

Béchamel sauce

Who really knew the truth about lasagne, that it is like sex, or so they told me? This never occurred to me when mother insisted I prepare lasagne her way: cheap mince, home brand Bolognese sauce, dried pasta sheets and a packet sauce mix. It was perfunctory in the extreme. Her dogmatic rules were suffocating: ‘Do it my way or don’t do it at all’.

Everything changed when I ripened into adulthood. I was ready to experiment; to learn what it was about lasagne that stimulated the juices.

Chef Tino’s two great loves were food and opera. His knowledge of cuisine was infused in passionately chaotic restaurant kitchens from Amalfi to Verona, and many a colourful trattoria in between. His love of opera he attributed to his nonna. Cookery classes were effervescent and flavoured with his seductive accent. Only he could say ‘Béchamel Sauce’ and make it sound like a naughty weekend. He breathed life into the most basic of ingredients. He brought *everything* to life, including me.

‘A plump tomato is like a voluptuous woman,’ Chef Tino crooned, as he gently cupped it in his hand and caressed its soft skin. ‘*Sì*. Close your eyes and breathe in pure ambrosia. Feel warm Mediterranean sunshine on your naked skin. Can you feel it *señorita*?’

I breathed deeply on the calyx and felt the warm congeniality of an al fresco meal beneath the shade of wisteria and grape vines. Yet, when I opened my eyes, I was still in the kitchen of rainy London’s La Trattoria School for Aspiring Chefs.

The pulpy flesh offered no resistance to the chef's knife, and seeds and juice as red as passion spilled out across his fingers. The dimple in his chin danced as he laughed.

'This is life,' he declared exuberantly. 'We are like Bellini, Puccini and Verdi, except we create with textures and flavours; we embellish with colour and our high notes are the dish's piquancy.'

He quaffed his Chianti, wiped away its mulberry-red traces with the sleeve of his whites and reached for a bunch of impossibly-green basil.

'Shut your eyes again. Tell me what you see.'

'I can smell the basil,' I said.

'No, no, no. Tell me what you *see* in your mind?' He placed the herb in my hand. His touch was warm.

'I see emerald green basil leaves.'

'Press the leaves,' he urged, 'then talk to me.'

I crushed the leaves in my hand and inhaled an aroma so intense, I gasped.

'I see wooden vats brimming with sun-warmed tomatoes. There are beautiful, olive-skinned women with untamed, dark hair escaping from headscarves, and gorgeous young men in white vests. They are laughing. Flirting. Old ladies watch on, shrinking into the blackness of their clothes like dried-up apples and yet they are alive. They too are laughing, with toothless mirth.'

'*Sì, señorita, sì. Molto bene,*' said the chef, His hands conducted his passionate approval. 'Breathe it in. Hold on to that image.'

‘We must see food like musicians see their instruments. Take a violin for example,’ he said, extending the overture. ‘It is not wood and strings; it is day and night, joy and sorrow, love and hate. In the hands of a maestro, it speaks. For us, tables are the stages on which we celebrate the culinary arts and our dishes are our prima donnas.’

‘Listen,’ he said one day. ‘Listen to *La Traviata*.’

Sounds of mighty choruses and beautiful arias saturated the kitchen and whetted our appetites for culture and cuisine. Chef Tino conducted proceedings with his wooden spoon while his dark eyebrows rose and fell with his extravagant gestures.

‘Do you hear?’ he asked, excitedly. ‘Alfredo does not say to Violetta “I love you a lot”. He is not limp lettuce! He is confident and expressive. He sings “*Di quell'amor, quell'amor ch'è palpito. Dell'universo, Dell'universo intero—Love, that's the pulse of the universe, the whole universe*”’. That, my friend, is passion! Italians do not cook, we compose. We blend and conduct. *Siamo Italiani*—we sing *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* from the depth of our boots. Verdi, pasta, Puccini, Chianti, Rossini ooze from our pores.’

The music wore down the shackles of inhibition and I found my voice. *Madama Butterfly* and *The Barber of Seville* were my new companions. While Maria Callas and Mario Lanza stirred my soul, I crushed peppercorns that conjured the spicy heat of street fights in Naples. Freshly-grated parmesan hinted at mellow sunshine on fields of Tuscan sunflowers, and chopped rosemary was as fresh and frisky as *La Dolce Vita*. But it was the garlic that made me tingle.

¹ ‘Un di, felice, etera’ from Verdi’s opera *La Traviata*.

‘You must slowly and carefully undress each clove, like a beautiful woman,’ Chef Tino said. ‘Peel back its papery cloak to reveal the potential within. Its raw pungency will tantalise you like the Sirens mesmerised sailors, but you must resist. Be patient, the climax awaits; that delicious moment when your tastebuds are titillated beyond endurance and you experience culinary ecstasy. *Bellissimo.*’

I felt longing and molten heat and kettle drums in my core.

‘Creating lasagne is like making love; master the foreplay,’ he would entreat as he winked at me. ‘Rush *la preparazione* and the outcome will be disappointing but gradually *accelerando* and you will be left shuddering with delight.’

‘Don’t beat the sauce, caress it,’ Chef Tino said. ‘You are marrying butter, flour and milk. Let them play with each other until they are in perfect, blissful union. Once you have conquered the basic sauce, you can add your own notes. It is your *cadenza*, your moment to improvise; enjoy.’

When I was a child, I wasn’t allowed to play the piano by ear. Mother said I had to follow sheet music. I only knew how to do as I was told. To now trust my own instincts required a leap of faith.

‘Confidence will come from being open to different influences, to experimenting. Be effusive, be *espansivo*,’ the chef said while his whole body urged me to let go, ‘but always remain true to the essence of the dish. Bolognese must be rich and sensual, pasta al dente, and béchamel sauce fit for the gods!’ he said, as he kissed his fingertips and raised them to Edesia.

I marvelled at how my chosen blend of ingredients sang on the palate. I felt the passion of Puccini. The baton was in my hand; I was

composer and conductor. The harmony of textures and flavours was simply heavenly.

Tino and I lingered after classes and steeped our relationship in the warmth of the kitchen, oblivious to the torsoless legs that hurried along the pavement visible from the high windows of La Trattoria's basement. We didn't notice that winter boots morphed into summer sandals and back to shoes, or the blush-pink spring blossoms that floated down the steps, to be replaced by desiccated leaves in the reds, oranges and yellows of children's autumn-tree drawings.

We mulled over food and wine, fresh hopes and stale dreams, sweet loves and bitter losses. We knew when it was time to make our first lasagne together. Prep was completed. Intoxicating layers conjoined. Every sense was attuned to the maestro: his heavy breathing, earthy scent, reassuring touch and honeyed mouth. We feasted with insatiable appetites and sublime crescendos. *Nessun dorma. Nobody shall sleep.*²

In the final act, an unpredicted storm shrouded London. Given the ensuing gridlock, I sought shelter at the school instead of joining the endless shuffle of commuter headlights edging nowhere. Flickering spotlights of lightening guided my steps down to the basement entrance of La Trattoria. Thunder that reverberated like bass drums muted my footsteps and kept my unexpected arrival a surprise to Tino...and Portia.

² Puccini's aria 'Nessun Dorma' from the opera *Turandot*.

The anticipation of spending an impromptu evening with Tino turned rancid in an instant. I could not look away from the entanglement of body parts that folded into one another and rose and fell on the stainless steel workbench like animated lumps of proving dough. They gorged on one another. I lost my appetite. Operas seldom end well. I should have known that *la prima uomo è un bastardo*. The curtain fell and I retreated into the wings, gagging on bile and salty tears; the milk of human kindness curdled.

In the safety of my own kitchen, I stared longingly at the lasagne Tino had prepared for me. In a flash of anger as hot as an Habanaga chilli, I swept the dish off the table. It smashed, leaving shattered fragments strewn across the floor. The rich-red ragù splattered across cream cupboard doors, leaving stains like shadows; the scars of Bolognese angst.

Blobs of béchamel sauce lay inert on the cold slate tiles, like lumps of pasty cellulite on a stainless steel workbench, pale and unpalatable. Who really knew the truth about lasagne?

Or tutto finì—All is finished.

³ The conclusion of Violetta's death aria from Verdi's opera, *La Traviata*.