

Melissa Forti

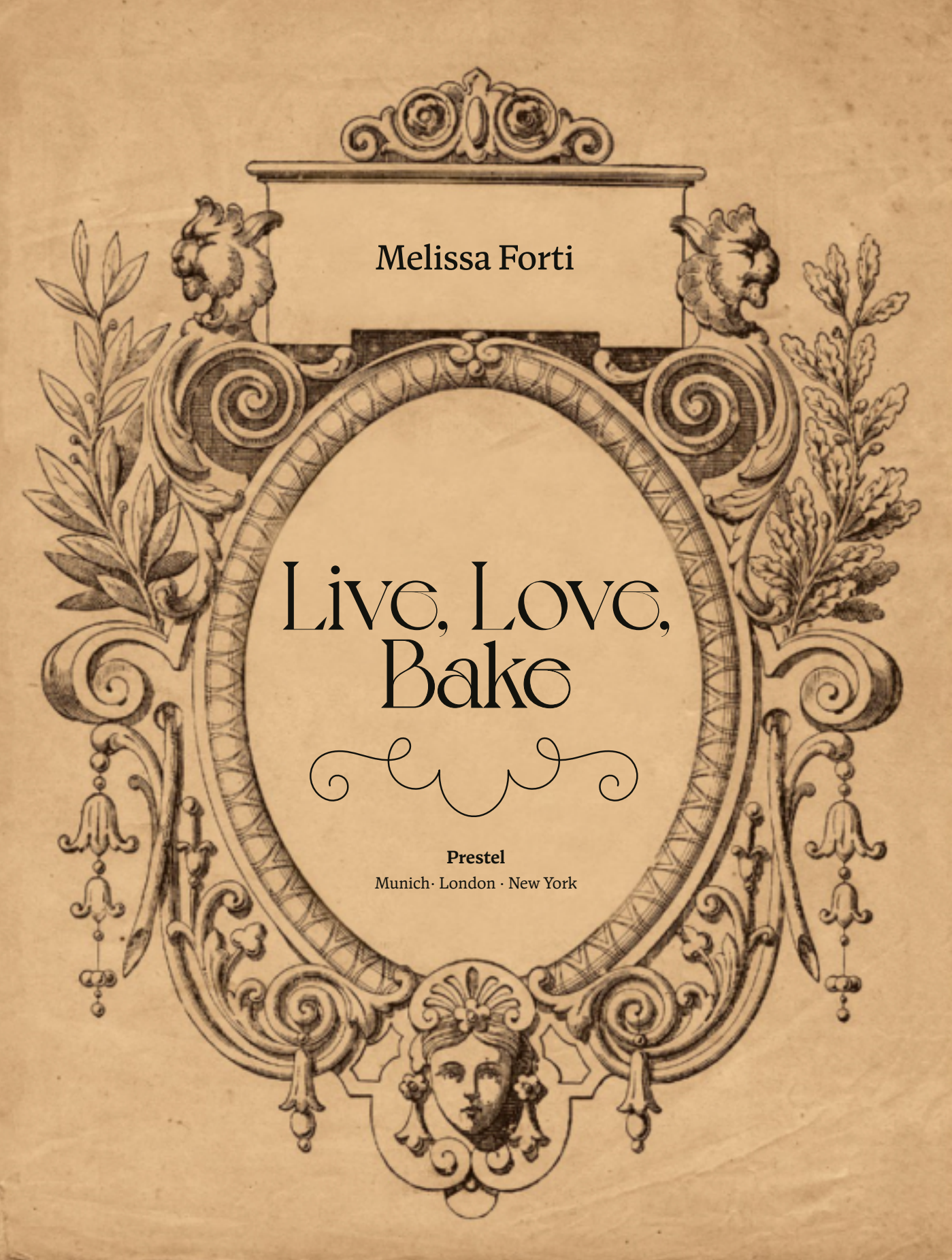
Live, Love, Bake



PHOTOGRAPHS
Giovanna Di Lisciandro

To my mum





Melissa Forti

Live, Love, Bake

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My name is Melissa Forti, and I bake cakes. This is what I do, and this is how I want to present myself.

Since the beginning of my career, I have done so many things, including opening and managing my very first little bakery in Sarzana, Italy, which became a tea-room and then the inspiration for my first book, *The Italian Baker*. Much has changed since then and this is my third book, but I still consider myself someone who bakes cakes. It started like this and, hopefully, it will continue like this for many more years.

My life has been, so far, an escalation of great achievements and also disappointments, because this is what life is about. But in the true spirit of “pick yourself up, dust yourself off, start all over again” (my favourite version of this song is by jazz singer Anita O’Day), I’ve worked my way through this beautiful thing that it is my existence with the enthusiasm of a little girl. However, and this is where I share my truth, there’s also been a great deal of sweat and tears. I recently opened Café Duse, in Copenhagen, Denmark, one of my most ambitious projects yet. I welcome every new endeavour in the humblest way and consider each of them monumental, but this one has marked my personal and professional growth like no other. As a human being, and as a

woman, I feel I am at a turning point and the urge to tell my story has been growing inside me more with every day.

Those who know me, know that my baking style is simple, true, and honest. Perfection, to me, is about more than the look of a cake. For a cake to be perfect, it must wake up all our senses, but even more importantly, it must speak to our emotions. This is what I love about baking: how it makes us recall a time long gone, people we love, or places we’ve visited and how it treats us to a moment of delight in the present, while helping us create a new vision for the future. Baking gives me the opportunity to use flavours, scents, and textures, to express history and tradition through my eyes and to explore my past, my present, and the future ahead. With this in mind, I divided the recipes in this book into three chapters—past, present, and future, with the third chapter dedicated to all the people who have dietary issues, such as gluten intolerance, as well as those who have made a conscious decision to change their food habits. There is space for all, and all should feel part of the narrative. Inclusion and connection are what I wish for our future.

Love,
MELISSA



PASTI

CASSOLA ROMANA	20
TORTA ALLA RICOTTA E VISCIOLE ROMANA	22
FRITTELLE DI MELE	24
MILLEFOGLIE	26
ZEPPOLE DI SAN GIUSEPPE AL FORNO PER LA FESTA DEL PAPÀ	30
CROSTATA MORBIDA DELLA NONNA	36
PIZZETTE ROSSE ROMANE	38
BOMBOLONI	40
SUGOLI	42
RISOLATTE	44
MARITOTZI ROMANI	46

FRAPPE AL FORNO	50
VENTAGLI	52
BABKA AL CIOCCOLATO	56
PROFITEROLES	60
BISCOTTI AI PINOLI	64
BRIOCES COL TUPPO	66
TARTE TROPÉZIENNE	70
BUDINI DI RISO	74
LA MIA MARBLE CAKE	78
TORTA MARGHERITA	80
BISCOTTI PER IL TÈ	82

PRESENTI

SCONES PER IL TÈ SENZA UOVA	88
BIGNÈ MIGNON	90
MIGNONS ALLA FRUTTA	94
TORTA TIRAMISÙ A MODO MIO	98
TORTA RED VELVET DI MELISSA	102
LA MIA TORTA ALLE CAROTE	106
MIGNONS AL LIMONE E PINOLI	110
BISCOTTI OCCHI DI BUE	114
MIGNONS AL CAFFÈ	116
TORTA SAPORE DI SICILIA	120
FETTE AL LIMONE	124
TORTA AL PISTACCHIO E CIOCCOLATO	126
TORTA AL CAFFÈ	128
TORTA DI COMPLEANNO ALLE CILIEGIE E MANDORLE	130

TORTA MERINGATA	134
BOSTON CREAM PIE	138
TORTA AL CIOCCOLATO 1000 STRATI	142
BISCOTTI KRUMIRI	148
TORTA DI PRIMAVERA	150
LOAF MARMORIZZATO AL TÈ MATCHA E COCCO	154
BAKEWELL TART FOR MY FRIEND LEILA	156
TORTA AL PISTACCHIO E MIELE	158
TORTA MANDORLE E CIOCCOLATO	160
BISCOTTI ALL'ACQUA DI ROSE	162
MERINGHE	166
TORTA MOUSSE ALLA RICOTTA E GOCCE DI CIOCCOLATO E FRAGOLE	168
TORTA MAZZINI	172

FUTURE

TORTA AL LIMONE E MIRTILLI	178
L'UNICA TORTA AL CIOCCOLATO VEGANA DI CUI HAI BISOGNO	180
CROSTATA FRANGIPANE ALLE ALBICOCHE	182
TORTA BUNDT AL LIMONE	186
FETTE DI ZENZERO	188
BIGNÈ ALLA CREMA CHANTILLY	190
TORTA QUADRATA AI MIRTILLI	192
VEGANE SCONES	194
FLAN VEGANO	196
BISCOTTI DI NATALE	200
TORTA AL CIOCCOLATO E NOCCIOLE	202
TORTA A STRATI AL LIMONE	204
GALETTE ALLE ALBICOCHE	208

BISCOTTI ALLE MANDORLE	210
LOAF 4/4	212
BISCOTTI MORBIDI ALLE MANDORLE	214
BISCOTTI ALLO ZAFFERANO E LIMONE SENZA UOVA	216
TORTA VANIGLIA E FRAGOLE	218
DEPRESSION ERA CHOCOLATE CAKE	220
VICTORIA SPONGE CAKE	222
LOAF AL LIMONE VERDE E COCCO	224
QUADRATI AL LIMONE	226
TORTA ALLE PERE E CIOCCOLATO	228
TORTA ALLE BANANE E CREMA AL FORMAGGIO	230
BISCOTTI RUGOSI AL CIOCCOLATO	232







Melissa's PASI

My first lost illusion and biggest disappointment in life was the illusion of family togetherness. I don't belong to the type of classic Italian family known around the world. No Grandmothers or Grandfathers. Two parents that separated when I was way too young and no siblings either. Well, at least none I knew about until I found out I had sisters from another mother. I was, literally, a lonely child. I am not saying this to give a sad tone to this book. On the contrary: From mud, the lotus flower grows, or so they say...

Never having a real family has always felt like my biggest weakness, so I went into survival mode and made my weakness one of my biggest assets.

When I was a little girl, I played alone in my room for hours, or even days, building fantastic worlds with my imagination. I had tea with a princess in a royal palace and dressed my dolls to go to the office where they led companies. I created and decorated rooms in my doll's house, using whatever I could find—a small tea towel became a carpet for the living room, an empty matchbox turned into a coffee table, and so on. I built a shop and stood at my imaginary market stall, selling all sorts of things, from fruit and bread to clothes and shoes. And after all that, I drew and painted for hours and hours. It's absolutely incredible what the mind can do to create a comfort zone, but above all, what really impresses me, is the ability each child has to turn an uneasy situation into strength.

Nobody knew, at the time, that all those games and imaginary worlds, were preparing me for who I was destined to become.

My father was a very good self-taught cook and made me the most delicious dishes. I believe I inherited a passion for cooking from him that ultimately became a true love for baking. But he left and that was that.

My mother, on the other hand, hated cooking. Apart from a few recipes, such as the yogurt sheet cake she sometimes baked (the recipe is in my first book, *The Italian Baker*), or her perfect mashed potatoes, she pretty much raised me on pasta with olive oil, soups, and frozen pizza. Don't get me wrong: As a child, I didn't mind and I was by no means a neglected girl, but this simple way of eating had an impact on my palate, as well as my curiosity for the culinary world. Although I am curious, I am not an adventurous eater. I prefer simple but properly defined flavours, and I have never been into eating unconventional food. Instead, I try to find perfection in the things I like the most.

Then there was Uncle E, who was not really my uncle but my mother's first husband, before she met my father. Uncle E.

SOME LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED FROM MY PAST

1. Everything is useful. You may not know where you are going, but if you keep moving, the answer will come. Don't stress too much though. When you need to stop, stay put. While you rest, your brain will continue to do the work.
2. Resilience is essential and to be resilient, you must work on yourself.
3. You can't do it all alone. Even if you think you can, well, you can't.
4. Be humble and willing to admit when you need help.
5. If something doesn't make you happy, change it.
6. Never make big decisions when you are feeling anxious, nervous, or depressed. Make them when you are feeling calm and happy.
7. Whatever it is, find something that makes you smile when you do it.
8. Being alone means being able to grow without interferences.
9. Accept change. I hate change, and the more I despise change, the more life forces me to change, so I know this one is easier said than done.

was always a part of my life, like a fun uncle, and loved me the only way he could, but in his own way. I owe him a lot. Uncle E. never cooked, but he always encouraged me in all my adventures. He passed away three years ago, leaving a great hole in my heart.

Rome, where I was born, played a pivotal role in my life and upbringing. It's called the Eternal City, but I call it the old beautiful lady. She is a crazy lady, with a temper, but also warm, welcoming, and so beautiful. Rome makes you fall in love with her every time you visit, while also being truly hard to deal with, so you can't wait to leave. You either love Rome or hate it. There is no in between. I love her with all my heart and hate her with all my guts, but when I need to find myself again, my heart always leads me back to Rome.

I get lost quite a lot, I must admit, and this is why I long to hold on to the people and places that make me feel rooted. I was born on Isola Tiberina, an island—yes, an island—in Rome's Trastevere neighbourhood and part of the historic city centre. On that island stands the Fatebenefratelli Hospital and it is there that my life journey began.

I can honestly say that Rome raised me, a bit like the Capitoline She-wolf, the bronze sculpture found near the Capitoline Hill that depicts a mythical creature feeding Romulus and Remus, the twin founders of Rome. I was, in many ways, fed by the city's beauty, history, nature, traditions, art, and especially all the delicious local food.

Rome has dozens of incredible parks and green areas, and it was in these outdoor spaces that my childhood largely unfolded. So many spots in the city hold memories for me, and most of those memories are linked to food. The zoo near Villa Borghese, one of the largest parks in Rome, was my favourite place to go as a child. It was our custom, before entering the park, to buy peanuts to give to the monkeys, and to enjoy a freshly fried bombolone (doughnut) at the stall right in front of the zoo. The smell of doughnuts still brings me back to those days.

When I was not in school and my mother was working, I spent the day with Uncle

E., who took me walking around the city all day, no matter how tired I as—he was quite a peculiar character and hated cars, so he didn't own one. I will never forget a particular episode that shaped a part of my future.

My mother wanted me to become a ballerina, at all costs. It was her dream, not mine, and because she couldn't be a ballerina, I had to fix that for her. She sent me to the National Academy of Dance, founded by Jia Ruskaja in 1940, and I studied there for 12 years. The day before I had to take the final exam to pass to a higher level, Uncle E., contrary to my mother's orders, made me walk for hours and hours on a very hot Roman summer day. I was exhausted and got a blister on the bottom of my foot, preventing me from executing the perfect grand jeté. I didn't pass the exam and I was out of the Academy. My mother was furious, but I was delighted! My uncle, on the other hand, had to deal with my mother for months! Who knows, what I would have become if I passed that exam?

Walking around parks and spending time in them, was something we did all the time, mostly because it was free! My uncle used to joke a lot and play pranks on me. We would stroll around the city centre and he would say, "If you behave, and you walk without complaining, I will take you to Via Veneto to watch beautiful people eat gelato at the cafés"! And I would reply, "But I want gelato, too"! Uncle E. would laugh and make me beg for a while, but in the end, he would buy me the biggest gelato I could hold. The pistachio at the Sant'Eustachio gelateria, near the Pantheon, was to die for!

Because I rarely played with other kids, my childhood memories are of experiences around town, eating pizza for lunch, snacks like suppli (rice croquettes) around midafternoon, and gelato for dinner. Yes, I know kids shouldn't eat gelato for dinner, but my life has never been normal! And the way Rome was "feeding me", was through hundreds of traditional delicacies that changed from district to district. In this chapter, I share some of my favourites.

As a teenager, I was rebellious, and Rome became my ally. Instead of daytime walks in the parks, bicycle rides at Villa Ada, and pony rides at Villa Glori, I was out every night, rebelling against my mother and her strictness. I made nightclubs and bars my home and Rome my partner in crime. The city smelled different at night. It was pungent and alcoholic, but also very sweet! Bakeries started work at 2 a.m., and I remember quite often stopping in the middle of the night at a bakery in Campo de' Fiori Square to eat a slice of their freshly baked pizza! Or when I was craving cakes and brioches, I would go to the Prati district to visit a bakery with no name, located in a basement—one of those places only true locals know where to find.

As a child, I wasn't taught that I could become and create anything I wanted. I had no real direction, and one could say that I was "lost" for many years. Very few people are lucky enough to be born knowing their mission in life, who they want to become when they grow up, or what job they want to do. I had no clue, and for many years I searched with no luck.

During those years, I was gathering information, having experiences, and causing some trouble, but mostly and without much luck, I was trying to find myself. I think this is something we all go through at some point. I was nervous, anxious, and eager to do something though I didn't know what yet. One thing was for sure: I had to escape the suffocating reality at home. Those were very confusing years and quite frightening for a girl with no guidance, no prospects, and no means to do much with her life. Rome had become one of those friends you shouldn't be friends with, but she always protected me from danger, and I am grateful for that. We were ok, me and Rome, until we had a falling out.

When I graduated from high school, I decided to skip university and look for a job, because I had to help at home. This is when Rome started to feel like my enemy. I did all sorts of jobs, but the city wasn't offering me real options, or at least nothing substantial. I worked as a waitress, a secretary, a shop assistant, you name it, but at the end of the day,

I felt empty and depressed. Little did I know that those were my formative years, and every single job helped me gather information and experience to build my future. At the time, I couldn't see it. I wanted more from myself and more from life. Because I'd had so little until then, I believed it was finally my moment. Rome, I thought, had betrayed me, keeping me there to see how great she was without allowing me to become great like her. Or so I thought...

I didn't come from a wealthy family, and money was always an issue, which limited my options. But I was curious, and I wanted to see the world, so I packed my things and left home to live and work around Europe, including in London, Berlin, and Amsterdam, as well as in Los

"I am **GROWING UP**," (...)
"I am losing my illusions,
perhaps to acquire new ones."

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Angeles. Looking back, I regret not going to university, because it would have provided, among many things, more "youth time." Moving away made me grow up fast, as I had to provide for myself.

And I did. I learned to speak English fluently, worked in many different fields, and studied interior decorating, which has always been a passion of mine. I also cried a lot and suffered a lot. I went to tons of parties and felt free, but I was also lonely a lot. I didn't ask myself questions like "what am I doing?" or "where am I going?". I simply did what I had to do to survive. And although I didn't know it at the time, there was magic happening once again. Those were formative, important years, and every single thing I did, would be useful later on.

Life is a matter of choices. I took mine and they led me to where I am today. I still don't know if I made the right choices, but I know that I did what I could with what I had, and this is one of the lessons that life has taught me that I will never

forget.

Like many young people spending time abroad, eventually, I went back home. My mother made me come back, because, and I quote: "It is time for you find a real job and help me here, because we are alone me and you". And so, I went back, heartbroken and lost once again, back to a city that remained the same, while I was changed, a place I could not relate to anymore. I found a "real" job working as a cabin crew assistant for an Italian airline company and then in airport ground services. I had a temporary contract, and I was helping my mother pay the mortgage, but once again, I felt confused, lost, and without direction. My days of freedom abroad were gone. I didn't want to wear a uniform and I really didn't want to get stuck in a job with no future. I knew what I didn't want but not what I actually wanted. I was a depressed mess. When my contract expired and the airline declared they wouldn't hire anyone permanently, something happened inside of me that I can now see was an epiphany.

I couldn't keep working temporary jobs. The end of my contract was a sign and I had to do something about it. But what? What did I want to do? Who did I want to become? Ah! Yes! I wanted to have my own business. Yes, but what kind? Selling what? I had no clue. I told myself that when one does not have an answer, one can take some time to figure things out but still start to move. I decided to work in a shop to learn how to manage it. First, I would acquire the knowledge and then I would act.

I was hired as a shop assistant in a store that sold natural beauty products. In a matter of a month, they made me the shop manager, giving me the opportunity to learn about orders, stocking the shop, payroll, etc. WOW!! Finally, I felt I was going somewhere! And then after a year, life came knocking at my door again, showing me that this was not my place, and it was time to change again.

Through friends, I met the person who became my partner for many years, and he was from Sarzana. I was in love, and I was happy and a little naïve, but I was not scared, because I thought I met the person I was meant to be with forever. I

left my job and moved to Sarzana, a move that marked the beginning of my new life, my new future, my new destiny, and a new version of me.

I will not tell you what happened after that, because it is all written in my first book, if you wish to know more. Here, it's more important for me to share where I come from and where I was going at the time. I was starting a new chapter in the charming town of Sarzana, which is in the Liguria region, in northwest Italy, and borders with Tuscany. This is where my career began, and my life really changed. Starting this new chapter, a scary one, I looked back at Rome with resentment and disappointment. Our relationship had been bumpy, but Rome was still in my heart. A part of me never left the old beautiful lady.

In Sarzana, I was blessed to find my passion: making cakes! Through baking, I could relive my past, see places in my mind, and explore my heritage, my childhood, and all the memories I was fond of but that weren't part of my life anymore. For many years, I worked nonstop. I studied pastry and then decided to challenge myself and learn by working. I read tons of books on the subject and baked for months straight and then when I opened my first shop, my career took off. I was happy and felt accomplished.

In addition to the success of my shop, I was able to work on the most amazing projects I could wish for, including being on TV, writing my first and second books, designing and curating the afternoon tea for The Royal Academy of Arts in London, and spending a year working with top chefs in Germany. I was still working at my tearoom in Sarzana, but because I was traveling so much and couldn't always be there physically, it was suffering a little. I also started working on a particularly ambitious project, which is now Café Duse, in Copenhagen.

Around this time, life came knocking once again and things changed drastically for me—and for everyone. I don't need to explain how much we were all affected by the pandemic, but the food and restaurant world got hit hard. Like many others, I had to close my shop. I thought

it could persevere, but I decided to close it, which was one of the hardest decisions of my life. If it wasn't for the pandemic, I don't think I ever would have found the courage to close, but the shop had been struggling and it was time to move on. There was so much uncertainty and fear, but being closed was also starting to produce debt, which is something we all had to tackle in the business.

At first, I didn't realise the impact this decision had on me personally. I faced it like I face every challenge: by dealing with it and not thinking about it too much. It simply had to be done. During those days, Café Duse was still in the making, although we were all scared it could fail. I was losing my shop in Italy, while opening another one in a different country. Talk about mixed feelings...

Months after I closed my shop in Sarzana, it hit me. I felt like I had lost my identity. That shop represented me and all I loved. Who was I without it? I wasn't worried about failure—I have learned there is no failure in life, only lessons to be learned. But I had lost my purpose, my direction, and most of all, my kitchen!

That was one of the lowest moments in my life and I didn't know how to get out of it. I bake. That's what I do, and without it, I felt lost. Until life came knocking once again. I've learned this is the beauty of life: its ability to flow, move, and turn everything upside down, whenever we least expect it.

Eventually, the pandemic was more under control, and we could start working on Café Duse again. What a joy!!! I dove into the project with all my heart and passion, searching for a new identity, or perhaps rediscovering myself, but all this work left me feeling confused and anxious and I didn't know why. Why did I feel this way? What was all this anxiety trying to tell me?

Something was not right. I was not well. I was also feeling pressure to post more and more on social media, in some ways just to prove I still existed professionally. I hated it. I am a baker, I write books, and I am an entrepreneur. Isn't this enough?! Social media is a tool to share and keep

in touch with all the beautiful people who follow me, but it doesn't define who I am. My work defines who I am. So I rebelled and decided to focus on what makes me really happy, which is the privilege of doing my job.

Meanwhile, Café Duse was progressing. The day we opened, I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't really see what was happening. I needed time to fully metabolize and accept one of the most important lessons I had to learn. There I was, inside Café Duse, looking around and feeling like a spectator, when I was meant to be a part of the show. Everything was so new, so important, so ambitious, so beautiful, and so grand that I couldn't see myself as part of it. Then it hit me. I had to let go of who I was before, to become who I am today.



