



Victoria Cosford

Amore

and

Amaretti

A tale of love and food in Italy



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To my two sisters, whose unbounded faith in me never once wavered

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Prelude

I might be walking along a street when I hear it. Unmistakable Italian words, a sentence, a conversation, uttered in that musical poetry so immediately familiar that I am shocked out of my previous self-absorption and swallowed into the sensuousness of the sound.

Yet, here I am in Australia, in another hemisphere, where I rarely give a serious thought to Italy, the country that changed my life and indirectly brought me to the place where I am today. I am living in Byron Bay, writing about food in a weekly column, reporting on general news stories for the local newspaper and occasionally teaching Italian cooking.

Someone famous – was it Virginia Woolf? – once said, ‘Do the hardest thing.’ It seems to me that my time spent in Italy was precisely that and it has brought me circuitously to contentment and the reward of true love.

Book One
1982–1986
Florence, Isle of Elba, Perugia



Quando si ama, anche i sassi diventano stelle
When you're in love, even pebbles become stars

One Florentine Friday night, a man with a tea towel tossed over one shoulder unclasps his watch and places it at the end of the table I share with twenty international students. This is how it begins, in a restaurant in a cellar. We belong to the Michelangelo Institute, where we are studying the language and culture of Italy; every Friday night we unwind over dinner in a typical Tuscan trattoria.

When I think about the small incidental objects that had the power to transform my life, I always return to that watch. Over the years, it became magnified in my mind, effulgent with significance. Its territorial presence on the table of *his* restaurant means that Gianfranco can come and go with ease, with a sort of claim on the two foreign women it lies closest to, my sister and me. Toward the end of the evening, there he is sitting with us, conversing in a clumsy cocktail of languages over wine.

Gianfranco is a country boy from a village in Umbria whose Italian is loose, lazy and colloquial, whose French is meagre though elegant, whose Dutch, owing to a ten-month-long marriage to a Dutch woman, is fluent, but whose

English is sparse. We understand each other magnificently.

He smokes Marlboros and wears expensive gold jewellery and tight jeans; there is a swaggish indifference to him to which I am drawn, so that by the end of the night, when somehow we have ended up at a bar at Piazzale Michelangelo, I am already a little in love. He is dancing on the mirrored floor with my sister and I am dancing with Roberto, the apprentice chef, who is asking me to translate into Italian the words of a Chicago song, which I do badly. Gianfranco brings me a glass of Cointreau with ice in it, and we sit down together with our knees touching. Roberto and my sister seem to melt away.

I had been in Italy for several weeks. I had already fallen in love with the country, the people, Florence, the director of the Institute. A degree in languages at university had led me indirectly here via jobs in advertising and nursing, a lonely year in London growing fat as a live-in barmaid, and the breakup of a relationship, grown too cosy, too lazy, with a gentle man named Tony whom I no longer loved.

Tony had arrived in London before me and met me at the airport, as arranged. In our six months apart, while he did the overland Magic Bus trip and I saved up, I had already changed, so that when I put my arms around his cheap new leather coat I felt that I was embracing a brother, not a lover. His decision to return to Australia was met with relief on my part; my adventurous life had only just begun. I found a job at the Museum Tavern opposite the British Museum and moved into a small room upstairs, where I worked my way through *War and Peace* on evenings off after solitary excursions to other pubs to sit over glasses of South African wine and dry-roasted peanuts.

My younger sister had flown from Australia to join me in Italy and the Institute had organised rooms for us in a boarding house near the Duomo that we shared with Scandinavian girls enrolled in the same course. London was already seeping out of me. I had begun to sling jumpers casually around my shoulders, the way Italian girls did, and knot scarves loosely around my white Anglo-Saxon throat... And, now, there is Gianfranco.

Gianfranco picks me up from the boarding house near the Duomo for our first official date. He has parked illegally, and our awkwardness is overshadowed by our haste to flee the city centre, like criminals in a stolen car, and by the time we are driving through outer suburbs I am almost relaxed. Our stop-start conversation is punctured by my tedious admissions of not understanding and carries us all the way to an unremarkable hotel on the town's edge. Gianfranco parks the car and bustles me inside in a proprietary way I find both arousing

and significant, then orders food from a waiter he clearly knows well. Earlier nervousness has narrowed my appetite to a thread but I do my best to try a little of everything: sliced meats and pickled vegetables, a winey stew on steaming gold polenta, little red capsicums stuffed with rice and herbs. We drink wine, which later allows me to float up the flight of stairs to an impersonal room with little more than a bed and a television set, where I am undressed by Gianfranco, the blinds lowered. A fleeting sense that I have been too easily won is displaced by the great and glorious joy of our coming together, a feeling that I have disappeared inside his body.

But still I am unconvinced he really likes me. I console myself by concentrating on his less appealing qualities: he is brash, but I close my eyes to a mouth of chipped and neglected teeth in my determination not to be superficial. I have been told about his reputation with foreign women, but cannot believe he actually finds me attractive. It is easier, in those cautious early days, to persuade myself that I am using him as much as he is using me, to be the hard, bright woman I really am not. But in truth I am always in Gianfranco's power; he has the advantage of being himself on his own terrain, master of the language, while I struggle, apologising and requesting enlightenment.

As it turns out I have nothing to worry about. Miraculously – quite magically, it seems to me – Gianfranco begins to betray the fact he is as enraptured by me as I am by him. When I have established that *'ti voglio bene'* means 'I love you', and I hear him tell me often, I begin to shyly say it back.

I study my lover. His cheeks point outward when he smiles. He roars his welcome to customers and friends; rooms feel empty when he leaves them. He moves quickly, heels clicking across the uneven stones of his restaurant and while crossing roads. He has friends everywhere: fashionable glittery Florentines whom he intimately addresses as *dottore*, plumbers and carpenters and shopkeepers, and a vast repertoire of waiters and cooks with whom he has worked. His profession is chef, but he is better suited to front of house with his boyish boisterousness and his easy charm.

I have never met anyone like Gianfranco before, a man so sure of his place in the world. He whistles loudly, in perfect pitch, and dispenses with the endings of names, so that after a while I become simply 'Vee'. I marvel in those early days at the miracle of having found him, at being swept up into the orb of his volatility and spontaneity, driven to edge-of-town hotels for the night, taken to country restaurants and to the seaside.

I am not spending the amount of time with my sister that I had expected. The

late, sleepless nights also mean that I am missing classes at the Institute – but I am beyond caring. The language and culture of Italy are filtering through, regardless.

Gianfranco sweeps me into small shops up side streets, where after good-humoured haggling he hands me a beautiful suede coat with a fur-lined hood wrapped in tissue paper, or a leather skirt, or gold jewellery. He never pays full price for anything; his audacity is breathtaking. We emerge into the sunlight, holding hands, each with new reversible leather belts. He is funny, smart, generous beyond measure – this is all I see in those early days. I am gradually substituting the cool stone rooms of his restaurant for those of the Institute, until one day I simply stop attending the course. Most lunchtimes I sit in the front room of the restaurant typing out the daily menu with one finger, spellbound by the names of the different Chiantis recommended each day: Geografico and Capezzano, Grignanello and Castello di Volpaia, Lamole di Lamole and Villa La Pagliaia. Then I move inside to the warmth of the dining room to sit beside my beloved and pick disinterestedly at the titbits he places before me.

Evenings I am back, perfumed and party-ish, to sit and sit and sit, drinking too much, writing love poems on the recycled paper placemats which double as menus before reeling off into the late night on Gianfranco's arm. Gianfranco drives his blue Fiat very fast up the narrow snaking streets to Fiesole with Deep Purple thundering out the open window. One time, with my sister in the back, I turn around to say that it wouldn't matter if I died at that moment, I am so brimming with happiness, and when she agrees we look at each other a little shocked.

No longer students at the Michelangelo Institute, my sister and I are obliged to look for accommodation elsewhere. We move from the boarding house and, thanks to an advertisement in the free weekly *Il Pulce*, into an apartment in an unfamiliar suburb away from the heart of the city, sharing with Anna and Franco. Initially we adore this unconventional couple; they strike us as modern and un-Italian. Anna is tall with a long plait of black hair that reaches to the waist of her billowy Indian dresses; Franco, a stub of a man, has his long hair tied back in a ponytail. Posters on the apartment walls depict peace marches and alternative lifestyles. Remnants of the 1960s, they have a little art-and-craft shop nearby, filled with mostly dust-covered junk and generally devoid of customers. The evenings when my sister and I have not caught the bus into the Santa Maria Novella Piazza to descend stairs to Salt Peanuts, our favourite underground jazz cellar, we sit at the long table in our room drinking Chianti and eating bread

and cheese with the door firmly closed.

Increasingly, inexplicably, Anna becomes stranger and stranger. Sometimes she will ignore us when we address her, or say something cold and vituperative we cannot properly understand. The one night I dare to have Gianfranco stay, she storms into our room and commences shrieking at the top of her voice about wet towels lying on the bathroom floor and how she cannot take it any more; humiliated, Gianfranco slinks away. We are left uncomprehending and open-mouthed, having believed we had been respectful, polite, cheerful guests in their home, and concluding that Anna is simply mad. We start to look for another place.

I ask Gianfranco, in my slowly improving Italian, how he can be so patient with my limited grasp of his language and his world. This is well before his displays of spectacular tantrums – all I see are deep-brown eyes of unwavering kindness as I labour to articulate my feelings and navigate conversations. He tells me that it is only with me that he manages to be patient.

One lunchtime I step down into the coolness of his restaurant and find Gianfranco sitting in front of a box of figs. Before he looks up, I see that what he is doing with a small sharp knife, his forehead knotted in concentration, is carefully peeling fig after fig and setting them aside. He resembles a little boy whittling wood, and when he presents me with the plate of peeled figs my stomach twists with love.

Il pasto non vale un'acca se alla fine non s' ha la vacca
The meal means nothing if it does not end in good
cheese

My understanding of Italian food begins to take shape in Gianfranco's Umbrian village. Most Sunday nights, after the benches are stacked on top of tables and the floor mopped at his restaurant, we set off on our midnight journey; tomorrow is our day off. Two hours out of Florence, passing glassy, spectral Lake Trasimeno, the hill towns of Tuscany are replaced by the hill towns of medieval Umbria. Gianfranco races all the bends, fuelled by Chianti, not bothering with seatbelts, belting out Battiato songs. I sit cross-legged beside him, tired eyes mesmerised by points of light in the rushing blackness. His village in

my mind always seems to be arising out of the mist, its few streets coiling past low doorways and bars, the butcher shop with a burning cigarette resting on the chopping block. And yet most of my time there is spent at the service station and its accompanying bar, both run by Gianfranco's sister.

We pull into the heavy silence of the sleeping village; Bar Due Raspi – Two Bunches – glows dimly, warmly. Gianfranco's sister raises two children, husbandless, in the attached house, assisted by Mamma. In the kitchen little feasts are left for us under cloths: a round of aged pecorino, a hunk of prosciutto, hard-boiled eggs and spicy salami, plump new broad beans and a dome of cheese bread. Gianfranco splashes rough red wine into tumblers and carves off chunks of cheese and passes me salami slices speared on the tip of his pocket knife. I feel like a rosy-cheeked maiden from another century, in the absolute stillness of a country village, with a man I am not terribly sure I know – but whom I feel terribly sure I love – who is offering me the great gift of this experience. I seem to exist solely for him, and in our whispered conversation and the simplicity of the setting there seems to be the possibility for more joy than I ever considered possible.

And of course there are the lunches. On Sundays we only work the evening shift, so at midday we often drive to share a meal with friends. I had never cared about lunch, until I was introduced to Sunday ones in Tuscan vineyards. Celebrations of food and wine amongst friends and family, they transcend the notion of mere meals and transform into a theatre for the senses.

It has much to do with the setting, the compelling beauty of ancient surroundings, of land which has yielded produce for millennia, of eroded stone walls and roads which wind through hills, and row upon row upon row of vines. There is little more glorious, in summer, than sitting through hours of golden afternoons at a long wooden table with twelve or sixteen or twenty others, in winter warming limbs and souls with fires and food and wine.

Gianfranco has friends at Montespertoli and we go there often, mostly for winter lunches. We crunch up the circular gravel driveway and arrive at the back door, which leads into a vast stone kitchen filled with people. The ancient stove roars with flames, heating an assortment of saucepans, which steam forth wonderful aromas. Someone is carving a prosciutto, Claret-red slices sliding off the edge of the knife. There are women to stir the saucepans, wash the salad, slice the bread. I make myself useful by carrying cutlery to the dining room, where men pose around the leaping fire, clutching glasses of Campari and smoking. Hand-painted jugs of water and flowers clutter the table. I set for eighteen people, folding paper napkins into tiny triangles beside each plate.

Two-litre bottles of home-grown Chianti, translucent red, line up like soldiers. Outside the tall windows, mist wraps around bare trees and church spires.

Platters are placed on the table: slices of wild-boar salami, tiny spicy venison sausages, rounds of toast topped with coarse chicken-liver pâté sweetened with Marsala, shiny black olives tossed in garlic and parsley. Wine is tipped into glasses and wedges of crusty spongy bread are passed around. Lunch has begun.

Pasta comes next, a deep ceramic bowl of steaming spaghetti in a simple tomato sauce fragrant with fresh basil, or a rich cream redolent of wild mushrooms. On top of the fire have been placed two metal grills, which clip together to enclose the main course: thick slabs of prime beef, a handful of quails, fat home-made sausages. Passed around the table they are black-striped and crisp from the flames, perfumed with fresh rosemary, garlic and good oil.

Afterwards there is a chunk of Parmesan, aged and crumbly, and a tangy pecorino from Sardinia to eat with a large bowl of various fruits. This is the winding-down stage of the lunch, when women begin to push back chairs and carry out plates and men light up cigarettes and pour whisky. Coffee brews aromatic from the kitchen, conversation subdues, becomes sleepy, comfortable and confidential. Pastries accompany the coffee: a wealth of shortbreads, crunchy almond biscuits, macaroons and iced eclairs bulging cream. Vin Santo, sweet and dark, is poured into small glasses; outside the evening has begun to descend, and Sunday lunch settles.

Whereas at Montespertoli the high stone walls surround the house like a stronghold, and the sense of place comes only once you have passed the gates and commenced the descent down winding roads that curve through the fields of grapes and olives, Claudia and Vincenzo Sabatini's villa sits on top of a hill, and looking down from the verandah you can see the vineyards stretch for miles. Even in winter clustered around their smaller hearth, warming hands, we always have the windows throwing up vistas of rich land, visions of space and ordered growth.

And in summer it is all there below. Slow yellow afternoons pulse with warmth and the tiny incessant rhythms of a million twitching insects. The verandah has canvas drapes to shut out the sun, and the table is cool. As we arrive we are handed a glass of Vincenzo's wine – not of his making but wine he collects weekly in huge vats from the villa next door, which he decants and stores in his cellar. Claudia is tasting the pasta sauce for salt: she looks harassed but happy, hair escaping from her bun and her apron spattered with flour. She has been making *pappardelle*, wide uneven strips of pasta that will be served

with hare sauce. Vincenzo, having dispensed wine to his guests, is washing lettuces from his garden then drying them in his salad-spinner. Our movements are languid. We eat home-grown egg tomatoes drizzled with green olive oil and fresh basil, thick slices of moist white mozzarella, paper-thin cuts of cured beef dressed with oil, finely chopped rocket leaves and shavings of Parmesan cheese, mushrooms marinated in lemon juice and garlic, strips of red and green capsicum bathed in oil, garlic and parsley, slices of spicy pancetta. There is crusty bread to mop up the juices, and Vincenzo's wine is flowing freely. Next comes Claudia's pasta, rich and gamey. Then a pause before she brings out a casserole of pheasant scented with red wine and herbs. There is silverbeet sautéed in garlic, and tiny chunks of potatoes oven-roasted with rosemary and rock salt, and Vincenzo's salad gleaming with oil. Afterwards comes a whole fresh ricotta cheese, and ripe pears.

Much later, in the fading day, with the beginnings of breezes lifting leaves and stirring the air, Claudia brings out coffee and her famous biscuits, which it is never possible to eat in moderation, whose secret recipe she has given me and which I have lost. Cicadas start up their buzzing hum, and the vineyards lie pale and ghostly in the moonlight. I am drowsy, aware of the desire to freeze time so I can always remain in this comfortable chair, breathing in the fragrant evening air, all senses gratified.

Gianfranco buys another restaurant with several partners. It is in the centre of Florence, with the Uffizi and a replica of David around the corner. I am in the enormous kitchen wearing an apron, being shown how to finely chop onions; how to make a basic tomato sauce; how to flick my right wrist so that the contents of a frying pan flip briefly in the air; how to cook pasta, separating the strands of spaghetti with a giant fork and knowing the exact moment when to drain it, just a touch ahead of *al dente* – firm to the bite – so the extra minute or so of tossing it in its hot sauce will render it perfect. I learn how to make *crepelle* – paper-thin crêpes – and béchamel, soups and slowly simmering stews, panna cotta without gelatine; and I learn the elaborate process of layering that goes into creating pasta sauces, like the *salsa puttanesca*.



Spaghetti alla puttanesca

Olive oil
1 medium onion
3 cloves garlic
4–6 slices pancetta

Dried chilli (optional)
2 tablespoons black olives
5 anchovies
1 tablespoon capers
1/3 cup red wine
400 g peeled tomatoes
Salt and pepper
Chopped parsley

Heat the oil, then add finely chopped onion and garlic together with sliced pancetta and chilli, if desired. Sauté 5 to 8 minutes on medium heat, stirring frequently, until translucent. Throw in olives.

Cook several more minutes, then add finely chopped anchovies and capers. After several more minutes, slosh in wine. Bring to the boil and bubble until evaporated, then add peeled tomatoes and about half a cup of water. Season cautiously with salt and pepper, bring back to the boil, then simmer 30 to 40 minutes. Garnish with parsley.



Gianfranco becomes less patient and more critical, however. There are days when I can do nothing right. I see the flipside of his creativity, a sort of madness. Saucepans fly, crashing into walls. An hour later, he is carving a rose out of a radish, his face gentle and his fingers graceful. For a country boy, those fingers are strangely delicate, almost feminine – each night he scrubs his nails vigorously with Jif.

Six months later, I am running the kitchen of the restaurant while Gianfranco escorts customers to tables. And we are living together, having moved into a flat nearby. I have grown thin with the long, unforgiving hours of work, but mostly with love and anxiety.

One summer midnight I am the only woman in a carload of murmuring men. We park near the river not far from Gianfranco's village and I watch as torches thread through the darkness and down to the edge, where bottles of bleach are poured into the water. Downstream, more torch lights illumine men wading with plastic bags, into which they throw the dead trout. I am appalled, disillusioned, excited and terrified all at the same time.

The next day, a long table is set under trees at lunchtime. There are dishes full

of steaming potato gnocchi with rabbit sauce, and platters of trout simply grilled. Everyone eats the sweet pink fish; nobody becomes ill. Glasses are raised to the fishermen.

Other times we go hunting for mushrooms. Autumn is the season for porcini – these treasures lurk around the base of chestnut trees and oaks. Often the size of dinner plates, they are as fleshy as meat. Many *trattorie* place baskets of porcini at the entrance, and, like lobsters at Chinese restaurants, they are selected by the customer, weighed, cooked and served. Studded with slivers of garlic, brushed with good olive oil and grilled is the best way to enjoy these musky, musty gifts from the forest floor, with their flavour of faintly sweetish decay.

On these mushroom expeditions I am fascinated by delicate, beautiful specimens in iridescent colours, which Gianfranco warns me are deadly. I dare not even stand too close, lest the air is contaminated by their garish toxicity. We pick, pluck and gather and, because he is a country boy, we have no need to carry our collection into the nearest *farmacia*, where they would readily identify the various types for us. We dine on massive porcini, with lots of bread for the luscious juices.



Salsa di coniglio

(Rabbit sauce)

Olive oil
Bay leaf
1 rabbit, jointed*
1 medium onion, finely chopped
2 sticks celery, finely chopped
1 carrot, finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1/2 cup white wine
400 g peeled tomatoes
Salt and pepper
Dried chilli (optional)

Heat olive oil in low, wide pan and add bay leaf and rabbit. Brown rabbit pieces all over, season, then remove and set aside. In the same pan sauté onion, celery, carrot and garlic until softened, about 8 to 10 minutes. Return rabbit to pan. Slopsh in white wine and let it bubble up and evaporate before adding peeled tomatoes, about 1/2 cup water and chilli if desired. Season again, bring to the boil, then simmer about 40 minutes for farmed rabbit and 2 hours if wild, topping up with water when sauce reduces too much. Check seasoning. When cool, remove rabbit meat from bones, then return to sauce, reheating at least 5 minutes before tossing through pasta.

** If using wild rabbit, soak it overnight in water or wine and herbs to remove some of its 'gaminess'.*



Several months into my Florentine life, life with Gianfranco, I hear about permanent contact lenses. Lavish advertisements depict their miraculous powers: lenses you can keep in for days at a time, lenses you can sleep in, lenses that will change your life. Having been desperately short-sighted since my teens, as I juggled glasses with contact lenses I must remove every night, I am naturally intrigued, then seduced. And despite their tremendous cost – but then what value can be placed on a miracle? – Gianfranco is marching me briskly into Pisacchi the optometrist.

I submit to the sort of eye examination I have had regularly since I was thirteen, and the optometrist speaks slowly and carefully to make sure I understand. My two years of university Italian, combined with the six weeks or so at the Michelangelo Institute, all reinforced by the past months in which Italian is what I mostly hear and speak (if not perfectly understand), have made me a little reckless, even cocky in my confidence. *'Si, capisco'* – Yes, I understand – I say. We pay for my exciting new lenses with half my month's salary and then speed off to Viareggio to spend what remains of our day at the beach. The world seems brimming with possibilities that the past decade and a half of myopia had closed to me. As we drive, Gianfranco is telling me how Italy has long been at the forefront of optical technologies, pioneering techniques and equipment.

We arrive at the beach in blazing sunshine, change into swimming attire and hurl ourselves into the water. I am so accustomed to keeping my eyes fiercely shut under water that it has become instinct. And yet the optometrist had spoken so enthusiastically about *'il fare la doccia'* – having a shower – or *'un bagno'* – a bath, or bathing – that the next time I go under I stare wide-eyed and defiant into the glassy curl of wave.

In that moment a strange sensation takes place as the sharp clarity of my