

PLOD ESSAY:

Italians bring their food culture to Wonthaggi

When I interview some of the Italians (an on going project), one of the first questions I ask is, “Can you remember anything special your parents brought with them when they left Italy for Australia?”

Yolanda Luna, who came from Tuscany just after the war to meet her future husband, immediately showed me a brilliantly shining copper saucepan with a wooden handle. It was large with a wide top and a narrow bottom.

“This is the polenta pan,” she said.

Then she picked up a beautiful old press for making ravioli, “You can’t do without this. It came with me,” she said.

From that point on, Mrs Luna, who had been reluctant to talk, kept up a steady stream of stories. Finally, she took me out to her garden to show me a whole hedge of artichoke plants full



of the delectable vegetable waiting to be picked and put up in jars with olive oil and garlic plus a little bit of fennel, chilli, thyme and, of course, some black pepper and white wine.

When the Italians first came to Wonthaggi in the 1920s, they must have found the food culture here fairly barren. Back then, the British were not known for their fine food. The Italians had to take matters into their own hands since nothing remotely Italian was sold in the food stores. In fact, it wasn’t until the late 1930s that some shops here began advertising, with great fanfare, pastas, sausages and tinned tomatoes ‘straight from Italy’ for sale.

Since many of the early Italian migrants came from subsistence farming in the Veneto, they knew how to fend for themselves. Everyone here knows that you can recognise where the Italians live (or lived) by the extensive (or the remnants of) gardens in the yards around town.

Lyn Chambers remembers their neighbours in the 1950s: “When we were in Mathew Street, we had Italians on both sides. Jack Campagnola became a good friend. We had a lawn out the front and when we went away for the school holidays at Christmas time, the grass would grow up too high, so Jack would come in with his

scythe and he would cut it for us. He couldn’t understand why we grew grass just to have to cut it; he had potatoes in his front yard!”

It is still a habit of the Italian men to spend time every day in their garden tending the vegetables, picking whatever is in season for the evening meal. There always seems to be tomato plants on the go in the gardens of the Calabrese from the south of Italy. The tomato season at the end of summer heralds the beginning of the seasonal calendar for *salsa di pomodori* is the constant vital ingredient in most dishes. Making the *passata* is a family event, extended family, that is. Everything to do with food in Italian life is about family and celebration.

Lucia (Lucy) Caile Hamilton, who is from Recouaro in the mountainous North, lit up when she began telling about the place food took in the social fabric of her family and the Wonthaggi Italian community in the 1920s:

“When we had visitors or a family get together we had piles of food. First course is risotto and the women in those days used to cook it in the big pot over the fire. In the fireplace! Then you’d have meat or chicken or roast with vegetables and polenta.

“We’d have wine with our meal, too, home made wine from our own grapes. We’d end the meal with cheese. Oh, there was so much to eat. If we didn’t have risotto, we had pasta first. No, we had soup first! Minestrone, tagliatelle, or chicken soup with the boiling chickens. We used to love the feet. They were nice and chewy. I remember my father used to eat the head. Oh, I didn’t like that too much.

“Say the chicken was a fairly old chicken, we always boiled it to make soup. A good idea is, when you boil a chicken, if you got some beef bones to put in it to boil it together it gives it a different taste. When you’ve made your broth, you let it cool and take the beef out and combine the meat with oil and vinegar and salad onion and [*she makes a sound meaning it is delicious beyond words*]. You didn’t waste anything. We had our own chooks. And Dad had a cow. But we didn’t have our own pig, not really.”

Irma Coldabella Storti, also a Veneto, talked about cheese making, which happened every week: “Everyone had cows and we used to make this cheese and we used to do it in groups. Like say it was my mother’s turn to do it for a week, so all the milk would go there and she’d do

it, and maybe the week after it was at someone else's house. So all the houses were just mixed with people. We were all friendly with everyone. We'd just go into everyone's houses as if it were ours."

Many families had Cantinas, usually under the house, where the homemade food was kept: the cheeses, all the preserves, the salamis and *supressas*, the wine, and in a secret place, the grappa. Lucy Caile remembers:



"My father had a cantina and I have one under my house. Dad kept wine, salami, cheese. Pickled vegetables, *gardiniere*, preserved stuff. Antipasto, which is salami, onions, olives. It was a stinky place because it smelled of cheese. You know how cheese smells of rotten feet. Mum used to have scales in there. I don't know why. Families got together to make cheese. They used to make the butter. They had the churn. There were people who knew exactly how to make the salami. It's a lot of work. They all got together. They might get a calf for veal, but not for salami. Salami is only made out of pork and it must be lean. They would buy a pig from a farmer. And make it up to use for the family. The men made the salami. The women cleaned up as usual. It was terrible to clean up. Yeah, they would cut it up because salami is not all the pork. It's only the best part of the pork. That's how it should be. Some of the meat that is not so good, they made the sausages, and they made another one where you could put even the skin in it. You made it into a sausage, but when you use it to eat, you have to boil it. It's called *cotechini*. Or *cotesine* in my dialect. I can't remember what they called the salami! I'll tell you another thing. Lard. You know the fat of the pig. They have it in the pigs and you salted that and you cooked with that. So every bit of the pig was used. And the trotter, the pigs trotters, I remember you used them and ate the head as well. Just like the chook. You cooked all of it, every bit..."

Irma Storti thought the best time was the pig killing: "The men would kill the pig and hang it up high. They would only do it in the winter months: June/ July. We would rear the piglets

into pigs. You partnership this pig with someone and then it comes time to kill it. The two families would get together to do it. Of course, friends would come and help. So it was altogether. There'd be wine, and then the polenta. It would be like a festival sort of thing. Pig killing meant a get together. And always a bit of a feast. We did the work and then the food would be payback. And the kids would always be there and we would have the time of our lives along with the others. You mince up all this meat: one's for the sausages, ones for the salami or *supressa*, ones for the *musetto*. The sausages that were made, we used to put it in the skin of the pig itself. We used to clean the intestines and put the sausage meat in through them because they were small. My mum used to pick up the intestines and clean them, but I have never done it. You're doing all this meat and then you put them all away in their different categories. We used to hang them in the cool *cantina* to let them dry. For the Veneti, the women made the cheese, the men did the meat and the wine. Well, when the pigs were being killed the women always helped because there was a lot of work to do there. We would clean up and cook and divide out all the stuff and put it away. It's a lot of work. So much work! It's not worth it anymore, except for the social value. You can buy it all now so easily!"

The Northerners love their polenta and the Southerners their tomatoes, but all Italians eat pasta. Many people brought their pasta makers with them when they came, but Lucy made her own just like her mother did:

"I made the noodles on the big table with a rolling pin my father made. The pasta would fit all over the table... you'd roll it out, and then you'd cut it in thin strips and separate it and move it about all over the table so it would dry.

"I make gnocchi. Risotto. Lasagne or noodles. Tagliatelle. You cut the pasta real tiny and you use them for soup. If you want them for pasta then you cut about an inch wide. You make your dressing. We used to make the sauce with *conserva* [tomato puree]. We made the *conserva*. It's an awful lot of work.



And we have said nothing about Italian coffee, the best coffee in the world! Next time.

- C. Landon

