



No Oranges After Dinner or Italian Food Lessons in Three Parts¹

By: Jesse Dart

Part 1:

The house is painted pale yellow and there is a metal gate that rolls on wheels, the sound of which signals that someone is home. There are mature trees out front and along the side of the garden, raspberry bushes, flowers, a few herbs.

The kitchen is the hub of the house. Painted a similar yellow to the outside, it also has dark wood cabinets and a light that isn't very flattering. Outside the kitchen windows, you can see some young fruit trees that my father-in-law planted not long ago. They are small, but some of them bore fruit last year, an apple here, a pear there. There's some grass, but it struggles to turn green or lush given the large trees that shade it most of the day.

It's lunchtime and inside the kitchen, we each take our places around the table. We always sit in the same spots, decided the first time I dined at their house. This is your chair, Jesse, you will not sit in any other chair at lunch or dinner. The same goes for when we eat at the nicer, larger table in the living room. I have my spot, that's where I sit.

Eating fruit after lunch and dinner is a normal, everyday occurrence in Italy, especially in my wife's family home. There is a fruit basket on the table, filled with seasonal choices (minus the bananas) and out in the garage is a basket filled with fruits that are either ripening, or, excess that doesn't fit in the basket in the kitchen.

One day after lunch, I reach for an orange. Everyone's faces turn white.

“What”? I ask, unknowingly aware of the faux pas that I was



committing. “Why is everyone looking at me?”

“You can’t have an orange after dinner. Why don’t you have a mandarin?” says my wife. Everyone agreed, yes, a mandarin was a much better choice for after dinner fruit.

“Why can’t I have an orange?” I said, “it’s more or less the same thing as a mandarin, just bigger.”

“We don’t eat oranges after dinner. Bananas either. Apples, pears, cherries and plums are all ok - mandarins are fine too. Oranges and bananas though are too heavy on the stomach after a meal. They block your digestion.”

Val’s father is looking at me from across the table. Smiling, he picks up an apple, washes it, then proceeds to use a knife to cut off the skin and eat it. He shares some with me - the outsider, the foreigner - somehow saying, “look, this is how you do it.”

I have a lot of things to learn.

Part 2:

Same table and I’m sitting in my spot - actually, we are all in our prescribed spots. The table is different, but the fruit basket is still there. Val’s mom has made a fantastic dish of spaghetti with langoustines. It’s my first time to have it and I ask Val if they eat it often, “not really, I think it’s because she likes to show off for you.” Somehow, the plain and simple foods of the region seem to disappear when I’m there. Anyway, here we are at the table and I have a heaping portion on my plate, four large langoustines from the Venetian lagoon - probably bought that morning - stare up at me. I ask, “Where’s the Parmigiano?”

Blank stares.

Val: “You can’t put parmesan on your pasta. There’s seafood in it. You don’t put parmesan on seafood pasta.”

Everyone nods in agreement, even if they didn’t completely understand what she said.

“Oh, really, why’s that?” I ask.



“You just don’t, everyone knows that. Even if you order it at a restaurant, the waiters know not to bring Parmesan. It’s just the way it is.”

Just the way it is has a place at the Italian dinner table. Food traditions are not just recipes, but unwritten rules of dining that, as an outsider, I’ve been introduced to since I married into an Italian (Venetian) family. And now, after a few years, I get it. These are just my observations, of course -it’s different everywhere in the country- but from north to south you will find these folk beliefs, these bits of wisdom that are passed through generations so that no one knows, really, where they come from. Italy is full of passed down lay gastronomic wisdom, and it’s these everyday occurrences that form the basis of a great cuisine. They are related to health, to digestion, to flavor combinations that work together, to seasonality, to timing, to patience. It’s about making sense of your food choices - of being presented with a never-ending series of options, looking at those and having some concepts that help guide you. No oranges after dinner, no Parmesan on your seafood pasta are just two examples. No cappuccino after 11am, and definitely not with your lunch or dinner, is another.

Part 3:

Val and I are at home in our London apartment and some friends have come over for dinner. We made seafood pasta with clams, pasta alla vongole. It’s a recipe that we feel we’ve mastered, difficult to mess up, so we make it often when guests come over and we’re unsure about what to cook.

One of our friends asks if we have any Parmesan.

Val smiles and says, “of course we do - I’ll just grab it from the fridge.”

Even if we’ve carried these rules with us into our own lives, into our home, we bend them - we’re flexible. We keep what my wife calls a “Venetian kitchen abroad”. A kitchen connected to traditions but also to the present moment. From the ingredients that we bring back from trips home to the recipes that she knows by heart, we’ve recreated something that has roots, but that also works for us in a foreign country. Isn’t this what most people do? You reach to the past in order to make sense of the present?

Traditions and rituals start at home and for us, they start in the kitchen.



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I was thinking about some of the rules I've learned in the few years I've been part of this family and how I've adopted them into my own daily patterns. I notice now if people don't play by the (non) rules - if someone at work drinks a cappuccino with lasagna and eats a banana afterwards. Perhaps it's my training in anthropology that makes me pay attention, maybe it's because my own habits are changing, or maybe it's because many of the rules I've learned just make sense.

Later that evening, after everyone has left I gently wash an apple, pull out a knife and start peeling.

“Dining al fresco”



“A glimpse outside, from the kitchen”



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“Seasonal fruit basket (minus the bananas)”



Photo credits: Valeria Necchio.