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The Food of Love

Antipasto

'An Italian meal is a lively sequence of sensations, alternating the crisp with the soft and yielding, the pungent with the bland, the crisp with the soft and yielding, the elaborate with the simple...' - Marcella Hazan, *The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking*

One

In a little side street off the Viale Glorioso, in Rome's Trastevere, there is a bar known to those who frequent it simply as Gennaro's. It is, to look at, not much of a bar, being the approximate size and shape of a small one-car garage, but the passing tourist would note that there is room outside for two small tables and an assortment of non-identical plastic chairs that catch the sun in the morning, while the passing coffee lover would note that there is room inside on the stained zinc counter for a vast, gleaming Gaggia 6000, the Harley Davidson of espresso machines. There is also room, just, behind the stained zinc counter for Gennaro, widely regarded by his friends as the best *barista* in all Rome and a very sound fellow to boot.

Which was why, one fine spring morning, twenty-eight year old Tommaso Massi and his friends Vincent and Sisto were standing at the bar, drinking *ristretti*, arguing about love, waiting for the *cornetti* to arrive from the bakery and generally passing the time with Gennaro before jumping on their Vespas to go off to the various restaurants around the city that employed them. A *ristretto* is made with the same amount of ground coffee as an ordinary espresso but half the amount of water, and since Gennaro's espressos were themselves not ordinary at all but pure liquid adrenaline, and since the three young men were in any case all of an excitable temperament, the conversation was an animated one. More than once Gennaro had to remind them not to all argue at once - or, as the Roman vernacular has it, to *parlare 'nu strunzo 'a vota*, to only speak one piece of shit at a time.

The unusual strength of Gennaro's *ristretti* was the result of his honing the Gaggia's twin grinding burrs to razor sharpness, packing the basket with the resulting powder until it was as hard as cement, then building up a head of pressure in the huge machine and waiting until the dial showed eighty pounds per square inch before finally allowing the water to blast into the packed coffee. What came from the spout after that was barely a liquid at all, a red-brown ooze with a hanging quality like honey dripping off the end of a butter knife, with a chestnut-coloured *crema* and a sweet oily tang that required no sugar, only a gulp of *acqua minerale* and a bite of a sugar-dusted

cornetto, if only the bakery had delivered them. Gennaro loved that machine like a soldier loved his gun, and he spent even more time stripping it down and cleaning it than he did making coffee. His goal was to get it up to a hundred PSI, way off the gauge, and make a *ristretto* so thick you could spread it like jam. Tommaso was privately convinced that even to attempt this feat was to run the risk of the Gaggia exploding and taking them all with it, but he respected his friend's commitment and ambition and said nothing. It was, after all, self-evident that you couldn't be a great *barista* without taking risks.

The conversation that morning was about love, but it was also about football. Vincent, who had recently become engaged, was being scolded by Sisto, to whom the idea of restricting yourself to just one woman seemed crazy.

'You might think today that you have found the best woman in the world, but tomorrow—' Sisto flicked his fingers under his chin - 'who knows?'

'Look,' Vincent explained patiently, or as patiently as he was capable of, 'How long have you been a Lazio supporter?'

'All my life, idiot.'

'But Roma are —' Vincent hesitated. He wanted to say 'a better team', but there was no point in turning a friendly discussion about women into a deadly fight. 'Doing better,' he said diplomatically.

'This season. So far. What of it?'

'Yet you don't start supporting Roma.'

'*E un altro paio di maniche, cazzo.* That's another thing altogether, you dick. You can't switch teams.'

'Exactly. And why not? Because you have made your choice, and you are loyal to it.'

Sisto was silent for a moment, during which Vincent turned to Gennaro triumphantly and ordered another *ristretto*. Then Sisto said craftily, 'But being a *Laziale* isn't like being faithful to one woman. It's like having

* Literally, 'that's another pair of sleeves.'

dozens of women, because the team is made up of different people every year. So you're talking shit, as usual.'

Tommaso, who up till now had taken no part in the argument, murmured, 'The real reason Vincent and Lucia got engaged is that she said she'd stop sleeping with him unless they did.'

His friends' reactions to this piece of intelligence were interestingly different. Vincent, who had after all told Tommaso this in strict confidence, looked angry, then shamefaced, and then – when he realised that Sisto was looking distinctly envious – pleased with himself.

'It's true,' he shrugged. 'Lucia wants to be a virgin when we marry, just like her mother. So we had to stop sleeping together until we got engaged.'

Vincent's statement, apparently illogical, drew no comment from his friends. In a country where literal, fervent Catholicism was only a generation away, everyone knew that there were as many grades of virginity in girls as there were in olive oil – which, of course, is divided into extra-virgin (first cold pressing), extra-virgin (second pressing), superfine virgin, extrafine virgin, and so on, down through a dozen or more layers of virginity and near-virginity, before finally reaching a level of promiscuity so unthinkable that it is labelled merely as 'pure', and is thus fit only for export and lighting fires.

'But at least I'm getting it now,' he added. 'I'm sleeping with the most beautiful girl in Rome, who adores me, and we're going to be married and have our own place. What could be better than that?'

'Tommaso gets it too,' Sisto pointed out. 'And he isn't getting married.'

'Tommaso sleeps with tourists.'

Tommaso shrugged modestly. 'Hey, can I help it if beautiful foreign girls throw themselves at me?'

This amiable conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the *cornetti*, a tray of tiny sugared croissants, which in turn called for a final *caffé* before work. While Gennaro flushed the pipes of his beloved Gaggia in readiness, Tommaso received a sharp nudge in the ribs from Sisto, who nodded significantly towards the window.

Coming down the street was a girl. Her sunglasses were tucked up on the top of her head amidst a bohemian swirl of blonde hair which, together

with her calf-length jeans, single-strap backpack and simple T-shirt, marked her out immediately as a foreigner even before one took in the guidebook entitled 'Forty Significant Frescos of the High Renaissance' which she was holding open in one hand.

'A tourist?' Sisto said hopefully.

Tommaso shook his head. 'A student.'

'And how do you know that, maestro?'

'Her backpack is full of books.'

'Psst! *Biondina! Bona!*' Sisto called. 'Hey! Blondie! Gorgeous!'

Tommaso cuffed him. 'That isn't the way, idiot. Just act friendly.'

It seemed puzzling to Sisto that any girl fortunate enough to be blonde and attractive would not be impressed by having the fact pointed out to her, but he allowed himself to be guided by his more experienced friend and closed his mouth.

'She's coming over,' Vincent noted.

The girl crossed the street and paused next to the bar, apparently oblivious to the admiring stares of the three young men. Then she pulled out a chair, put her backpack on the table and sat down, arranging her slim legs over the next chair along.

'Definitely a foreigner,' Vincent said sadly. Because every Italian knows that to sit down to drink coffee is bad for the digestion and will therefore be penalised by a surcharge costing three times as much as you'd pay at the bar. 'You wait. She'll ask for a cappuccino.'

Gennaro, watching the pressure gauge of the Gaggia intently, snorted dismissively. No proper *barista* would dream of serving cappuccino after ten A.M, any more than a chef would offer cornflakes for lunch.

'*Buongiorno,*' the girl called through the open door. She had a nice voice, Tommaso thought. He smiled at her encouragingly. Beside him, Vincent and Sisto were doing exactly the same. Only Gennaro, behind the zinc counter, maintained a suspicious frown.

'*giorno,*' he muttered darkly.

'*Latte macchiato, per favore, lungo e ben caldo.*'

There was a pause while the *barista* thought about this. Although the young woman had spoken in Italian, she had revealed her origins as much by what she had ordered as by her accent. *Latte macchiato* - milk with just a splash of coffee, but served in a *lungo* or large cup, and *ben caldo*, hot, so that it could be drunk slowly instead of being thrown down the throat in a couple of quick gulps in the proper manner. She was indisputably American. However, nothing she had ordered actually offended propriety – she had not asked for espresso with cream, or de-caff, or hazelnut syrup, or skimmed milk - so he shrugged and reached for the twin baskets of the Gaggia, while the three young men tried to look as handsome as possible.

The girl ignored them. She pulled a map out of her backpack and compared it, with a somewhat perplexed expression, to a page in her guidebook. A *telefonino* rang in her backpack: she took that out too, and proceeded to have a conversation which those inside could not overhear. When Gennaro finally judged his *macchiato* worthy of being served, there was a scuffle to be the one to deliver it to the girl's table, which Tommaso won easily. He took one of Gennaro's little *cornetti* as well, placing it on the saucer and presenting it to the girl with a smile and a muttered 'On the house.' But the girl was engrossed in her call, and her smile of thanks was all too brief. He had time to notice her eyes, though – grey eyes, clear and untroubled, the colour of a sea bass's scales.

In fact, Laura Patterson was deeply troubled, or as troubled as it is possible for a twenty-two year old American girl to be in Rome on a fine spring morning, which was why she was glad to discover that it was her Italian friend Carlotta who was calling. Carlotta worked for a magazine called *Stozzi* in Milan. She was also part of the reason that Laura had come to Italy, having been a very good college friend back home.

'*Pronto.*' In Italy it is customary to answer the phone by snapping 'Ready!', for reasons which are now obscure.

'Laura. It's me. What are you up to?'

‘Oh - hi, Carlotta. Well, I was looking for Santa Cecilia, as it happens. She’s in possession of some rather fine frescoes by Cavallini. But it seems Santa Cecilia doesn’t want to be found, so I’m having coffee instead.’

Carlotta ignored this nonsense and cut straight to the reason for her call. ‘And last night? How was your date?’

‘Ah. Well, it was fine,’ Laura said in a voice which made clear that it hadn’t really been fine at all. She had to tread a little carefully, because the date in question had been a friend of a friend of Carlotta’s own brother. ‘He, Paulo, was perfectly nice, and he knew a lot about architecture –’ At the other end of the phone, Carlotta snorted derisively– ‘And he took me to a really interesting restaurant near the Villa Borghese.’

‘What were you wearing?’

‘Um - the red top and the black trousers.’

‘Jacket?’

‘No jacket. It’s warm down here.’

There was an audible sigh at the other end. Carlotta, like all Italian women, thought that anyone who committed offences against fashion had only themselves to blame for whatever calamities subsequently befell them. ‘Did you wear sneakers?’ she demanded suspiciously.

‘Of course I didn’t wear sneakers. Carlotta, you’re missing the point. Anyway, as I was saying, the meal was good. I had squid pasta and a really good lamb thing.’

‘And?’

‘Nothing else. Just coffee.’

‘And afterwards,’ Carlotta said impatiently. ‘What happened afterwards?’

‘Ah. Afterwards, we went for a walk around the Giardino di Lago, and that’s when he jumped me. Literally, because unfortunately there was a slight discrepancy in our respective heights, which meant that he had to actually propel himself off the ground somewhat in order to stick his tongue where he wanted to. Then after that of course he was trying to get me into bed – well, not bed exactly, since he still lives with his parents, so an actual bed was not part of the offer, but he was certainly trying to get me into the bushes. And

before you say anything, I really don't think wearing a jacket would have made much difference.'

Another sigh. 'Are you going to see him again?'

'No. Honestly, Carlotta, thanks for the introduction and everything, but I think I've had it with Italian men. They're all so ridiculously over-sexed and - well, just *clumsy*. That's my fourth disaster in a row. I think I'm going to have to go back to dating Americans for a while.'

Carlotta was horrified. '*Cara*, coming to Rome and dating Americans would be like going to the Piazza di Spagna and eating at MacDonalds.'

'Actually, a few of us did that the other day,' Laura admitted. 'It was kind of fun.'

There was an exasperated tut at the other end. 'Imagine what a waste your year in Italy will have been if the only men you've dated are people you could have met back home.'

'Imagine what a waste it'll have been I'll be if the only people I've dated are frustrated Italian rapists who still live with their mothers,' Laura retorted.

'You're just meeting the wrong people. Look at *my* last boyfriend. Filippo was a sensational lover. Considerate, inventive, slow, passionate - '

'And currently, I think you said, working in a restaurant in a ski resort, precise whereabouts unknown.'

'True, but it was great while it lasted. That's the thing about chefs. They know how to use their hands. It's all that chopping and slicing they do. It makes them dextrous.'

'Hmm,' Laura said, a little wistfully. 'I have to admit, dextrous would be a nice change.'

'Then, *cara*, you simply have to make sure your dates can cook before you agree to go out with them,' Carlotta said decisively. She lowered her voice. 'I'll tell you something else about Filippo. He liked to taste everything as he cooked it, if you know what I mean.'

Laura laughed. She had a remarkably dirty laugh, and the sound permeated into the interior of Gennaro's bar, causing the young men inside to

glance up appreciatively from their *cornetti*. 'And I suppose, being a chef, he had a great sense of timing?'

'Exactly. And he took his time. You know how we Italians like to eat - at least a dozen courses.'

'But all of them very small ones,' Laura teased.

'Yes, but believe me, by the end you can't eat another thing.'

Even as Laura continued to joke, a part of her couldn't help admitting that her friend might have a point. Someone creative, who understood taste, and texture, who knew how to combine ingredients for the purpose of sensual pleasure... if only she'd met someone like that during her time in Italy.

'Well, there you are then,' Carlotta was saying. 'It shouldn't be hard. Rome's full of restaurants. It stands to reason it must be full of chefs as well.'

'Maybe,' Laura said.

'Listen, I'll tell you something else Filippo did - '

By the time Laura rang off she had half-jokingly, half-seriously promised her friend that from now on she was definitely only going to date men who knew their Béarnaise from their Béchamel.

Tommaso had made up his mind he was going to speak to the American girl. Who could resist a laugh like that? As Vincent had said, he had an excellent track record with female tourists, who seemed to melt when they saw his big-featured, handsome face with its shock of corkscrew ringlets. Not that Roman girls didn't melt as well, but Roman girls had a tendency to want him to meet their parents afterwards. Foreigners were altogether less complicated.

He waited for the right moment. The American girl stayed on the phone, occasionally sipping slowly at her *macchiato* - no wonder she'd wanted it hot - until Tommaso realised with a sigh that he was going to have to go. He would already be late getting to the restaurant. He slapped a few coins on the counter and waved a farewell to Gennaro. His *motorino* was parked outside, next to the girl's table, and he lingered for a last moment as he crouched down to unlock it, savouring one more glance at the slim honey-brown calves stretched over the chair opposite.

'No more Italians, then. Not unless they can cook,' she was saying. 'From now on, I don't date anyone who isn't in the Good Food Guide.'

Tommaso's ears pricked up.

She reached into her cup for the final frothy globs of latte, scooping them out and licking them off her finger. 'My God, this coffee is fantastic. Hold on. Yes?'

Unable to stop himself, Tommaso had tapped her on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your call,' he began in his best English. 'I just wanted to tell you that your beauty has broken my heart.'

She smiled appreciatively, if a little warily. Nevertheless, she tried to sound polite as she replied '*Vatte a fa' 'nu giro, a fessa 'e mamma,*' using the words that her first Italian date had told her to employ whenever she was paid a compliment. Tommaso's face fell. 'Okay, okay', he said, backing off and throwing his leg across the scooter.

Laura watched him go, then turned her attention back to Carlotta. 'Who was that?' her friend wanted to know.

'Just some guy.'

'Laura,' her friend said carefully, 'what do you think you said to him?'

Which was how Laura discovered that she had actually been telling the young men of Rome in perfect idiomatic Italian to piss off back up the orifices of their mothers from which they were delivered.

'Oh,' she said. 'Oh dear. That's a shame. He was quite cute, too. But it doesn't really matter, does it? Because from now on I'm holding out for someone who can cook.'

Primo

'Once the general and commonsensical principles of menu planning become apparent, the choices remaining before us provide an infinite number of agreeable and workable combinations ...' - Marcella Hazan, The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking

Two

It was a week before Tommaso saw the girl again. He had gone to Gigliemi, the great food shop near the Piazza Venezia, to pick up some supplies for the restaurant. Earlier there had been a phone call to say that a hunter, one of dozens in the Castelli Romani who supplied Gigliemi with specialities, had driven in from the countryside that very morning, his Fiat full of tender young *lepre*; baby hares, the first of the season. Tommaso had been instructed to be quick, so he walked straight through to the back, shouldered the box which Adriano gave him with only the briefest of pauses to discuss Adriano's family, his uncle's marriage, his second cousin's business and his brother's new girlfriend, and was hurrying out again when a movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. It was a girl. She was reaching up to the top shelf for a packet of pasta, exposing a band of taut stomach. Tommaso caught a glimpse of a tiny whorl of belly button, as intricate and perfect as the knot of a balloon. A keen aficionado of female beauty, he muttered '*Fosse 'a Madonna!*' under his breath. Quickly he swung the box down again. '*Momento,*' he called to her; wait up. He reached up, got the packet for her and handed it to her with a smile. '*Prego.*' Then he realised he'd seen her somewhere before.

She smiled. '*Grazie, faccia di culo.*' Thank you, assface.

Of course - he remembered now. The girl from Gennaro's. He also remembered her saying that she was only going to sleep with - well, to date; but it was famously the same thing with American girls - someone who could cook, and if she was buying her own pasta, the chances were that she hadn't yet found that someone. Which was remarkable, because as her friend had pointed out, Rome was absolutely full of cooks, while blonde American girls were somewhat scarcer.

It was his opportunity, and he took it.

'*Spaghetti,*' he said, glancing at the packet in her hand. 'How nice.' Even to him, this sounded a little flat.

'Well, I hope so.'

'And what are you cooking it with? What sauce?'

'Well - I thought perhaps Bolognese.'

His look of bewilderment was not feigned. 'But you can't,' he objected.

'Why not?'

'First, because you're not in Bologna,' he pointed out, reasonably. 'And secondly, because what you have in your hand is *spaghetti*.'

'Yes. Spaghetti Bolognese.' She saw his expression. 'That's not a good idea, is it?'

'It's just impossible,' he explained. '*Ragù Bolognese* is a sauce for *tagliatelle* or *gnocchi* or possibly *tortellini*.' He pointed to Gigliemi's glass-fronted display case. 'These are *tortellini*.' He snapped his fingers at the assistant, who handed him one of the soft, doughy parcels on a piece of tissue paper. He held it out to Laura to show her. 'The shape is based on the shape of a woman's - what do you call it?'

She peered anxiously at the *tortellini*. 'I'm not sure.'

He pointed to his own stomach. 'Tummy popper?'

'Button. Of course,' she said, relieved.

He remembered that glimpse of midriff and the tiny little whorl of her navel. It had not, in fact, looked very like the thing he was holding in his hand at all, which resembled nothing so much as a big fat oyster of ricotta cheese, or possibly a woman's *fica*. 'Anyway,' he said dismissively, 'we are in Rome, and Roman sauces are better. Well, strictly speaking we are in Lazio, but it's the same thing. We eat spaghetti *all'amatriciana*, with a sauce of *guanciale*, which is the pig's—' he ran his finger down her cheek, briefly, a touch so fleeting she was hardly aware it had happened - 'this part of the pig's face. We fry it in olive oil with a little chilli, some tomatoes and of course some grated *pecorino romano*, hard cheese. Or if you don't want *spaghetti* you could have *bucatoni*, or *calscioni*, or *fettuccini*, or *pappardelle*, or *tagliolini*, or *rigatoni*, or *linguine*, or *garganelli*, or *tonnarelli*, or *fusilli*, or *cochiglie*, or *vermicelli*, or *maccheroni*, but,' he held up a warning finger, 'each of them demands a different kind of sauce. For example, an oily sauce goes with dried pasta, but a butter sauce goes better with fresh. Take *fusilli*.' He held up a packet to show her. 'People say this pasta was designed by Leonardo da Vinci himself. The spiral fins carry the maximum amount of sauce relative to the surface area, you see? But it only works with a thick, heavy sauce that can cling to the

grooves. *Conchiglie*, on the other hand, is like a shell, so it holds a thin, liquid sauce inside it perfectly.'

'Are you a cook?' she asked, understanding dawning in her eyes.

'I am a chef, yes, at one of Rome's best restaurants,' he said proudly.

She hesitated. 'Can I ask you - what would *you* make, if you were me? I don't do a lot of cooking, but my father's flown in for a few days and I stupidly said I'd make something for him. I'd love to cook him something Roman.'

'If I were you... ' Tommaso thought hard. Then his eyes fell on the box of baby hares. 'I would cook *pasta con sugo di lepre*, pappardelle with hare sauce,' he said triumphantly. 'The hares are never better than when they're young and tender.'

'Is it easy?'

'It's fantastically simple. You cook the hare in onion and garlic for a little while, then you add some red wine, some cloves, some cinnamon, and that's it.'

'And I can buy the meat here?' she asked, looking around her doubtfully.

'No,' he said. 'They only supply delicacies like hare to those they know well. But for you - ' He went over to his box, took out a hare, and presented it to her proudly on the flat of his hand. 'Here. It's a gift. So that you will never make Bolognese sauce again.'

She seemed to recoil a little. 'Don't they sell them skinned?'

'Ah, skinning it is easy,' he said happily. 'It will take you two minutes.' He called to the assistant for a paper bag.

'And is it - gutted?' she asked doubtfully.

'Of course not,' he said, sounding a little offended. 'Gigliemi wouldn't sell a hare with the best bits removed.' He dropped it in the bag and swung it round to close it. 'Here,' he said, pressing it into her hand. 'And - here.' He took out a pencil with a flourish and wrote his cell phone number on the bag. 'If you need any help with the recipe, any help at all, just call me. My name is Tommaso Massi and I will be delighted to assist you.' He swept the box of

hares up onto his shoulder, before she could ask him about the recipe in any more detail.

‘You mean that? I can really call you if I have a problem?’

He almost laughed out loud. The American girl was actually asking if *she* could phone *him*! ‘But of course. You can call me any time.’

‘Well, thank you. I’ll do that. If I need help, that is.’

‘*Ciao*, then.’

‘*Ciao*. For now.’

‘*Ciao* for now!’ He liked that, it had a good sound. And the way she was looking at him, he had definitely made an impression.

He had, indeed, made an impression.

He’s nice, Laura thought. *Like a character from a Michaelangelo drawing, with his big extravagant features and his hands waving in the air all the time like that. And, ah, undeniably easy on the eye. But he didn’t hit on me, which is refreshing. Refreshing, and a little bit annoying. Because if he doesn’t hit on me, how am I meant to say no? Or, as the case may be, yes? Which it isn’t, of course. The case is definitely no. Because you don’t just bump into people like that, do you? Not people you’re going to go out with.*

Mind you. A chef. How weird is that? Carlotta and I had that joke about me going out with a chef, and then here one is. A good one too, he says. A beautiful one, says I.

Serendipity?

It was only much later, when this internal reverie had finally played itself out, that she realised she was walking along the Via Araceli with a smile on her face and a paper bag in her hand containing a dead baby hare.

Tommaso strapped the box of hares onto the back of his Piaggio and sped off through the traffic. *Uanema*, he was late. He had been told to be quick, and here he was wasting time yet again with girls. He wondered if anyone would notice that one of the animals was missing.

He took the Via Aurelia past the Vatican, his little scooter chugging up the hill towards Montespaccato, weaving expertly through the endless traffic

jams and hold-ups. Finally he came to a part of the city that was higher, cooler and calmer, where the buildings were larger, and where even the cars drove past each other in unnatural silence, with barely an insult or a gesticulation to smooth their interaction.

He parked the Piaggio around the back of a large white building, making sure that it was precisely in a line with all the other scooters, then carried the box of hares shoulder-high through a pair of double doors into a vast room full of steam and heat. There was no sign outside the big white building to announce it, but this was the kitchen of Templi, one of the most famous gourmet restaurants in the world.

Tommaso took the box of hares over to the head chef, Karl, who wordlessly picked up one of the dead animals to inspect it, sniffing its mouth and anus for decay before pronouncing himself satisfied with a nod. Only then did he say, 'You're late.'

'Traffic. An overturned lorry on the Ponte Garibaldi.'

'And one of the hares is missing. I ordered a dozen.'

'That's right. There was one that wasn't quite dead. Suddenly it jumped out and ran back to its mother. Through the traffic. Do you know the extraordinary thing? It was just as we were going past the Vatican. And they say the Holy Father is in residence. Perhaps it was a miracle. Yes, a miracle, that's it.' He was just warming to his theme when Karl, with a faint sigh, said 'Go and help with the glasses, Tommaso.' He nodded towards the sink, where the bottlewasher, Amelie, was working her way through a mountain of glass.

Tommaso reached for a pair of polishing gloves. The glassware at Templi was all lead crystal, and there was never a single speck of lint or dust on it, let alone a smear of dirt or detergent. Every single one was polished by hand.

There are three kinds of restaurants in Rome. There are the local *trattorie* and *osterie*, most of which serve only *cucina Romana*, Roman cooking. It is a tradition firmly rooted in the ingredients available from the markets and slaughterhouses, with no part of the animal wasted. From the ears to the tail,

there is a proper and correct recipe for everything, handed down from generation to generation. Then there is *cucina creativa*, the cuisine which takes that tradition and experiments with it. Many ordinary Romans remain deeply suspicious of experimentation, not to mention the increased prices that go with it, believing firmly that *più se spenne, peggio se magna* - the less you spend, the better you eat.

And thirdly, there is *cucina gourmet* - the awkward collision of French and Italian indicating that this is a concept which does not quite fit comfortably in this region. The ordinary Roman loves his food with a passion but, however wealthy he is, he will probably pass his entire life without ever setting foot inside one of the handful of Michelin-starred establishments dotted around the Eternal City. The presence of major American and European corporations, however, many of whom have their European headquarters nearby, not to mention the stream of wealthy gastro-tourists doing the modern equivalent of the Grand Tour, means that there is a small but steady demand for an international style of cooking which equals that found anywhere else in the world.

Standing at the very apex of these restaurants is Templi, the three-star establishment of Alain Dufrais, the great Swiss chef and internationally-acknowledged master of Nouvelle Cuisine.

Polishing glasses is boring work, particularly when you are in love. Tommaso relieved the tedium by whistling to get the attention of his friend Bruno, who was making *zabaione* nearby.

‘Ueh, Bruno. Psst. I’m in love.’

‘That’s good,’ Bruno said. He was concentrating on his zabaglione, which he was making in a traditional, round-bottomed copper pot, directly over a flame. ‘But nothing new. You were in love yesterday as well.’

‘This is someone else. An American girl. Blonde and very cute.’

Bruno grunted.

‘Ueh, Bruno. How do you make *sugo di lepre*?’

This question, being about food rather than about women, did make Bruno look up briefly. He was not good looking like his friend Tommaso,

being thick-set and slightly awkward. His eyes, which tended to shy away from direct contact with others, only really settled when he was visualising something to do with cooking, as he did now. 'Well, you fry the hare with some pancetta,' he began.

'Pancetta!' Tommaso clasped his forehead. 'I knew I'd forgotten something.'

'Then you remove the hare and pancetta and you soften some onions and garlic, very gently. Add a bottle of red Sangiovese, some cinammon, cloves, rosemary and plenty of thyme - '

'Thyme! Damn!'

'- and then you put the hare back and simmer it for at least two hours, until the hare starts to collapse into the sauce, which becomes so sticky it coats the pasta like glue.'

'Two hours!' Tommaso couldn't remember if he'd actually told the girl to cook it for that long.

'And of course, just before serving you remove all the bones.'

'Shit!'

'Why do you ask?'

'Damn!'

'Tell me what happened,' Bruno said gently. He spooned the zabaglione into ramekins and slid them into the fridge. They were to form part of a complex assemblage of warm and cold, consisting of a fresh peach *gelato*, just starting to thaw; then zabaglione made with Barolo wine, slightly chilled; then a warm froth of more zabaglione, a thicker one this time, made with the yolks of goose eggs and rich, sherry-like Marsala; and finally a topping of crisp fried mint leaves and freshly-roasted espresso beans, arranged like the petals and seeds of a flower on top of the other ingredients.

When Tommaso had finished, he said neutrally, 'So you gave her a hare.'

'Yes. One of Giglieme's finest.'

'That was romantic of you.'

'It was, wasn't it?'

'Other men give flowers. But you, Tommaso, give dead animals. Dead *baby* animals. To an American.'

A thoughtful expression passed across Tommaso's face.

'Still,' Bruno continued, 'At least she wasn't a vegetarian. Many of them are.'

'You think the hare might have been a mistake?'

Bruno shrugged.

'She did ask me how to gut it,' Tommaso said, remembering. 'I thought that was strange. I mean, most women know how to gut game, don't they?'

'Maybe not Americans.'

Tommaso smacked his fist into his palm. 'Don't their mothers teach them anything? What do they learn at school, for Christ's sake?'

'How to give great blowjobs, apparently,' Bruno said dryly. 'I wouldn't know.'

'Shit! Shit! Shit! The hare *was* a mistake. I should have given her some *tortellini*. Even an idiot can cook *tortellini*. Even *I* can cook *tortellini*. If only I'd been picking up something different, this would never have happened.'

'*Si nonnema teneva 'o cazzo, 'a chiamavamo nonno,*' Bruno agreed calmly. 'Too many ifs. Why don't you call her and give her the right recipe?'

'I don't have her number. I gave her mine and told her to call if she had any problems.'

'Well, if she does call you, at least it'll prove she isn't in the mortuary with a hare bone stuck in her throat.'

A faint pinging sound came from beyond the swing doors that led to the restaurant. Someone had just struck a glass, softly, with a knife.

'You'd better go,' Bruno said gently.

'Shit!'

Tommaso raced to get into his uniform. Black trousers, white shirt, black tie, black jacket. Franciscus, the maitre d', didn't like to be kept waiting.

When Tommaso told Laura that he was a chef, he wasn't exactly telling the truth, or indeed anything close to it. Tommaso wasn't a chef, or a sous-chef, or even a commis-chef. Tommaso was a waiter, a very junior waiter, a

* Literally, 'if my grandmother had a dick, we would have called her grandpa.'

waiter so lowly that even Amelie the bottle washer was allowed to give him orders.

The ritual which was about to take place in the restaurant was the same one which took place on the first day of every month. It was time to fill Templi's *libro prenotazioni*, the reservations book.

While the waiting staff stood round in a semi-circle, three or four vast bags of post were emptied onto a round table. One by one the letters were opened and handed to Franciscus, who perused the contents, gave a curt nod or shake of his head, and passed it on to one of the two waiters to his left. One of these put the rejections into a rubbish sack, while the other carefully wrote the names of those accepted into the reservations book, a leather-bound volume as weighty as a church ledger. Tommaso's job was to take the full sacks and replace them with empty ones, thus ensuring that the ritual, like everything else at Templi, proceeded with the smooth, uninterrupted solemnity of a state occasion.

It is not enough, of course, to telephone Templi and simply ask for a reservation. Even if you could find the number, which is ex-directory, the waiter who answers the phone would explain to you very politely that due to excessive demand, reservations are only accepted in writing, on the first day of each month, for the period three months in advance. Even so, there are more applicants than places, and thus a great deal of care has to be taken when writing your letter to make sure that you are one of the lucky ones.

It is rumoured, for example, that it helps to give some indication when you write that you are the sort of person by whom the legendary cooking of Monsieur Dufrais will be truly appreciated; a sort of brief resume, detailing other restaurants you have eaten at – though of course you will want to acknowledge that they will not be as good as Templi - or perhaps your appreciation of the philosophy outlined in one of M. Dufrais' many books. Do not be tempted to go on at length, however, because this may indicate that you are a chatterbox - and if there is one thing Alain Dufrais does not appreciate, it is a chatterbox. Talking is not actually forbidden at Templi, but excessive conversation is certainly discouraged, it being assumed that you are

there to concentrate on the flavours in your mouth, not to adulterate them with unnecessary verbiage. Cell phones, cigarettes and children *are* forbidden - the latter not in so many words, but you will have been sent a discreet note well in advance of your meal which clearly states that M. Dufrais only cooks for well-developed, sensitive palates.

It is also important not to let yourself down by your choice of paper or writing implement. To write in ballpoint, for example, rather than with a fountain pen, suggests that you are not really treating your application seriously. To use machine-cut paper might be all right: M. Dufrais is not averse to simplicity, but the paper you choose had better be expensive as well as simple. On the subject of money, however, do not under any circumstances fall into the trap of enclosing a 100-Euro bill with your letter. Many people do so, and to see the icy contempt which flickers across the maitre d's face when the bills flutter from the envelopes is a chilling sight. The bills are handed to another waiter, to be added to the tips pool, but the letter always goes straight into the rubbish bag without another glance. Alain Dufrais is famously unconcerned with money, an attitude that permeates his whole establishment, which is why the menus have no prices and dinner for two will set you back anywhere between five hundred and a thousand Euros.

By the time the reservations had been sorted it was nearly noon, and the waiting staff took their places around the dining room to await the first guests and make final checks of glassware, silverware and placement. It was Alain's proud boast that the waiters at Templi always outnumbered the customers by at least two to one. To reach for a bottle at Templi was to find it floating as if by magic towards your glass; if you dropped a fork, it would be caught before it reached the ground, and just as swiftly replaced with a clean one.

At twelve-fifteen precisely Alain Dufrais himself made his daily tour of the dining room. You would never have guessed that he had been in his kitchen for nearly six hours: his whites were immaculate, untouched by a single drop of food. A thin, tall man of few words, he made a circuit of the empty tables like a senior commander inspecting his troops. Occasionally he picked up a glass and held it to the light, or pushed a fork a few millimetres to

the left. On these occasions he said nothing, but Franciscus instantly pounced on the offending object, handing it to a waiter to be replaced. Then Alain returned to his inner sanctum, the kitchen. The double doors swung shut; the noise and hubbub of the morning subsided. There were no last minute preparations, for the simple reason that everything was prepared and ready. Like an army which knows it has manned a perfect defensive position, the staff of Templi waited in silence for the first customer to show himself at their door.