

SI MANGIA



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LUNCH WITH THE FAMILY

An intimate chamber play—that’s the best analogy I can come up with for lunch at our place. Our family get-togethers are a real drama, every single time. There are 46 of us all together, and our communal meals regularly involve around 30 people. The massive table in the garden then becomes the centrepiece of the whole affair. This offers plenty of space for all the protagonists, so everyone can take a seat and become part of the spectacle.

The performance kicks off with the arrival of the children. The opening scene features little Gemma, proudly showing me her dress and then waiting expectantly for me to admire her gorgeous shoes. Her pastel footwear reflects the colours of this lovely sunny day.

Slowly, the garden fills with people. Giacomo and Noemi are already here with their four kids. Stefano and Silvia arrive with three more little guests. The bright sounds of children’s voices mingle with the distant, deep chimes of the church bell. Now Maria Rachele and Lorenzo are here too with their own sonorous quartet of Giuditta, Vittorio, Francesco, and Emma. Then there are my parents, of course, plus the two of us with little Elio.

Everyone gathers around the long table. Noisy greetings and kisses are exchanged as everyone finds a seat. The colourful, densely woven tablecloth dates back years and has been laid with Italian porcelain. Antipasti are already plated up and waiting to be eaten. The stage is perfectly set.



A brief moment of reflection is followed by the toast, then the first act begins with the primo: penne al sugo. It's time to eat!

The meal is accompanied by loud laughter, the clink of cutlery on porcelain, jovial snippets of conversation, and even some singing.

From the head of the table, I can already spy the second course, held up high above the heads of the junior performers as they put on a wild theatre show from their seats. Slices of brilliant yellow lemons are draped around the main course. Today we are eating the ultimate dish: roast chicken with patate arrosto, plenty of salad, and a lemon and rosemary garnish. The assembled company applauds, and plates are immediately held out for the star of the show.

Now comes the dramatic climax: tasting the feast on offer. Words and gestures combine in a sublime dramatic composition.

Plates are emptied and there is loud talking and laughter. The more junior "extras" have already slipped away from the table to carry on their cheerful racket elsewhere in the garden.

The final act. My mother emerges from the kitchen with a pot of coffee. But the finest theatre prop is yet to appear: the cake. An appreciative murmur ripples through the group. This is the finale we have all been waiting for.

Afterwards, we linger for hours at the table as the afternoon fades away and blends into early evening. The participants express their thanks for the exquisite meal and leave the stage. Slowly, ever so slowly, the curtain falls on proceedings.





Caro Mattia,

I think your passion for cooking began when you went to Berlin. Enjoying great food together was your way of expressing affection! In other words, your love of meeting people prompted you to lay the table and pamper others with your cooking, encouraging intimacy and building connections.

When it comes to getting to know someone, your tried and tested method is to cook and enjoy food together in a welcoming environment.

All my children are incredibly different. It's impossible to say how or why the 11 of you turned out the way you have (even if your granny Marisa is forever seeking out similarities between you).

In family photos, you occupy a central position between your siblings. Five on the right and five on the left, with you, Mattia, seated plumb in the middle. Your place in the family has helped you stay connected to everyone, always trying to build bridges between people by bringing them together.

Even now that you're a married man with your own family, we are constantly amazed at the way you seize the chance to learn new things. This desire to learn is like a thirst for innovation. And an appreciation of food is your creative outlet (no wonder we say that the way to someone's heart is through their stomach). It's a fundamental part of your personality.

As we say in Italian: "At the table, nobody grows old." That's because good food makes an unforgettable impression, evoking the past as if it were timeless and of the moment. No doubt the echo of your Italian home inspired your desire "to speak and why not also sing" through stories, culture, flavours, colours, and shapes, which you then lovingly interpret to share with your Berlin friends at the dinner table.

Your Mamma Silvia



INTRODUCTION

It isn't hard to cook great food in Tuscany. For one thing, the ingredients are so good, you don't really need to do much to conjure up a delicious meal. Tuscan cuisine is also known as *cucina povera* (meaning "poor kitchen"), which refers principally to cooking done by ordinary people, using inexpensive ingredients where nothing at all is wasted. But the term also describes the ability to produce fabulous meals with simple resources. All you have to do is throw two or three things in a pan, and the result is delicious. There is nothing particularly elaborate about our food—in Tuscany, our ideal mealtime companions are a slice of bread and a close friend. The main purpose is spending time together. Eating is not just about nutritional intake; it's about being together. Food is a social event, wherever we are. Even when travelling with friends and renting a cabin in beautiful natural surroundings, food and drink are things to be enjoyed together.

In Tuscany we have a huge variety of culinary options in relatively close

proximity, all offering delicious dishes that vary slightly from place to place. We think nothing of driving for an hour just for an afternoon snack, setting off somewhere to get a particular item that we have set our heart on eating and that can't be found elsewhere, whether it's a panini with first-rate mortadella or arista with egg. It's all about having a tale to tell about where you ate, and convincing yourself that nowhere else would have provided such delicious food. The food itself becomes a topic of discussion while we are eating.

I am one of 11 siblings, and communal meals have always been an essential part of our family's social life. When we were children, at 8 pm a shout would resonate around the house: "Si mangia!" ("we're eating"). That meant it was time for supper, and everyone would drop everything, whatever







they might be doing. The evening meal took a lot of organising because there were so many of us: 11 children between the ages of 1 and 20. We cooked together, helped my mother, laid the table, cleared away afterwards, and looked after our younger brothers and sisters. There was always plenty to do, every single day. Eating together as a family was non-negotiable. We would talk, laugh, and enjoy the food. Nothing has changed today, even though we no longer live at home with my parents. One of us is always there on a daily basis, usually several of us, and my mother, my father, or one of their children will cook for each other and eat together.

When I moved to Berlin 10 years ago, I wanted to experience something new, a different culture. That was the moment I became aware of the benefits of my home. I enjoyed Berlin and the culinary world it revealed to me, with all the different nationalities and dishes that I had never encountered before, but at the same time it whetted my appetite for home. I cooked recipes I had grown up with to remind me of my roots and to share my culture with my new friends. Cooking for other people started as a hobby, turned into a passion, and then became my job.

Professionally—but also privately—I've always been interested in visiting regional producers and understanding their craft to experience the quality of the produce. When buying ingredients, I try to seek out carefully chosen shops and businesses, and I use the supermarket as little as possible. Italy has lots of family-run businesses producing or selling food. These form the foundation of Italian food culture, which is why they are held in such high esteem. The stories and the people who produce our food are just as important to me as the products themselves.

LA POGGIANELLA

My grandmother (nonna) Marisa's house (which she acquired in the 1970s) was "our" place and the venue for family get-togethers. In the Carmignano hills, surrounded by olive trees and vineyards, we celebrate, spend days and evenings together, talk, laugh, and enjoy the cool breeze that wafts here on hot summer days (sadly, not always).

When I say "we," I mean my siblings, Giovanni, Simone, Elisabetta, Giacomo, Maria Rachele, Stefano, Giuditta, Ester, Francesco, and Tommaso; my parents, Roberto and Silvia; and all our partners and kids, of course. Every year at Christmas and Easter we are at least 40 people. On these occasions, Poggianella is the only place where we can all fit round a table (at least the adults). In summer we regularly spend Sundays together, baking pizzas in the wood-fired oven and cooking in the kitchen, setting up long tables on the patio to sit and pass the time together.

The photos for this book were taken here. It is somewhere we love spending time, a place associated with so many shared memories, where we make the most of every possible moment to be together.



