened to me was having my portrait painted by one of Italy's most famous artists. One afternoon after finishing a day of modeling for a design house in Rome, I was grabbing a cup of espresso at a café on the Via Veneto, and I was spotted by Sergio Terzi. Sergio, who is also known as Nerone, has painted some very famous Italians, including Luciano Pavarotti, the singer Zucchero and many others. I was surprised and delighted when he approached me. Of course, I agreed! The portrait was exhibited throughout Europe as well as at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where the painting and the artist were honored at a ceremony for the contributions of Italians to the world. When Sergio was done exhibiting the painting two years later, he offered to give me my portrait as a gift, but the "catch" was that I had to go to his studio in Reggio-Emilia to pick it up. The tale of my fiancé's and my trip to this rugged and rural area to bring home a large painting in a small car is part of the book. I still smile when I think of all of our misadventures along the way.

I: What other projects are you working on now?

M.L.: I am working on two books that should be published in 2006: *Festa!!- (Special Foods for Special Occasions)* and *The Basic Art of Italian Cooking, Part Two: The Italian Kitchen*. Another book that is in the works is *The Royal Art of Desserts*, which is a collection of more sophisticated recipes. That one should be released in 2007. I am also expanding my two web sites (www.MariaLiberati.com and www.TheBasicArtofItalianCooking.com), creating a monthly lifestyle newsletter, putting together more cooking programs at a vineyard in Italy and developing a television show. So this is a busy and exciting time for me. But no matter how busy I am, I always make a point to find time to sit down with family and friends and enjoy a good meal because that is what keeps me going.