

Amuse Bouche

About Me and Food

By: Brook Nestor

Food is powerful stuff. Everybody needs it, wants it and loves it. In Italy, the success of a company meal is judged by how long the guests stay at the table, extending the nuts and bolts of food into its function as the glue of society.

Using food as a hook, I've taught Italian language, culture and cuisine, bartered for goods and services, upped my kids' social status and coached Italian teenagers to promote their culinary heritage to members of Slow Food. I've become a celebrity of sorts among local foodies and a minor legend on both sides of the Atlantic while being showered with flowers and gifts. And all I have to do is act naturally, as the song goes.

However, mine is a "natural" acquired at a not insignificant price. Anyone who wants to know what it feels like for food and meals to determine the rhythm of life should do what I did: spend two decades in Italy. While I busied myself raising children and earning a living as a technical translator and English teacher, I was absorbing an intimate knowledge of the culinary facts of life Italian style.

When I arrived in Italy after completing a language degree in California, one of the assumptions I brought with me was that I was educated. I also thought I knew how to cook, drive and sew, had unshakable self-esteem and didn't need anyone's help. I was laboring under the countless illusions that come with cultural one-sidedness. My real education was about to begin.

I was two years into my struggle to prove how right I was to Italian society at large when it happened. One morning I woke up with an enormous realization staring me in the face: I had grasped the subjunctive, the most slippery of grammatical eels, in a stranglehold. I owned it. I could pull all its strings and make it do its tricks without getting entangled. Quite unconsciously, this was also the moment I started seeing the people around me as valid human beings with worthwhile opinions and values rather than as quirky foreigners. From then on life was a piece of cake. Or so it seemed.

When I moved back to the soft, sensual contours of the wine country hills of California, the view stroked my soul with a soothing hand. Drivers let me merge into traffic with appalling courtesy. I was taken aback by the sight of orderly lines in stores and banks. I reveled in the power of consumer rights, where purchases could be returned for hard cash, no questions asked. I reconnected with friends and family, picking right up where I had left off so long before. Life was good.

The honeymoon glow of my second cultural marriage started to dim in short order. I don't know if the clock or the calendar first hit me as being more than just a little off.

Disturbing subtleties started seeping through the walls of my rose-hued bubble of bliss. From housework to meals, I detected a laxness in daily routines. I was fresh off a planet where predictability reigned, where homes were immaculate, food served a higher purpose than staving off hunger and the passing seasons were reflected in both wardrobes and cuisine. In my new Rip-Van-Winkle life, “tradition” seemed to mean doing something fun more than two years in a row, an “ancestral home” was a mansion from *Gone with the Wind* and “roots” were commonly confused with tubers. These “foreigners” just didn’t get it.

This time, however, I knew better than to idolize one culture to the detriment of another. I had also learned that people will think what they want regardless of what you say or do, so I set my own clock and kept my own calendar. I had grown accustomed to Italian efficiency, cleanliness and order in spite of the stereotypes that echoed from my youth. I also found that predictability gave me a welcome sense of security in this undemanding culture where cleanliness was frequently next to godliness. Nowhere was this security more noticeable than in food.

Going about my culinary business was unremarkable in Italy, but in California my cooking took on a whole new meaning. The various apprenticeships I had undergone at the side of my adopted mother and subsequent matriarchs left me with far more than a cache of unwritten recipes. These ladies had given me the greatest gift of all: they had bestowed their traditions on me. As I stirred a risotto, their faces stirred my heart, while stories they told set in war-torn Italy, on feast day celebrations or in their mothers’ kitchens played in my head. No one else could see my mental TV screen, but my guests were far from indifferent. My passion was transparent, their praise profuse.

Ever so slowly, my children grew to appreciate the beauty of food. When they were invited to eat at a friend’s house, they recounted the meal with increasing sensitivity. At first, they saw little difference between bags of fast food set on the table, store-bought dishes of frozen food that were microwave ready or a home-cooked meal using semi-prepared, packaged ingredients. (Once I overheard a high school student tell her friend that breakfast from McDonald’s was much better than one from Wendy’s. I told my daughter about the remark and was dumbstruck when she agreed.) As high school came and went, they began to make more discerning comments about how their friends ate, singling out real cooking from its surrogate counterparts.

At some indefinite point in time, my kids became respectable food critics, comparing the quality of my fresh tomato sauce to that of their grandmother’s, choosing the right type of pasta, commenting on textures, colors, temperatures, suggesting corrections and evaluating the results. Their food memories developed longevity, and they began referencing a particularly successful dish as a paragon for successive attempts.

From there, it was easy for them to take the final step into full appreciation for traditional cooking. The occasional friend to dinner has escalated into an annual banquet for as many guests as the house will fit, with seating improvised from fold-out chairs to stair steps. Their reputations as members of an elite culinary clique have preceded them faster than a juicy rumor. Now they feel a responsibility to live up to the ideal others have painted of them: they are experiencing the power of food full-throttle.