



My Family in Bologna



Bologna, Italy is known as the gastronomic capital of Italy, and it has become quite popular as a tourist destination. But, when I first visited Bologna there were very few tourists, and I got to see the city through the eyes of an Italian family who had lived in the Emilia Romana region for generations. Marcello and Raffaella Tori, along with their daughter Francesca met me at the market in the city center after I had emailed them begging for a one day cooking class. Marcello had replied to my email saying they didn't normally do one day classes, but instead gave week-long tours and classes in the region. However, due to my persistence, he agreed to a one day class, and the rest is history.



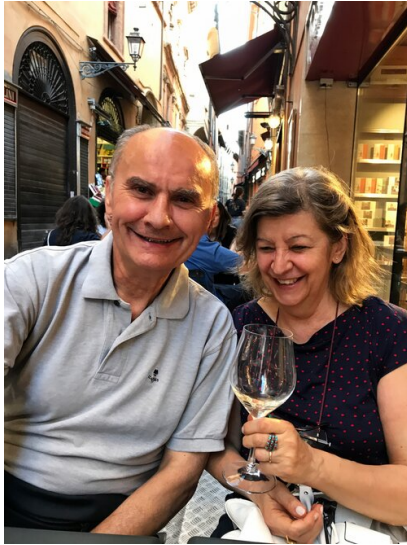


After the market tour that was so well guided by Francesca and her mother Raffa in their charming Italian accents, we went to their apartment where Marcello was waiting with a bottle of wine to drink while we prepared the ingredients we had purchased that morning. We cooked for hours, hand rolling pasta made from eggs with yolks the color of a sunset. Raffa used a pasta board that had been passed down from her grandmother and a wooden rolling pin that was nearly as long as she was tall. They taught me to carefully roll the dough, turning it slowly as the edge was tucked over the rim of the table while I pressed against it to hold it in place. When the sheet of pasta was so thin I could see light through it, we began cutting it into small squares for tortellini. The stuffing was a mixture of mortadella and prosciutto that was cured in the Emilia Romana region, as well as pork loin, and parmesan cheese. Raffa used a meat grinder that was clamped to the table to grind all the meats, which was blended with the cheese, some eggs, and a grind of nutmeg.



We formed tortellini for hours, and after a while I finally got the hang of it. While we were making tortellini Raffa made the broth that would cook our delicate pasta. Marcello told stories and poured wine, bragging on his wife and daughter, and his love for Italy. He described his favorite regions and the food he preferred in each. Raffa often rolled her eyes at his stories, but always with a sweet smile. She told me Marcello couldn't cook a thing, but could talk forever and eat anything she made. Once our food was prepared, Marcello set the table with embroidered napkins and hand painted plates that I could tell had been filled with years of delicious food. Raffa served an antipasto platter of cured meats, cheeses, and olives as we drank lambrusco wine that had been made just a few miles away. The tortellini in broth was served next while Francesca grated fresh parmesan over each bowl. I had never had anything quite like it. Tortellini is always meant to be served in broth as a soup, and never with heavy sauces like we eat it in the U.S. Raffa told me I shouldn't make it unless I could get the authentic ingredients at home, because it would never be right with any substitution. I really don't remember much about the rest of our meal that day because the soup had such a powerful impact. I do remember Raffa served semi-fretto for dessert with peaches we had found in the market, and Marcello insisted on a glass of grappa before I left.

The Toris and I became very good friends that day, and we kept in touch for years. Francesca came to visit me a year later and we taught many cooking classes in Tulsa and Dallas, hand-rolling pasta and making hundreds of tortellini for days. We also made pasta bolognese, using the recipe passed down from her grandmother. She even brought me a rolling pin she had carried on the plane and an apron with my name embroidered on it.



Since that memorable day in Bologna I've been back two more times to visit the Toris. We cooked other dishes from the region, and I spent more than just one day with them. Marcello took me to Faenza, a small city nearby that is known for their beautiful hand painted ceramics. I've bought many pieces from his favorite artist, and I think of the Toris every time I eat off those plates. The last time I visited, I took my son, Mitchel. He and Marcello became fast friends, and we went to the Ferrari factory where Mitchel test drove a red convertible. He still tells me it was one of the best days of his life. He also learned to make tortellini in the Tori's home, and quite honestly he did a better job than I did my first time. That trip was special because I got to introduce Mitchel to the family I had grown to love.





Unfortunately, their son, Tomaso had passed away that year and I could see the sadness on their faces. Someone had painted a beautiful portrait of Tomaso that hung on the Tori's wall in the living room where we ate dinner. Marcello told Mitchel many of the same stories I had heard over the years, as I listened and smiled. And, of course he served us grappa, but one that was much more elegant than my first visit. We were family now.



On my last visit to Bologna I saw the changes in the city. Many more tourists walked the streets, stopping to stare into the pasta shops and butcheries that had been there for decades. Marcello told me it was bittersweet to see the progress the city had made. He and Raffa are much busier now with their tour business, but their city isn't the same quiet and peaceful place they were used

to. I was particularly sensitive to Raffa with her tragic loss of her son, and she was growing more tired every year. Recently, Francesca emailed me with photos from her wedding. The photos showed a very proud Marcello as he held the arm of his only daughter. Francesca is no longer working with her parents' business, and is now a yoga instructor, which Marcello told me was also bittersweet. I know someday I will reunite with the Toris again. And even if Raffa and I don't cook together, we'll catch up on new stories, as well as the old ones. I treasure the lessons I've learned, and hope to pass on not just their recipes, but more importantly the lesson of preserving family traditions. Bologna will forever hold a place in my heart.



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