

Ann Sorrentino, *From Ann's Kitchen: The Recipes and Reminiscences of Ann Sorrentino, A Treasury of Italian Ethnic Cuisine* (Elmhurst, IL: Bordighera and Fra Noi, 1997); 3-10.

## Introduzione

PAW, &OWaO&W

Editor's Note: Ann Sorrentino was born in Chicago in 1917 to Leonardo and Providenza Sodaro. She also shared her childhood with her sisters Christina (Dugo) and Mary Ann (Ewing) and her brothers Andrew and John. Luckily for us, she often wrote of her formative years on the West Side of the city, and of her memories of food and family. All personal references and recollections on the following pages and throughout the remainder of this book are hers.

by Ann Sorrenim\*0

To know our family in the years prior to 1927 was to know the true meaning of togetherness. Our family of seven lived in seven rooms on the third floor of a three-story building owned by my Uncle Tony and Aunt Carmela. They and their eight children occupied the two floors below, along with Grandma and Grandpa Sodaro. Later, they were joined by Aunt Carmela's mother, Zia Rosina, who arrived from Sicily. All told, we were twenty.

But that wasn't all. Uncle Tony also owned the house to the south of us, and there was easy access between the two. On the first floor of that building lived Aunt Carmela's sister, Marianna, with her husband Charlie Panzica and their four children. Should we have decided to get together for meals, we would have been a crowd of twenty-six. However, we limited such gatherings to special occasions and holidays, when we might have been joined by any number of my grandparents' other four children and their families.

One entered the two-story living area that my uncle's family occupied by descending a pair of stone steps into an anteroom. Immediately beyond that was an entry hall with a staircase to the right. In the hall was a wall telephone with a box in which a nickel was deposited with each call. The nickels were collected once a month by the "telephone man," who arrived with a little black satchel.

Beyond the entry hall was a family room the length of three rooms that was used for all family gatherings. The dining-room table was at the far end of the room, a pot-bellied stove with glass windows stood in the middle, while the front part was used as a sitting area. This is where, each Christmas, Uncle Tony set up an eight-foot table with his elaborate Nativity scene, which all the relatives came to admire. [end page 3] Beyond the family room was another hall down which were located the "storeroom" and the washroom. At the end of this hall was the kitchen, with its wood-burning stove, where all the cooking and baking were done. To the left of the kitchen was the work room, which held one of the first washing machines, along with an ironing board and all the other paraphernalia that one keeps in such a space.

Going up the stairs off of the entry hall to the second floor, the first thing that came into view was an altar made by my uncle. It was about four-and-a-half-feet high by four-feet wide and was always covered by an altar cloth. On it stood a tabernacle, statues, candles in their holders, and vigil lights. One never felt far from church. To the left was a parlor with a player piano. The rug was worn thin from young people dancing. Behind that was a seldomused dining room and then the bedrooms.

Once or twice a year, after a powwow among family members, a list of culinary necessities would be drawn up and sent off to Italy. After what seemed like an eternity, the awaited day would arrive along with its bonanza. There would be a variety of pastas packed in wooden cases,

each trimmed with a strip of royal blue paper. Then there were gallons of olive oil packed in cases; cheeses in rounds, blocks and cylinders; tuna packed in oil; and whatever else was on order. That night, the family members would gather to collect the cases of pasta that they ordered. The oil and other items would be divided up, and the cheeses would be cut into portions and distributed.

All these things became a part of the abundance of the storeroom, along with all the other food items that the women of our family worked year-round to prepare. There you would find jars of tomatoes, peaches, pears and candied melon rind; chunks of caciocavallo, provolone, Romano or Parmigiano; sun-dried tomato paste; rendered lard; sausages; dried beans; nuts; ripe olives packed in oil and stored in crocks; and sacks of flour and sugar. Homemade liqueurs like anisetta and rosolio, sweet muscatel wine, and biscotti were also there in readiness for guests or celebrations.

Thinking about the storeroom reminds me of the easy approach my parents and grandparents took to their informal meals. A piece of cheese (sometimes so fresh you could see the rich oils oozing from the crevices), a handful of ripe olives and a chunk of good homemade bread would satisfy their appetites completely. Sometimes a Sicilian green-olive salad would be added, along with a plate of sliced tomatoes. Depending on what was on hand, lunch

might be a dish of cooked greens or a few potatoes, diced and made into a delicious saffron soup. When eggs were plentiful, one egg per person would be poached in the soup. Sometimes the eggs would be poached in a delicious tomato sauce, then enjoyed with a thick slice of bread. Fresh fruit and homemade wine were always available as a sweet ending to these simple meals. In those days, entertainment was centered in the home among family members and friends. The best of times were had during festivals and celebrations, holy days and holidays that marched through the calendar year with comforting regularity. I treasure early memories of coming home from school to find my grandmother, mother and aunt deeply involved in preparation for the next festive occasion. These preparations carried with them a sense of joyous anticipation. The year was barely underway when preparations for Carnevale were in order. This came just before the season of Lent, which meant a long period of fasting and, in those days, abstinence from meat. So, naturally, before the fasting came the feasting. Incidentally, Sicilians do not say Carnevale, but Carnilivari, which is derived from the phrase "carnem levare," to take away meat. On the occasion of Carnilivari, the anticipated treat was homemade macaroni served with a special pork sauce, which invariably included little roll-ups made of pigskin enclosing a fragrant bread dressing. The macaroni for this dish was prepared from a pasta dough made with fewer eggs than our regular homemade noodles. Small portions of the dough were wrapped around the length of a reed-like stick that was lightly oiled until it was perfectly smooth. The trick was to deftly pull out the reed, leaving a long noodle with a hole through it. These were painstakingly made one at a time and hung to dry over a clean rod until it was time to drop them into boiling water. The taste of this macaroni, served with the rich meat sauce and distinctive pork roll-ups, was a taste treat to be cherished until the next Carnilivan.

On March 19, several weeks into the Lenten season, the Feast of Saint Joseph would come around. Because it was Lent, we ate no meat for this commemoration, but looked forward to the delicious specialties of the day, such as Pasta con le Sarde and other dishes using fish, vegetables and eggs. Another much-anticipated menu item was sfinge, sweet fritters made of yeast dough and drizzled with syrup, sugar and cinnamon. Although this was a simple

private celebration for the Sodaros, some Sicilian families brought the elaborate custom of the Saint Joseph's Day table with them when they came to America. These tables were an act of devotion presented to the saint in thanksgiving for favors granted. If the family was not wealthy, the food was obtained through solicitation, and preparations often started weeks in advance.

The festivities always began with a Mass in honor of Saint Joseph, after which everyone retired to the home of the host. Three young children, representing the Holy Family, knocked at the door and were invited to enter. The parish priest blessed all the food, and the Holy Family were the first to be served. This hospitality prevailed throughout the day, and everyone who came to the door was made welcome and fed. The splendor of the table often exceeded any holiday meal, even Christmas or Easter. A table set with the finest linens held a statue of Saint Joseph in a place of honor and an array of foods that included fish, beans, salads, meatless pastas, omelets, and vegetables such as eggplant, stuffed artichokes and vegetable fritters. Breads, often baked in elaborate shapes, were given a place of importance, and the table was completed with a display of choicest fruits and dessert specialties.

Saint Joseph's Day was followed closely by Easter, but not before a flurry of housecleaning, floor polishing and curtain stretching during the week before Palm Sunday. Then came Holy Week devotions and, finally, the Easter baking. My mother would fashion biscotti dough into the shape of dolls and arrange a hard-cooked egg on each one before baking them. She then decorated the whole creation with confectioners' icing and sprinkled each generously with colored candies. She also used raisins to decorate the face with eyes, a nose and a mouth. These were called *pupi cu'uova* (dolls with eggs) and were presented to each of the girls in the family. For the boys, she rolled the dough into long, thick strips and braided them into a chain with an egg nestled in each twist. These were decorated the same as the *pupi*. A very small boy would

have only one twist (with one egg) while older boys had two or three eggs. Papa, one of the "older boys," was always sure to get three eggs.

Summer brought its own diversions, with outdoor festivals sponsored by various religious societies. These always included processions through the streets with members of the society bearing a statue of Saint Rocco, or whichever saint was being honored. One of these feasts was held on Loomis Street between Polk and Taylor streets, directly in front of our house. I recall the carnival atmosphere that prevailed, with electric lights strung up and down the street, the merry-go-round hammering out its calliope music, the smell of Italian

ausa a roasting over ho

g t coals, and vendors selling watermelon, Italian lemonade and assorted roasted beans such as ceci, semenza and lupini. On these special summer nights we were allowed to stay up late, sitting on our front steps with neighbors and friends, taking in the sights and scents of the festivities. It also gave us a special vantage point from which to enjoy the sounds of the local musicians performing on a platform built across from our house in front of Mazzuca's grocery store.

One of the most anticipated festivals of the summer was the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Mother, held on August 15. This celebration was held in very high regard in Termini Imerese, Sicily, where my parents and grandparents were born. In Sicily, the feast was preceded by nine days of devotional prayer known as a novena. On the eve of the feast, the devoted not only abstained from meat, but also from any animal products such as cheese, butter and eggs. I remember clearly that on August 14 the adults ate only boiled macaroni served with a little olive oil and some of the macaroni water.

My older cousin, Augusta Dugo, told me that, before I was born, the family lived in another location east of Racine Avenue, between Harrison and Polk streets. Family members lived in three buildings that shared a common courtyard, providing even more opportunities for togetherness. Augusta told me that, in those early days, our grandmother set up a statue of Our Lady in the courtyard and, for nine nights preceding the feast, family and friends would gather in the courtyard, light candles before the statue and hold novena devotions. On August 15, tables laden with food were set up in the courtyard and everyone came to eat and enjoy. While the women socialized, the men played a few games of cards and bocce and drank of their best wines, comparing and judging the quality of different barrels.

Each season brought its own activities, and early fall meant a flurry of canning and storing away for the winter months. I particularly remember the preparation of tomato paste, which was dried and cured in the sun on clean wooden frames that my grandfather made from orange and lemon crates. The tomato paste was spread out on boards and covered with clean white netting to keep flies away. Several times a day, the netting was removed and the paste stirred. In the evening, the boards were brought indoors. The process would be repeated for several days until the paste was sufficiently dry. It was then stored away for the winter in crockery jars with basil leaves nestled in each jar and a layer of olive oil covering the surface of the paste. This extract of tomato was called 'stratu. Those who enjoy dishes featuring sundried tomatoes, currently so popular in Italian restaurants, can appreciate the special flavor

that made this long process worthwhile.

Later in the fall, the grapes would be delivered and the men would go about the business of making wine. The women would also get involved, however, preparing a sweet dessert wine from muscatel grapes that was especially delicious served ice cold over sliced fruits, or as an accompaniment to homemade biscotti.

Another concoction the ladies made with the grapes was vino cotto (cooked wine). This combination of grape juice and sugar was cooked very slowly until it became a syrup. It was used as a binding and sweetening agent for many special dishes, particularly in the fig and raisin cookies that were a Christmas specialty.

As Halloween approached, the children anticipated receiving treats, but not in the American tradition. The first day of November is All Saints' Day, followed immediately by All Souls' Day. I'm told that, in Sicily, children knew nothing of Babbo Natale or La Befana. Instead, on the night before All Souls' Day, they were reminded to recite prayers for the holy souls before going to bed and to hang a little shoe or small basket at the window. In the morning, the children would find small gifts from the holy souls, usually marzipan candies in various shapes, as well as oranges and nuts. I can remember only a few times when the marzipan candy made an appearance in our home, as the practice was somewhat lost here. It was kept alive more in the telling of it.

In Italy, the period of preparation for Christmas begins on December 13, the feast of Saint Lucy. Stalls are set up on the streets and in the piazzas to sell holiday items such as seasonal sweets and figurines for the elaborate Nativity scenes (presepii) that many families display. However, in most Sicilian homes, including ours, the Feast of Saint Lucy was a special observance, a day when bread disappeared from our table and in its place there appeared cuccia, pannelle and special

rice dishes. My mother, fearful that the children would cry for bread, would wrap whatever bread remained in the house in a large clean dish towel and carefully store it away in the bottom of our dining room china cabinet. In due time, we discovered the bread in its hiding place, but we never let on. We went along with the routine of the day, which was much more interesting.

On Saint Lucy's Day, the family abstained from any food that contained wheat flour, but there were still many special foods that were prepared to celebrate the occasion. One that I've already mentioned, panelle, is a pancake-like fritter that is prepared from ceci (chick-

pea) flour. It was seasoned with salt and parsley, boiled as for polenta, then poured on special wooden forms to cool and solidify. Finally, it was cut into small rectangles, deep fried in hot olive oil and served piping hot. In the morning, we would awaken to the smell of the pannelle, and my mother would have a pot of cuccia cooking on the coal stove. Cuccia is the whole kernel of wheat grain, soaked overnight and prepared as a cereal. (Although food made from wheat flour is prohibited, unmilled wheat is eaten.) Incidentally, the bowls of the cuccia were sweetened with vino cotto, the cooked grape syrup previously described. The entire day continued in this manner, with pannelle appearing in place of bread at every meal. Instead of the pasta we were accustomed to having for our evening meal, my mother would prepare Riso 'Ncasciato, a casserole of layered rice and vegetables.

As I grew older, I began to wonder why we ate only unmilled wheat products on the feast of Saint Lucy. I knew from my religious education that Saint Lucy was a virgin and martyr born in Siracusa, Sicily, who died for her virtue; but I only discovered her connection to wheat after many years of inquiry and reading. Legend has it that, at the time of her death, a terrible famine came to an end when ships laden with wheat miraculously appeared, then disappeared, after depositing huge quantities of the grain on the shore. The legend continues that the starving villagers did not wait for it to be milled into flour but boiled it and ate it as a pudding or cereal. After December 13, preparations began in earnest for Christmas. Most of my memories of the weeks preceding Christmas center on the family's religious observance of the season and the special kitchen aromas that, for me, spelled love and foretold of family gatherings.

Christmas Eve, la Vigilia di Natale, would begin with my mother serving our family of seven a meal around our kitchen table. We upheld the Christmas Eve tradition in which no meat was eaten. Fish in many varieties appeared: baked, fried, in pasta sauces and more. Usually my

mother served seven different types of fish, which she told us represented the seven sacraments.

We would also eat salads and vegetables, roasted nuts, fruit and wine. After dinner, we joined all the aunts, uncles and cousins at Grandmas house. When I reminisced with my cousin Augusta about these long-ago Christmases this is how she remembered them:

"After dinner, the whole family would gather at Grandmas. We would play 7-1/2 for hazelnuts that we picked out of the holiday nut bowl. We also played lotto for a penny a card,

and when we tired of that, there was another simple game called minigaddu. No one ever explained what it meant, but we began by having each player put one or two pennies in the kitty. Then a deck of cards was passed around the table face-up with each player exposing the next card. The game came to an abrupt end when the two of clubs appeared, and that player won the kitty. Towards midnight, Grandma and the aunts went into the kitchen to start preparing the midnight feast. They fried homemade sausage and made pizzas and mufuletti (homemade cheese buns). Just before midnight, Grandma would kneel before Uncle Tony's elaborate presepio and sing hymns of the Christ child. The whole family gathered around her and joined in the singing. When Uncle Gus was present, he would play the violin, which added a special touch to the spirit of the evening. After midnight, the ladies would put the food they had prepared on the table along with bowls of fruit, roasted chestnuts, and the special biscotti and cucciddati they had been baking for weeks. Shortly after this, the women and children would retire, but the men would play cards well into the night."

There were neither gifts nor a Santa Claus associated with these holiday gatherings. We were introduced to this idea at the parish church, where Santa would appear in the school hall with bags of candy, nuts and fruit for all the children.

Christmas Day meant morning Mass, followed by a fine meal of pasta and a special roast. Both the religious and secular celebrations extended until the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. But most of my memories revolve around the rituals of Christmas Eve.

Like most people of my time and place, my early life centered on family, the church and the neighborhood. As personal as my ethnic experiences are to me, I know they are shared by anyone who has lived where urban gardens were planted; where the aroma of simmering spaghetti sauce filled one's nostrils as one walked home from Sunday Mass; where grape arbors

flourished and wine presses were put to use in the fall; where grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles were always in view.

I continue the customs and food rituals of my childhood not only because they remind me of who I am, but also because, by some magic, certain days and certain dishes make the family of my childhood come to life in my mind's eye and I can almost feel their presence.