



Vecchia Cucina: Perfecting Recipes on the Two Sides of the Pond

BENEDETTA GRASSO (February 02, 2010)



An interview with Riccardo Costa, a writer, producer and amazing chef who has recently published his book "Vecchia Cucina: Antique Original Family recipes from my Grandma Secret Kitchen."

I sat down with Riccardo Costa, a young writer and filmmaker whose knowledge of food and Italian



culture have influenced his career abroad and whose passion for cooking and his accomplishments as a chef have lead him to be the finalist on a Food Network Show and ultimately to publish a book "[Vecchia Cucina](#) [2]", a collection of recipes from the Bologna's area.

Riccardo is in his thirties, has an amiable expression and speaks enthusiastically of all his enterprises, interests and ideas. He quickly jokes about things and presents himself in a very down-to-earth way; he's genuinely passionate about what he does and he has found ways to link together the different fields that fascinate him.

He has always been incredibly busy, teaching classes as well as assisting famous directors and actors in their projects (in the past for example he worked with Spike Lee). His vibrant social life connects him with the most exciting social circles in New York, a city where he has lived for thirteen years and that he loves and knows deeply.

Sipping a coffee at a Starbucks in Chelsea, we amiably conversed about his book, reflecting on the geographical context, his experience as an Italian on an American TV show and eating as a cultural phenomenon.

Tell me something about your new book...

It's about 145 pages long and there are more or less 300 recipes inside, divided in appetizers, main courses, desserts, etc.

This is a book I've been working on for five or six years, but I was never satisfied with it. It required a lot of personal research, studying my family recipes; the hard part was that my family is incredibly jealous of those recipes - they basically don't know I've written this book. This is one of the reasons why I decide to write it in English and publishing it here.

So if you wrote it in English, did you keep in mind that your readers would be Americans? Did that change or influenced your writing?

Yes, obviously I did, since it would have made less sense for me to write about Bologna's cuisine explaining to the people from that area in Italy and yet for Americans I have to contextualize the dishes more.

My writing process went like this: I copied my grandma's recipes along with the most important and famous recipes from Emilia Romagna and when I went back home for the holidays or during the summer I would spend my days at the culinary library of the [University of Bologna](#) [3] - one of the most famous in the world - and my goal was to find stories linked to the dishes, to explain the origins of some particular food. Like, for example, eggplant, which was brought in Italy, in Parma by the Arabs.

How did you go from writing the book to publishing it here in the US?

I decided to self-publish the book. Through my experience on Food Network, on the show "[Ultimate Recipe Showdown](#) [4]", I learnt that cooking books have to be sponsored by celebrity cooks or celebrities in general and I can't do that; so for me the first step has to be to sell a thousand copies and then publishers will come to you. Luckily things are looking good and I will meet with [Barnes and Nobles](#) [5] and [Borders](#) [6]. As far as I'm concerned, now though, I'm already happy since the book is doing well on [Amazon](#) [7].

Did you ever feel "lost in translation"? Did you have to change the culinary terms adapting them to English? How did you balance the two cultures?

It was hard especially in regards to measures. It's almost impossible to get the exact conversion of measures when you go from kilos to ounces; you always have to choose, to readjust the numbers. At first I tried to guess, by intuition but then I decided to prepare all the dishes in my own kitchen here in New York, using the American measure system and by doing that I could evaluate what was better, what tasted better. Sometimes it just depends on the dish.



Can you find all the ingredients, for example, here in New York?

I believe that you can find 99% of them. There are places like Chelsea Market or services such as Freshdirect that have plenty of variety and the quality of the food is exemplary. Also there are many Italian food stores.

Did the book sell particularly in New York where more “foodies” live?

It definitely sold a lot in New York but in Chicago as well. Now I’m expecting to reach a broader audience through my appearance in the show “Ultimate recipe Showdown” on [Food Network](#) [8]. I filmed the episodes six months ago and on March 14, 2010 they will be aired. At that point there will be more exposure. I’m also building a website and shooting web cooking videos that you can also download on your Ipod.

Is cooking an integral part of your daily life in New York?

Yes. I always prepare elaborated dinners and lunches and it’s a priority in my social life.

Did this influence your relationship with the city, your experience here?

It definitely made it more personal. New York is a city where you meet a lot of people very fast and sometimes just superficially. It’s hard to maintain friendships and relationships and if you decide to open the doors of your house to someone and you offer him or her what you prepared and made with your hands, not something you just got from a take-out or a deli, then you build stronger bounds with people and communicate something more real.

We all know Italian cuisine is well represented here in New York. Do you feel that specifically Bolognese cuisine is represented as well?

Actually, probably not that much. There are one or two restaurants that have dishes from that area but I don’t find them to be that great. You see, I’m a purist and I feel – although we are moving in that direction with places like [Otto](#) [9] for example – that even the best Italian restaurants in the USA prepare their food mixing different traditions or changing, even slightly, some dishes to make them more appreciable by Americans. It’s understandable, since you want to have people coming in, but I believe sometimes you have to take a risk, and if you open a restaurant you should be, as I was saying, a “purist” and educate your public, not talk down to them

Being a “purist” and a perfectionist did you enjoy taking part to an American cooking show, Ultimate recipe Showdown?

Yes, a lot. My plan is to audition for more shows and culinary contests, one for Fox and the other still on Food Network. I’m excited about them and my friends support me and give me ideas.

Do you believe these kind of shows are well done? Or, maybe even because of your nationality, did you sometimes feel like you were “better”?

I actually strongly believe that they are very well done. I was much more of a snob before or when I just started, but then on the Food Network show I really admired how professional everyone was and the people I worked with knew what they were talking about and in terms of food were really prepared and educated.

Did you notice a big difference in your approach towards food between you and the other contestants?

I’m one of the four finalists and well...yes there is a difference in the approach. I guess I went for the more sophisticated dishes preparing a “crostino rinascimentale” while the other contestant prepared a pizza with aragosta...but they are just different approaches; that’s all.



By the way, since we are talking about shows on TV, are you familiar with the MTV show Jersey Shore and the debate it has stirred regarding the representation of Italian Americans and in a way Italians in general on TV?

Yes, I am.

Being the only Italian on an American cooking show, did you ever feel like you were forced into a stereotype by the marketing campaign of the show either as a selling point (The Italian cook) or an exaggeration of certain aspects?

I guess we will see now with how they edit the trailers, teasers and so on and I don't really know what they added to the actual footage to make it more entertaining. As far as I'm concerned they were very professional: they just wanted pictures of me as a baby, a child, pictures of my family and of Italy, but not aimed at a "stereotype", just focusing on how to tell my life story.

In any case this is a cooking show and people assume that there is a whole deal of respect for Italian cuisine. It's hard to make fun of it.

Great. Have you ever perceived to be treated differently than the others, even in a positive way?

No, not necessarily. The only thing is that I'm wondering if they will add subtitles or not when I talk, because they do that when people have even just an accent. I'm curious, since I've lived in New York for thirteen years and my English should be fine.

Going back to the book, what did you like the most about writing it?

It was a way to bring up many memories, things you just take for granted. You grow up with your grandma in the kitchen, tasting and smelling certain foods and then these feelings and flashbacks come back to you years later.

In Italy food is more than just "eating" is part of the culture, it's in itself culture. What you eat is important, you don't eat just because you're hungry but to fully appreciate the taste. Behind every little gesture in a recipe there is a story, a tale, a lot of hard work. It was very emotional to relive some of these moments by writing the book.

Do you think this is just an Italian privilege to have so many memories, family rituals around the table and traditions shaped by the food culture or do American families have a similar experience?

I think they do. I think they obviously have something similar and they are actually more open to go in that direction nowadays. It's not a food culture that is as developed as in Italy but, for example, even because of the financial crisis, more and more people want to cook at home. Also, if you look at the Food Network you'll see how their audience has radically changed in the past years. Ten years ago nobody but a lonely housewife would watch them and now the spectrum of people is much bigger. Eating is becoming a cultural phenomenon.

What's the dish that is most connected to you particularly, to your personal life and culture?

Tortellini in brodo (in broth). Made with my family's original's recipes, handmade dough and filling. For me it's a dish linked to the idea of perfecting yourself. See, we have this book in my house on which my family has written every Christmas for the last fifty years, adding comments, ideas and notes to the tortellini's recipe. You have to look through the previous comment to make something better the next year, generation after generation.

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[4] <http://www.foodnetwork.com/ultimate-recipe-showdown/index.html>

[5] <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/>

[6] <http://www.borders.com/online/store/Home>

[7] <http://www.amazon.com/Vecchia-Cucina-Antique-original-grandmas/dp/1449930085>

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