

Love
IN A
TUSCAN KITCHEN

SAVORING LIFE THROUGH THE ROMANCE,
RECIPES, AND TRADITIONS OF ITALY

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RECIPES, AND TRADITIONS OF ITALY

SHERYL NESS
— THE CHEF'S WIFE —



Rochester, Minnesota

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*For Angiolino,
taken too soon from this earth, who is an
angel watching over us now.*

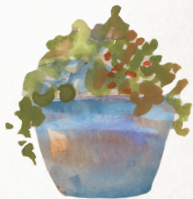
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INTRODUCTION

One of my early memories as a child was cooking together with my mom in our old farmhouse kitchen in Minnesota. The kitchen was where everything happened. She taught me how to cook traditional Midwestern comfort food on a regular basis. We had a small farm with land for growing corn, soybeans, and wheat, along with cows and pigs. In the summer there were always extra people around helping with the many chores of the season. This meant cooking for ten or more people some days.

Mom taught me the basics and then some. We cooked casseroles that could feed an army, baked bread, cookies, cakes, and roasted meats in the oven for hours. The most exotic thing we created was pizza from a kit that came in a box. The smell of the spice packet with oregano was one of my favorite parts of the pizza-making experience. I was her helper in the kitchen, mainly because I was the only daughter, but also because this got me out of doing the dirty work outside with animals and crops. I had two brothers, one older and one younger, who were outside every day with my dad caring for the farm.

My mom taught me that putting love and care into the food she created was important. This was how she expressed her love for others. This tradition was passed to me through her, and it is one of the reasons that I love the feeling and comfort

of spending time cooking and being in the kitchen. When in the kitchen, everything else fades into the background, including deadlines, stress, and worry. What I did not realize was that this love of food and cooking would reveal a path to another country and into a Tuscan kitchen, where I would fall deeply in love with the chef.

I grew up and married in my early twenties, which ended in a divorce ten years later. In my thirties, I was on the fast track to launching my career as a nurse and manager. It was what I was expected to do, especially since I did not have a family or husband. After all, what else could there be?

As I was sitting in one of my time management classes that I was expected to take as an up-and-coming leader in a busy academic medical center, I learned something incredibly valuable. Usually these things are boring and a bit of a waste of time. The instructor during the class detailed the steps of goal setting one day.

He said, “If you want something to happen, you can’t just think about it in your mind. It won’t just magically occur. You have to first write it down, and be very specific. This will make the goal real. You can read it and see it on the paper. Next you need to write out the possible steps to achieve your goal. After this, you need to share it with others. Talk about it openly with others who can potentially help you achieve your goal. If you never put it out there, it will never happen.”

For me this was a sort of epiphany. No one had ever told me that I could do something like this. Most of my goals in life so far had been at the direction or desire of others. It was like when I was a kid and finally learned that to catch a ball I had to keep my eyes wide open. Well, I thought about my goals, and I wrote down a few that I wanted to achieve in my career because, after all, that was why I was in the class.

Then, I thought, why not write a personal goal for myself? Something just for me. At the end of the list I wrote that day,

I wrote this one: take a trip to Italy. There it was in black and white. I had a very strong sense, almost a longing, that I needed to go to Italy. Perhaps this was because of the love and care the Italian culture also placed on food and cooking. I was intrigued by the stories I had heard from others. My hunger for living a full life was another strong motivator for me during this time.

So I did what the instructor that day had told me. I kept my list of goals close to me and started talking about them with others. One day I was having dinner with a group of girlfriends. Two of them had just returned from a hiking trip through Tuscany and mentioned how incredible it had been. As they described meeting the people along the way and the memorable food and wine they had discovered, my mind was racing.

I looked around and said out loud, “I’ve wanted to do this for a while now.”

This came out of my mouth at the same time as Ann, a good friend, said it too. We looked at each other with excitement and said, “Yes, let’s make a plan.”

Ann and I decided we would go the very next spring, so we had a few months to plan. This would be a fun adventure, but I had never done any serious hiking, so I started to train on a regular basis walking and taking long hikes on the weekend. While walking, I started listening to Italian podcasts to get some experience with the language.

The experience was everything I had been longing for and more. Do you ever get a feeling that you’ve been somewhere before? Or that you feel a strong connection to a place, but you’re not sure why? I have traveled many places in my life and had wonderful experiences. The feeling I had in Italy was something I had never felt before.

On that first trip to Italy in 2004, I kept thinking about how comfortable I was there. Everything around me gave me

a feeling that I was at home, from the foods to the people and the unique landscape. I was falling in love.

I returned home to Minnesota and could not get the memories and experience out of my mind. I surrounded myself with things that reminded me of Italy, including pictures of the landscape of Italy, pottery, shoes, and scarves. I could not get enough. I even took cooking classes and learned more about the language, cuisine, traditions, and wines. The more I discovered, the more connected I felt to my inner self. I loved the escape and creative experience of Italian cooking and would get lost in reading the recipes and discovering more of the culture and traditions.

Eventually, I returned to Italy a few years later. I was hoping that it would not disappoint me. I had such high hopes that I realized the trip was at risk for letting me down. I loved it as much as I remembered, perhaps even more. Some people have near-death experiences, but I had what I might call a near-life experience on that second visit to Italy.

This time, I was traveling with another good friend, Cathy, touring with a couple from California, Pam and Sam Hilt, who create small-group immersion tours to Italy. They showed us their Italy—the places you would never find on your own. One of my favorite memories was the experience and deep emotions felt while sitting in a little square, in a tiny little village, in the middle of rural Tuscany, sipping a glass of local Chianti wine while watching the final match of the World Soccer Cup in 2006 when Italy won over France.

Cathy and I had just eaten one of the best meals of our lives in a tiny little restaurant in the village of San Gusme. The soccer match was being projected on an old white sheet that was hung in the square of the village so that everyone could watch and celebrate together. The drama, energy, friendships, passion, and culture from the local people were just swirling around me. In that instant, my world had

changed dramatically. I wanted to somehow be a part of this culture, this place, and these people. It was a comfortable feeling of being at home.

After this experience, my mind was made up. I was tired of waiting for something to happen. I knew that life was short and that I was not about to let time just keep passing by without doing something to seek out my dreams. My philosophy about taking more chances in life changed. In my work as a nurse with people suffering from memory loss and Alzheimer's disease, I saw so many people as they aged and lost their memory and physical function.

How many times I heard these words from them, "I wish I had done more, took more chances, and not waited for someday to come along."

My life was missing something—true love and companionship. There were days when I thought maybe I should just give up and be happy with the status quo. I had good friends, a wonderful family, and a career. However, I wanted so much more. I felt as if I might never find it. That was until I followed my heart back to Italy for a third time in 2007. This time, Italy intervened and changed the path of my life forever.

This is my true story. It chronicles my journey starting in the year 2007 and continues for ten years. I first started writing about my experiences in Italy after traveling there. I did not want to forget any of the details of what I was experiencing. Then something incredible happened and Italy became my life. Eventually, this is where I found love and a life of complete contentment. So I kept on writing.

After a while, I started hearing this from others who knew me: "You need to write a book. Your story is incredible."

Each time I heard this, I thought that perhaps the story should stay with me, my own personal memories. I was not so sure I wanted to share this treasure of a life I had discovered.

People also remarked that I had been brave and taken a huge risk that they could never do. Then, I wondered, if I could write my story in a way that reflected the true experiences I had, it might inspire others as well. My story connects to the traditions, people, and foods I experienced along the way.

My hope was to encourage others to strive to find meaning and purpose in their lives and perhaps, in the process, discover what I had found—pure happiness. So here it is. My story of finding love in a Tuscan kitchen and the unfolding of the journey that led to a life-altering experience of living in a little village in Chianti.