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The Food of Love Cookery School

Written by Nicky Pellegrino

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The Food of Love Cookery School

Nicky Pellegrino



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Food of Love

Luca Amore thinks he knows how the next eight days will unfold, give or take a few minor variations. Things have a habit of going the way he plans them.

Right now he is making sure everything in his kitchen is arranged exactly how it should be. The first day's menu is chalked up on the blackboard and there are four clean aprons hanging on the hooks beside it. Plates are stacked; cutlery and saucepans are shining. He has scrubbed the wooden boards where dough is kneaded and rolled; laid out a tray of almond cakes as a welcome; thrown open the shutters to show off the view.

Generations of Luca's family have cooked in this kitchen in the house at the top of Favio's steepest flight of steps. The view from its windows has barely changed in all that time. Pink and gold buildings climb a rocky spur, the cathedral at their centre. Drying laundry flutters on terraces. Date palms reach for the sky.

Since he was a boy, this view has been Luca's to enjoy. His grandparents lived in the house and often his mother brought him here, stopping on the steps to catch her breath, complaining every time.

Now his grandparents are gone and the place is his. At first Luca thought he might live here instead of in his mother's house. He began to renovate, replacing cracked tiles, freshening walls with a new coat of paint.

It was the kitchen that brought him up short. With each small thing he changed, he felt he lost a little more of the Amore women who had been there before. The modern six-burner stove, the long granite counter, even the dining table he stripped and restored; all these things pleased him yet somehow undid his connection with the past.

His nonna, countless great-aunts and distant cousins: some of his best memories were of seeing them gathered here, working dough with cool, capable hands; noisy, wide-bodied women, always bickering over something, the best recipe for a pasta al forno, or some half-forgotten slight. They filled this kitchen completely.

To the very last, his nonna loved to cook, bent and old but still conjuring the flavours from food. Luca missed her and the others. As he modernised the room, replacing and reshaping all that was familiar, he searched for a way to brighten his memories of them.

For over ten years now, Luca has run the Food of Love Cookery School. His guests come from all over the world to make his nonna's dishes, spiced with saffron and cinnamon or flavoured with the chocolate that Favio is famous for. Luca teaches them all the most important things: how to tell good olive oil from bad; how to know fake gelato from the real thing.

In early summer he takes them to collect capers from the flower-covered bushes that grow wild from the town's rock walls. They taste the local Nero d'Avola wine and caciocavallo cheese. They shop for sardines or sweet Pachino tomatoes at the market in the morning, and sleep each night in the Amore family's beautiful old house.

Season to season the schedule may vary, but for the most part every course is the same. People come together, food is cooked and friendships are formed. On warm evenings they sit out on the terrace sharing limoncello and life stories. There are good times; there is laughter.

Then, on the final day, suitcases are packed, farewell messages written in the visitors' book and promises made to keep in touch. A week or so later, a flurry of thank-you cards arrive; often e-mails too, with photographs of the dishes they have re-created at home. But the messages soon stop coming and Luca is too busy with his next group of guests to mind.

Over the years, so many of them have faded from his memory. He can't put names to faces in his photo album. The ones that do stick tend to be the complainers, or the guests whose food intolerances make menu-planning a mission. Those who have squabbles and dramas; who lose handbags and hats; or suffer heart flutters that turn out to be severe attacks of indigestion.

Luca loves his job. Cooking is a joy and he is always interested to meet new people. But it is also a pleasure when everyone is gone and he is left alone. He enjoys mornings like this one, with the house empty and his. Once he has restored order, if there is enough time, he likes to make a few cavatelli just for himself, feeling the dough beneath his fingers; deftly pressing it into pasta seashells on the wooden board the way his grandmother taught him.

Today there is no chance for that. The new guests aren't far away – four of them, all women. Luca checks his notes and memorises their names. From England there is Moll, who says she is passionate about food, and Tricia, who works as a lawyer. From America, Valerie, who is the eldest. And all the way from Australia, Poppy, who says she has never visited Italy before and will eat anything but offal.

Luca assumes this new group will be much like all the rest. Still, he is aware there are things he cannot tell from the forms they have filled in. He doesn't know exactly how much experience each has had in a kitchen; if they will understand how to knead dough with the heels of their hands until it is firm enough; if they will have healthy appetites or worry

about their waistlines; if they will drink just one glass of wine or a whole bottle at dinnertime.

There are other, more important things about this group, but Luca doesn't realise it yet. Right at this moment, all four are standing by a baggage carousel at Catania airport. Moll, Tricia, Valerie and Poppy. This is what Luca doesn't know about them.

One is hiding a secret. Another is hoping to find love again. One is desperate to escape her life; one has already managed it.

As he sets out mineral water, a bottle of Prosecco and five glasses, Luca has no idea how different this cookery course will be to any that has gone before ... or how it will change his life entirely.

Welcome to the Food of Love Cookery School in the lovely baroque town of Favio in southern Sicily. Here is your apron, your cavatelli board, your maps and itinerary. Don't worry, there is no need to take notes; the recipes will be given to you at the end. Just relax and have a good time. Your holiday is beginning ...

Poppy

This is going to be an adventure – the first of many, I hope. My life has been short on adventures so far. I've been busy doing the things I ought to and not what I really wanted. But that's changed now. This is my time.

Why did I choose to come here? Well, my family on Dad's side comes from Sicily. My grandfather left when he was a child but has never lost his accent or his love for the spicy sausage he could never persuade us kids to eat. He was born in Ortygia – we'll be going there on day four, I think. Oh yes, I've been desperate to come to Sicily for ages, but it's such a long, expensive flight from Australia and, well, Brendan didn't want to.

Brendan's my ex-husband. Our divorce was finalised three months ago. It was all very amicable. I pretended to be sad because he seemed to expect it, but the truth is it wasn't so hard. We don't have kids, not even a cat. The house sold quickly, we divided up our stuff, split savings and shares – our divorce was as unexciting as our marriage really. We were together for ten years, and in all that time I never travelled anywhere on my own. I've been feeling a little nervous, to be honest. Being in a strange country – it even smells different, doesn't it? – well, it's wonderful but a little daunting, too.

Oh yes, go on then, I'll have another glass of wine. I know it's getting late, but I'm too excited to go to bed yet. And it's lovely out here on this terrace. What a view! I love how

everything is crumbling and hundreds of years old; completely unlike Sydney, which seems so organised and new in comparison. You don't get that same sense that there may be a lovely secret waiting to be discovered around every corner.

Do you know anyone who's been on this Food of Love holiday? No, me neither. I booked it on the spur of the moment because I liked the look of the website. It was a risk, I guess, but it seemed like the only cooking holiday in this part of Sicily. I read Luca's blog, watched the clips of his cooking classes, and one night, after a few Chardonnays, I decided to go for it.

Dishy? Yes, I guess he is. It's a pity he wouldn't stay and have a few drinks with us, but I suppose he must do so many of these courses. And it's great that he leaves at night so we've got the house to ourselves, much more relaxing somehow.

I'm pleased there's only the four of us, too. A bigger group would have been impersonal, don't you think? This way we'll all get a go at making the dishes he shows us. Not that I'm such a great cook. I love eating, and that's why this holiday appealed to me so much – it's a chance to taste real Italian cooking rather than the samey stuff they serve up in restaurants; tomato sauce slopped over everything, all the flavours so totally expected.

I'm planning to do a lot more travelling now I'm single again. I'd like to backpack round India, visit Vietnam and China, South America; so many places. But this holiday seemed a wiser choice for my first trip, a safe way to make a fresh start.

Day One

(i) The joy of shopping

Poppy woke early and completely. Jet lag, she supposed. Twenty hours on a plane, then dealing with the time difference between here and Sydney, was bound to take its toll. As she sat up in bed, her head throbbed a little and she remembered all the wine she had drunk last night and wasn't surprised.

There was no point trying to get back to sleep. Yawning and stretching, she climbed out of bed. She went first to the window to take another look at the view. It was still fairly dark, but the cathedral opposite was lit, and around it street lamps gleamed brightly enough for her to make out crooked rows of buildings crowded shoulder to shoulder on the rocky outcrop. This town must be built on two steep hills, she realised, with the main street running along a gully between them.

As soon as it was light enough, she would go out and explore; get some exercise. Last night's welcome dinner had been lavish. Luca had escorted them to a nearby restaurant, where he took charge of the ordering. To begin with there were *arancini*, moist balls of rice filled with meat and cheese, fried until they were golden, and so delicious Poppy hadn't been able to resist reaching for more. Next came a ceramic pot filled with a steaming soup of broken spaghetti and leafy greens, and assuming it was the main course she had taken a second ladleful.

It had turned out there was more to come, much more. A sweet-sour caponata of aubergines, courgettes and celery; meatballs cooked with lemon leaves, dense pork sausage bright with flecks of chilli. The only thing to do had been to keep on eating. This morning a long walk up a steep hill was definitely in order.

Poppy dressed quietly so she wouldn't wake the others, although the walls of the old house were probably thick enough to muffle the sound of her moving around. It was 6 a.m. and the sky had lightened. She laced up her sneakers, tied back her long dark hair and was ready.

At first her pace was brisk. She ran down the flight of steps, continued past last night's restaurant, now all closed up, and turned into a narrow lane. There she was faced by yet more steps, these leading all the way to the cathedral. The climb forced her to slow, and by the time she reached the top, she was breathing hard. Resting for a moment, she turned and scanned the houses on the hill opposite until she found the one she had just left, glowing rosy pink in the first rays of the early morning sun.

Favio was a town of stairways, she discovered. They snaked between the houses and linked the winding alleyways. If she took a walk like this one every morning, she would be much fitter by the time she left Sicily in nine days' time.

Her route took her past two more churches, three elderly men gathered on a bench for their morning conversation, a couple of skinny dogs and an old woman harvesting something from a large bush growing from a rock wall.

'*Buongiorno, signora,*' Poppy said (she had been having weekly conversation classes). 'What are you picking?'

Straightening and smiling, the woman held out her basket and Poppy saw that it was filled with hundreds of small green buds.

'What are they?' she managed to ask.

The woman spoke a great jumble of words that Poppy's

ear wasn't practised enough to separate and understand.

'Sorry, my Italian isn't very good,' she apologised.

Smiling again, the old lady offered her a handful of the fresh green buds. Looking at them properly, Poppy knew exactly what they were – capers, just like she bought in jars at home, except these were fresh and firm.

After that, she noticed caper bushes growing wild everywhere, cascading over walls and pushing their way from crevices. She picked more of the buds as she went, filling the pockets of her hoodie. Later she might ask Luca how best to preserve them.

Poppy thought about Luca as she walked on up the steep incline. Last night she had found him intriguing. Over dinner, while everyone else was talking about who they were and where they came from, Luca had given away very little. He was born in Favio and studied for a while in England – that was all she knew. But how old was he? Did he have a partner? Were there children? He was careful not to touch on it.

Once he had left and they were sitting out on the terrace, Tricia had said she thought he was dishy. But it wasn't his looks that were striking, not really. Didn't most Sicilian men have dark hair, brown eyes and tanned skin? It was something in Luca's manner, the way he looked you in the eye when he was talking, yet seemed reserved at the same time.

Poppy glanced at her watch. There was still an hour before he would arrive to prepare their breakfast. She was heading downwards now, back towards the cookery school, and wondered if she might find somewhere open for a coffee along the way.

On the main street, there were signs the town was waking. A white van with leafy bunches of sprouting broccoli strapped to its roof was making a delivery. There were groups of schoolgirls in burgundy uniforms; a nun wearing sunglasses; men smoking cigarettes. People hurried past dressed for their

offices, and Poppy felt that delicious freedom of being on holiday whilst others had to work as usual.

At the end of the street was a piazza, where she found a bar with tables set out beneath three tall date palms. She smelt coffee and the sweetness of pastries. Inside, a man in a business suit was taking a few moments to drink an espresso and scan the day's newspaper headlines. Poppy found a table in the sun and practised pronouncing her order: *'Un cappuccino e un cornetto con crema, per favore.'*

Of course, the waiter spoke English. Everyone under the age of about forty seemed to. Still, she didn't regret all those conversation classes she had taken. They were part of the build-up to her trip, like reading the guidebooks and planning a holiday wardrobe; a way to stay excited.

Poppy finished her milky coffee and her pastry, but no one came out to ask if she might like anything else. She suspected she could people-watch from this table for half the day without ordering another thing and no one would try to move her on. It was so different to her favourite café at home, where there was always another customer hovering for a table and the staff were friendly but brisk.

Back in Sydney it would be evening by now, and people would be eating dinner or gathering in bars. Brendan might still be working, though. This was when he liked to call potential vendors or drop fliers in their mailboxes. Poppy wondered how he was getting on without her. There had been a couple of offers under negotiation, a new listing that looked likely; still, generally things quietened down in the real-estate business this time of year.

Most people she knew had been amazed when they'd continued to work together even after their marriage ended. But there didn't seem to be too many issues so far. The things that irritated her about Brendan were the same as always. He could be too pushy; he had a tendency to gloss over the negatives of a property and a habit of never taking no for an answer.

When they had parted, she'd suggested breaking up their business partnership too, but he had been persuasive. 'We're a great team; you know that. We might not want to live together but there's no reason why we shouldn't work together, is there? Two are better than one. Just give it a go.'

He had even dropped her off at the airport on Friday, kissed her on the cheek and told her to have a good trip. And now there were to be days away from work, no clients calling at crazy hours, no Brendan at her side running her schedule; days free of all her usual responsibilities. She felt almost giddy with relief at the thought of it.

Poppy considered ordering another coffee, then changed her mind. She was hot and sweaty from her walk. Better to take a shower before Luca came with breakfast.

Already the climb up the steps back to the house felt a little easier. She called out a greeting as she opened the front door. 'Hello. Anyone up yet?'

'Oh, thank goodness.' It was Tricia, one of the English women. 'There's been a disaster. I've forgotten my hair straighteners. No, don't laugh, I'm serious.'

Last night, Poppy had noticed how poised Tricia seemed, with her sleek chestnut hair and lovely clothes. Now she made a different picture, her bathrobe sloppily fastened, skin all shiny, hair a frizz.

'It's the humidity,' Tricia complained, running her fingers through it. 'It's gone completely feral. Please tell me you've brought some hair irons.'

Poppy shook her head. 'Sorry, no, I haven't. Can't you pull it back into a ponytail?'

'That's what I was going to do, but it needs to be straightened first.' Tricia's voice rose. 'Oh bugger. You seemed like my best bet. I'll wake the others and see if either of them has a pair. Pray for me.'

Iron her hair? Poppy was on holiday and wasn't planning to bother ironing anything, even clothes. Marvelling that Tricia

was so concerned with her appearance, she showered quickly, dressed in light linen and was the first one down to breakfast.

Luca was there already with the moka pot on, laying out pastries and sliced fruit. He looked up and smiled. ‘Good morning, did you sleep well?’ he asked, his English gently accented.

Sliding on to a stool beside the counter, she reached for a glass of orange juice. ‘Yes thanks. I expected to be awake half the night after that huge meal, but it was fine. In fact, I felt hungry again when I woke up!’

The moka pot bubbled and hissed. ‘That’s good,’ Luca told her, lifting it from the stove. ‘It helps to have an appetite on this holiday. But don’t worry; we eat a lot, but we walk too. You won’t have a problem.’

As he was pouring the coffee, Valerie and Moll appeared. ‘Good morning,’ they chorused. ‘Yes, coffee would be lovely. Oh, and look at these pastries. How delicious.’

Valerie took the stool next to Poppy, spreading a napkin carefully over her lap. Poppy thought her one of those women who must have been a real stunner once. There was still a fragile beauty left in her face: she had high cheekbones, soft blue eyes and silvered hair caught up in a tortoiseshell clip. And there was a gracefulness about her too. She made a stark contrast to Moll, with her clumpy shoes and sensible haircut. Still, the pair of them had been getting on well enough to seem like old friends

They were exclaiming over their breakfast now, and full of curiosity. What was in those little half-moon-shaped biscuits? Oh, almonds and candied orange. What about the ones that looked like mini Cornish pasties? Chocolate and beef ... no ... really?

Poppy tasted one. The flavour was unusual: there was the bitter dark crumble of chocolate, a hint of spice and also an earthiness that might have been the meat but she wasn’t certain.

‘They’re called *’mpanatigghi,*’ Luca told them. ‘And they’re part of our Spanish heritage, it’s believed. But we’ll talk more about that when Tricia is here.’

‘Oh, she’s upstairs having some sort of hair crisis,’ said Moll, who had one of those voices that tended to carry. ‘Valerie lent her some straighteners, but apparently they’re not the ones she likes, so she thought she might be a while. She said to start breakfast without her.’

Luca shrugged. ‘No problem, there’s plenty of time.’

When she did appear, Tricia was transformed. She wore a silk top and matching bracelet in a shade of green that set off the chestnut of her now-smooth hair.

‘Good morning, everyone.’ She ducked her head, as if embarrassed. ‘Aren’t I awful? I’m so sorry to have held you up. I’ll just have a quick espresso and then be ready to go.’

‘No hurry.’ Luca poured another coffee and offered her a plate. ‘Take a few moments to have something to eat.’

‘Yes, see if you can guess the mystery ingredient in these,’ said Moll, pointing to the *’mpanatigghi.* ‘I bet you never will.’

Tricia shook her head. ‘I’m not a cake-in-the-morning person. Just some fruit for me, thanks.’

Moll frowned. ‘You really should try one, you know,’ she urged. ‘They’re quite different to anything you’ll have eaten in England.’

Tricia shrugged off her words. ‘Just coffee and fruit,’ she insisted, an edge to her voice.

Apparently unfazed, Luca passed her the plate of sliced fruit and returned the moka pot to the hob.

‘Before we go to the market, I want to talk to you about the flavours of Sicily,’ he told them. ‘Don’t make the mistake of thinking Sicilian food is the same as Italian. We’ve been invaded so many times, by the Greeks, the Arabs, the Spanish – all have left something behind to enrich our cooking. Nevertheless, it is a simple cuisine. We eat what comes

from the land and the sea; and we care about the ingredients as much as the finished dish.'

'It was the Arabs that introduced the spices, wasn't it?' Moll guessed.

Luca nodded. 'You'll find we use cinnamon and cloves, almonds and pistachios; we mix fish with cheese, which horrifies the rest of Italy. We cook with fairly limited ingredients but still dishes vary from village to village, from family to family. What I will show you is the way the Amore family have eaten for as long back as anyone knows.'

Poppy was beginning to feel uneasy. For the first time she wondered if a food holiday had been the smartest idea. These other women seemed to know a lot more than her. What if she couldn't keep up?

'So Sicilian food is essentially *cucina povera*, right?' Moll remarked now, confirming Poppy's suspicion (she'd never even heard the term before).

'Yes,' Luca agreed, approvingly. 'It comes from the poor people making do with whatever they had. There is also the richer, more sophisticated cooking of the aristocrats. The divide between the two remains even today – many of the old people in Sicily still won't cook with cream because of it.'

'Were the Amore family rich or poor?' Tricia wondered.

'They certainly weren't wealthy,' Luca told her. 'But my nonna was a curious woman and far more open-minded than most. She loved to cook and liked nothing better than discovering new recipes. Many of the dishes I will show you come from her.'

'What's the most unusual thing you're going to teach us?' asked Moll.

'I think perhaps the chicken with chocolate and Prosecco,' Luca told her. 'But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Today we're going to make a simple pasta dish with a sauce flavoured with the local sausage and a little cinnamon. For the main course, the recipe will depend on what looks good at the

market – baked anchovies, stuffed cuttlefish or swordfish, with vegetables and lots of good olive oil. So are we nearly ready to go shopping?’

There was a rush to find cameras and handbags, to apply sunscreen (Poppy) and lipstick (Tricia). Valerie turned back at the last minute to change her shoes and Moll wavered over whether she should take a wrap.

Luca waited patiently at the door until everyone was ready.

‘Here we are at last,’ Tricia said.

‘Yes, so sorry to keep you,’ Valerie added, her accent clipped Manhattan.

‘There’s no hurry,’ Luca reassured them. ‘In Favio we don’t move all that quickly. We take our time to enjoy life.’

Outside, the heat was building. Together they strolled up the shady side of the main street, past the shabby baroque palazzos Poppy had noticed earlier that morning, and through a maze of narrow lanes filled with curious little shops and hidden-away restaurants until they reached a small piazza with a market at its centre.

This market was a makeshift affair, and lively. Between canvas-covered stalls were flat-bed trucks piled high with wooden crates of vegetables, and caravans serving snacks of piping hot *arancini*. Shoppers haggled with traders, or clogged the narrow spaces between the stalls as they gossiped with friends and neighbours.

Everyone seemed to know Luca. Stallholders called greetings; women kissed his cheeks; men slapped him on the back. ‘So you’ve got yourself another group of foreigners? All women again, eh?’ they joked. ‘How do you do it, Luca?’

Poppy was dazzled by the noise and colour. This seemed such an exhilarating way to shop for food. She had always hated pushing a trolley up and down the soulless rows of fizzy drinks and instant noodles in her local supermarket. Here, everyone seemed happy and the place vibrated with life.

To her right, an old man was standing behind hessian sacks of dried beans and lustily singing his favourite arias. To her left were fishermen wielding cleavers and dealing with the morning's catch. There was the metallic smell of meat, the brininess of seafood, and many of the vendors called out to them, offering morsels to taste.

'Try my artichoke wine, it is good for the digestion.'

'No, no, *bella, bella*, come here, taste my salami made from my own black pigs.'

'Try my olive oil, my Ragusano cheese, my sweet Pachino tomatoes; the best you'll ever have, I promise.'

Valerie had wandered over to examine a stall piled high with tomatoes of every size and shape. Moll was busy photographing jars of fat green olives.

Poppy heard a slight lull in the shouting and noticed the heads of several of the male stallholders turn. She wondered why; then saw for herself what they were staring at. A woman, very slender, very beautiful, wearing a short dress with perilous stiletto heels, steering herself directly towards Luca, a wide smile on her face.

'*Ciao, caro.*' There was a whisper of scent and a tinkle of gold charms on a bracelet as she took his arm and kissed him on both cheeks.

'*Buongiorno*, Orsolina, how are you today?' he replied, brightly.

'I am well, as always.'

Turning to face the group, she kept her hand on Luca's arm. 'Good morning, everyone,' she said in sing-song English. 'Welcome to Favio.' She spoke as if the town belonged to her, gesturing with her free hand towards the disintegrating palazzos and the cathedral high above them.

Once the proper introductions had been made, Orsolina turned away and began talking to Luca in quiet, rapid Italian.

Tricia raised her eyebrows and whispered to Poppy, 'Hey, so what do you think? The girlfriend?'

‘Maybe.’

‘Well, if she’s not his girlfriend, then she wants to be. I can always tell.’

‘She’s very striking.’

‘Yes, but overdone. Those shoes are Manolos. Bit much for Monday morning at the market, don’t you think?’

‘How does she manage to walk in heels over these uneven flagstones?’ Poppy wondered. ‘I guess women like her are born able to do it.’

Luca was trying to finish the conversation. He pointed towards the fish stalls, saying something that provoked a frown, and then Orsolina shrugged, throwing her hands in the air. ‘OK, OK, I will see you this evening, then,’ she said in English, more loudly. ‘Come early if you can.’

‘Definitely the girlfriend,’ Tricia decided, but Poppy wasn’t convinced.

Once they began to shop, Luca moved quickly and seemed certain about what he wanted. The swordfish were in season, very fresh, and he would like some steaks sliced thinly so he could prepare them the way his nonna preferred. He would take some sausage flavoured with fennel for the pasta dish; vegetables for a sweet-sour *fritteda*, and that would be lunch.

As they left the market, laden with bags, they passed a stall heaped with nothing but odd-looking leafy greens with curling pale green tendrils.

‘Luca, what are those?’ asked Poppy.

‘Ah, they are the vegetable you had last night in your soup. They’re called *tenerumi* and they come from the tops of our Sicilian squash. Very refreshing to eat, and good for you too. You won’t find them anywhere but here, I think.’

‘Do they use the whole plant in the soup? The stalks, leaves and tendrils too?’

‘That’s right. Perhaps I’ll buy some another day and show you. But right now we have enough food. It’s time to go and begin cooking.’