

Local author charts recipes and traditions of Italian immigrant life with Si Mangia!



By Brock Weir

Luciana Longo stood off to the side as she watched her parents perform a ?ritual? she grew up with.

Her mother gathered mason jars and got them ready for the big moment, while her father set the traditional tables and machinery for the task ahead.

It was Labour Day weekend, a traditional time for Italian immigrant families to gather and make their stores of tomato sauce for the year ahead. It is the perfect time of year when the tomatoes are at the peak of their flavour, and each family has their own tradition on how to achieve that perfect blend.

But, as Luciana watched the scene so familiar to her unfold, she leaned in to get a closer look.

?I noticed my parents were getting older and if they were to pass away I really wouldn't know how to go about making tomato sauce from Step A to Step Z because even though I had participated in this ritual for so many years, I would usually wake up when they had already started.

?In that moment, I noticed this was not just about making tomato sauce; it was about their deep sense of connection with the land, and I wanted to capture that.?

The result is ?Si Manigia! Memories, Lessons and Recipes from Italian Immigrant Life,? a new cookbook by Ms. Longo, a first-time author.

As a child, Ms. Longo says she grew up with a mother who loves to cook. While spending time in Italy with her grandmother, she learned how to make some of the more traditional Italian dishes, pasta from scratch, and old recipes handed down orally from generation to generation, but it took her a long time to realise these traditions needed to be set down on paper.

Children of Italian immigrants don't grow up eating a lot of junk food in the house so, when she was a teen, she freely admits to becoming a bit rebellious with her eating habits, turning to Chef Boyardee, for instance, to stave off hunger ? ?to Italians, eating anything out of a can is a foreign concept? ? but came back around to healthy eating in her 20s.

?As I started to record the recipes, memories started to emerge of just being the child of Italian immigrants and most of those involved either the preparation, cultivation or preservation of food,? she recalls. ?I started to record some of the memories that came out of that and while I did so, a deeper layer emerged in that I saw themes in these stories. The themes led to my dividing the book

into 10 chapters, each centred on a particular lesson that emerged.

?They all revolved around the joys of community, interdependence, and the themes also revolved around finding gratitude in simple things. Most Italian immigrants came here to escape the poverty of their childhoods. They grew up in postwar Italy and had humble means when they got here, but in the stories I found they really found a sense of joy in simple things like family gatherings and family dances, and different rituals involving the celebration of food.?

Once a year, for instance, Ms. Longo says her parents hike into the local forest gathering edible mushrooms for the day. The bounty they bring home turns into a celebration, inviting friends and relatives over to share in the harvest.

One year, Ms. Longo says she attempted a vegetable garden and, looking back she realised she didn't actually share the tomatoes with anyone, whereas her mother would have taken the best of the crop, loaded up her basket, and loaded down the neighbours with fresh, vine-ripened goodies.

?I realised as I was writing the book that there is a life lesson for me,? she says. ?I started to do that and made a conscious effort to connect with my neighbours as my parents did. The core message I wanted to deliver was the sense of community I think many of us long for, especially if we grow up in a suburban environment and our lives revolve mainly in the private realm. I hear a lot of people longing for a sense of community and I think the proliferation of social media is symbolic of that.

?I have had an amazing response [to the book] from my family and some of my relatives were actually in tears. One of my cousins thanked me for capturing their childhood because they could relate. The interesting thing is many of my readers are non-Italians and they could also relate. I think from a social history perspective, the story of the Italians also captures the spirit of a time when people lived in villages and people from other countries could relate to these practices.

?Some of the recipes might seem a little daunting, but most of the recipes are fairly straightforward. I think one of the beauties of Italian cuisine is it is very simple to prepare. Homemade pasta takes some time to learn, but the rest is really quite simple and based on a few fresh quality ingredients. I hope anyone who feels they would like to experiment with Italian cuisine will feel inspired to do so.?

Si Mangia! is available now at www.lucianalongo.ca or via amazon.ca.