

CLASSICO E MODERNO

ESSENTIAL ITALIAN COOKING

MICHAEL WHITE

and **ANDREW FRIEDMAN** | with a foreword by **THOMAS KELLER**

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Photographs by Evan Sung

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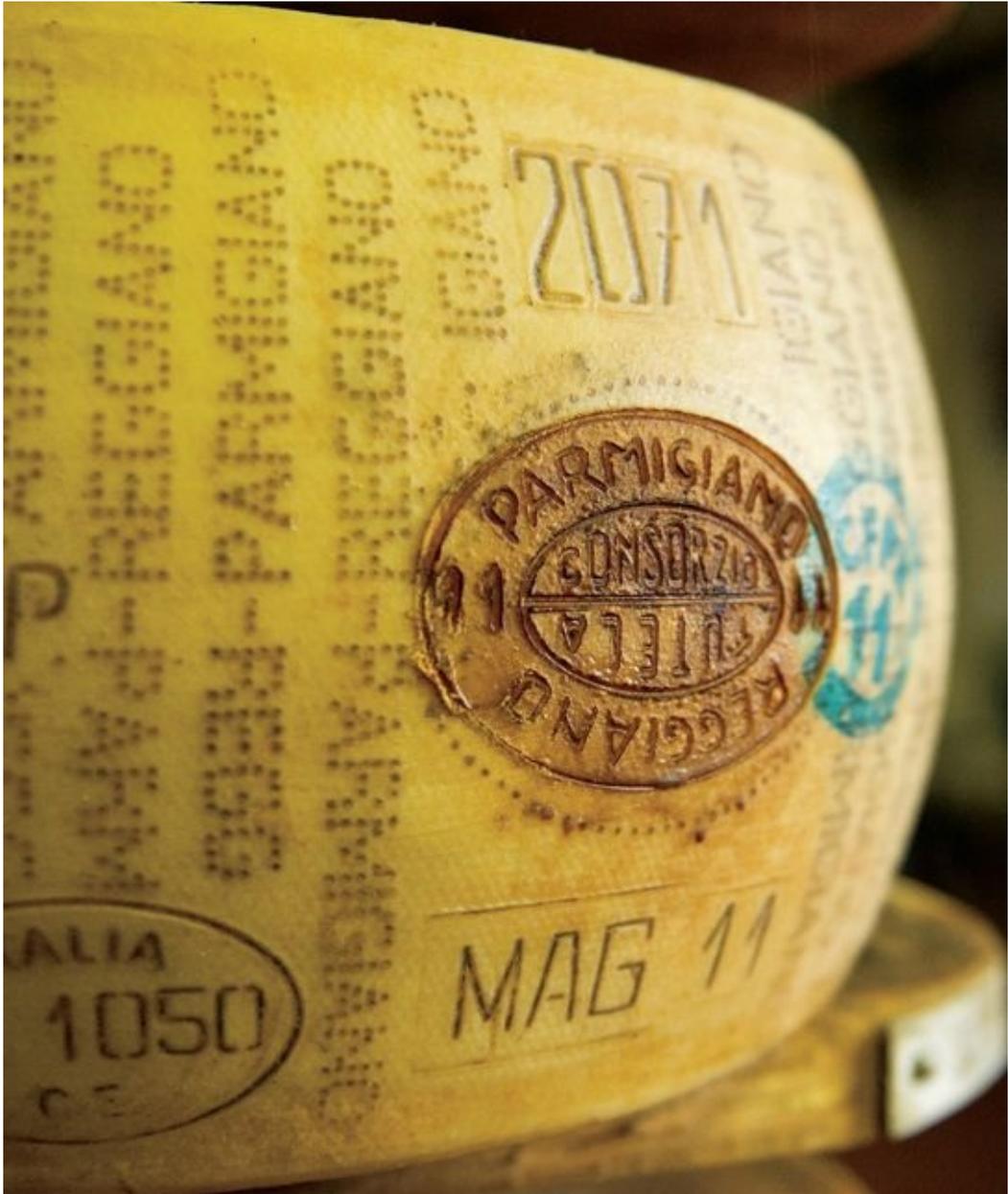
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I dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, Mary Ann,
who taught me to appreciate the fine things in life;
to my father, Gerry, who showed me how to achieve them;
to my wife, Giovanna, who makes it all possible and shares every moment with me;
and to my daughter, Francesca, who makes it all worthwhile.



CONTENTS

Foreword by Thomas Keller

Introduction

Cooking from This Book

Notes on an Italian Pantry

CLASSICO

PER COMINCIARE | To Start

ANTIPASTI E INSALATE | Salads and First Courses

PIZZE | Pizza

ZUPPE | Soups

PASTA E RISOTTO | Pasta and Risotto

PESCE E FRUTTI DI MARE | Fish and Shellfish

POLLAME E CARNE | Poultry and Meats

CONTORNI | Side Dishes

DOLCI | Desserts

MODERNO

SALADS AND FIRST COURSES

PIZZA

SOUPS
PASTA AND RISOTTO
FISH AND SHELLFISH
POULTRY AND MEATS
DESSERTS
BASIC TECHNIQUES AND RECIPES

Acknowledgments

Sources

About the Authors





FOREWORD

At its best, food is a journey.

For those of us who have made the kitchen our professional home, the journey is one of discovery, both of ourselves and of our vocation, and it's necessarily a slow and deliberate process. For all of the public attention chefs receive these days, cooking is essentially a lonely business, especially during one's formative years. Talent is a must, but a cook's fate is largely determined by his or her willingness to put in the hard yards required to master the craft, as well as additional years defining and honing a personal style.

Meeting those challenges requires physical and mental stamina, which is why I have such empathy for young cooks, and a special appreciation for the commitment Michael White made early in his career. As you'll learn in these pages, in his twenties, driven purely by instinct, he spent the better part of eight years away from family and friends, and from his native land and language, to immerse himself in the food and culture of Italy. It cannot have been easy for this extrovert to live and work in a foreign land where he couldn't communicate well, at least not initially; but he endured, with nothing but his own passion telling him it was the right thing to do and that it would pay off one day.

And pay off it has: I've followed Michael since he emerged as the chef of New York City's Fiamma restaurant in 2002. Since then, I've watched and tasted as he's matured into his current position as one of the preeminent stewards and pioneers of Italian culinary tradition in America. A few years ago, when asked by a magazine to name my favorite restaurant of the moment, I instead praised my favorite dish at the time: Michael's Fusilli with Red Wine-Braised Octopus. Eating it is a thrilling and highly pleasurable experience, a little journey all its own. At first glimpse, the dish looks like a Bolognese; but as you get into it, it reveals hidden treasures and complexities, chief among them exquisitely viscous bone marrow that constitutes a match made in heaven with the toothsome octopus, for a sublime and sophisticated variation on surf and turf.

Like many great dishes, that fusilli is simultaneously revelatory and inevitable; Our initial sense of wonder at its interplays of tastes and textures gives way to an appreciation for how utterly natural they seem. Michael's restaurant menus are replete with such delights. Another of my favorites is one of his contemporary crostini, topped with sea urchin roe that's hugged by luscious lardo and topped with sea salt. It's a small morsel, but a feast for the senses, delivering cool, warm, silken, and crunchy elements in each bite.

These dishes, served at his restaurant Marea, represent the cutting edge of Italian food in America today. But Michael doesn't just do cutting edge. On the contrary, he

retains a reverence for the classics of Italian cuisine, such as the Tortellini in Cream Sauce and Pasta Ribbons with Mushroom Sauce that he came to love during his near-decade spent overseas. Today he serves them at his restaurant Osteria Morini, which pays loving and faithful homage to the food of the Emilia-Romagna region.

In cooking, as in life, timing is everything. While Michael was soaking up inspiration and knowledge in Italy, the rest of us were on our own journeys. Like many Americans, my earliest memories of Italian food aren't of high-end restaurants but rather of Chef Boyardee, frozen pizza, and casual eateries where meals began with garlic knots and ended with spumoni. We've come a long way in our culinary knowledge and sophistication since those days, and just as we arrived at the apex of our Italian-food learning curve, there was Michael, poised to meet the moment with a deeply personal cuisine commensurate with our ability to appreciate it.

I'm hesitant to dissect Michael's food too much, preferring simply to enjoy it. But when you consider the totality of his repertoire, it becomes clear that his respect for the classics isn't at odds with his contemporary cooking; rather, his mastery of the classics forms the backbone of his success with the contemporary. This book, divided into *Classico* and *Moderno* sections, shares Michael's recipes for both traditional and contemporary Italian dishes and explains the connection between them. Just as compellingly, it traces the story of his discovery of the classics and his own creative development. I wrote once that recipes have no soul, requiring the cook to bring an ineffable something to them. I still believe that, but I know, too, that Michael's soul, captured here in words and pictures, will help guide even novice cooks on *that* journey.

In his earlier days, Michael mingled classic and contemporary dishes on the same menu; today he devotes entire restaurants to one or the other, but the relationship between past and present always matters. Innovation is important, but we connect best with dishes grounded in tradition, to flavors and combinations that were first arrived at to satisfy something primal in those cooks—their names long since lost to the ages—who first thought to pair and eat them.

That link is always present in Michael's food, which explains why even his signature modern dishes are as relatable as the classics—and perhaps are destined to be deemed classics in their own right someday.

—Thomas Keller





INTRODUCTION

A BRIEF HISTORY

I still vividly remember the first time I ate Italian food. *Real* Italian food. Or maybe I should say that I remember the first time I *experienced* real Italian food, because my senses were reeling even before I took my first bite. It was a dish of potato and leek ravioli adorned with a creamy Parmigiano-Reggiano sauce and topped with a generous spoonful of deep-green pesto. To begin with, there was the stark beauty of the composition: a half dozen ravioli arranged neatly on the plate, the white sauce clinging to the pasta, the pesto popping against a pristine backdrop. The ravioli themselves were unlike any I'd ever seen. Rather than the typical squares, they were perfectly round, with a ruffled edge that added a flourish to their simple beauty.

I was smitten, swept up by the poetry on the plate, and eating them only reinforced my infatuation: When cut open, the ravioli unleashed an intense aroma of garlic and herbs. I put a forkful in my mouth, and flavors and textures followed one upon another in quick succession: the earthy, salty Parmigiano mingled with the pesto—a version of the classic Ligurian condiment with parsley, basil, walnuts, and pignoli (pine nuts)—and then gave way to the toothsome, house-made pasta and the oniony mix of potato and leek within.

There I sat, staring in wonder at the plate, where five ravioli remained. I could scarcely fathom how so much complexity could be contained in something that, although it featured two sauces, seemed so simple: There weren't more than a dozen or so ingredients on that plate, but like a great rock band that creates a signature sound with just three musicians, it felt perfect.

This significant moment didn't take place in Italy, but in Chicago, Illinois. It changed my life and set me on the course that I've been on ever since, one that I hope and expect to continue on for the rest of my days.

It was 1991, and I was a young cook who had moved to the Windy City from my hometown of Beloit, Wisconsin, to work at Spiaggia restaurant. Under the stewardship of chef Paul Bartolotta, Spiaggia had distinguished itself as one of the finest Italian restaurants in the United States.

In truth, I had lucked out. Seeking a kitchen job and a life in the “big city,” I'd begun a search for an Italian restaurant in Chicago for no reason other than that Italian food, or my concept of it at the time, felt familiar and comfortable to me. When I learned that the chef was also from Wisconsin, Spiaggia went right to the top of my list. I knew nothing of its reputation, or of its potential to inspire.

Those ravioli were just the first of many Italian dishes I would come to taste, cook,

and appreciate at Spiaggia. Things have changed a lot since those days: Ingredients such as burgundy-hued radicchio and dishes such as risotto were known to those who had traveled and eaten in Italy, or dined in the finest, most cutting-edge New American restaurants of the day, but not to the general public. They were unfamiliar to me, as were rapini (broccoli rabe), cavolo nero (black kale), and cheeses such as Gorgonzola, to name just a few of the building blocks of Italian food that I came to know and appreciate in my early weeks on the job.

Mostly, though, I was fascinated by how those ingredients came together in dishes like that ravioli. Another early favorite, which I was positively obsessed with in my first winter at the restaurant, was a very traditional zuppa di gran farro alla Lucchese, a pureed bean and grain soup from Tuscany, that I can still taste, with all its flavors and textures in perfect balance: the smoky richness of pancetta; the piney scent of rosemary, delivered via an infused olive oil; and the toothsome farro, which was both blended into the soup and used as a garnish, along with a generous grinding of black pepper. As with the ravioli, the miracle of the soup was that, on paper, it was unremarkable: it depended on neither luxury ingredients nor complicated cooking techniques. But when those ingredients came together, an alchemy took place and they added up to something greater than the sum of its parts, or so I thought. In reality, the parts themselves were great, and their coming together only served to underscore their respective attributes. But that's a lesson that it takes time to fully comprehend, and I had a long way to go.

ITALY CALLING

When I was a kid, the last place I thought I'd end up was . . . well, there were a lot of last places I thought I'd end up. I was, and in many ways remain, a creature of the American Midwest. I grew up in a small town amid the vast green pastures of the American heartland. My father was the vice president of a bank and my mother was a homemaker. They raised me with values and manners that I guess you'd call old-fashioned today: my mother fostered a sense of curiosity in me, always encouraging me to ask questions and buying me *Tell Me Why* books that explained everything from what made it rain to how to calculate the distance from the Earth to the sun; my father taught me to look people in the eye when you shook their hands (with a shake as firm as a vise), to call my elders Mr. and Mrs., to never shy away from a challenge, and to work like a dog.

I didn't mind work. In fact, I loved it: As soon as I was old enough to have a job, I got one in the plumbing department of the local Ace Hardware store, which I supplemented by mowing lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. I also pumped gas for free at the local Mobil station so that I could have access to their garage and work on my car there whenever I needed to. I had good friends, and we had a good time, cruising chicks and chowing down at McDonald's after school and on weekends.

At six foot four, I was a big kid, and I loved competition, becoming an offensive tackle on my high school football team. As a sophomore, I got to travel a little with the varsity team, sitting on the sidelines to observe. The next year, when I was a junior, we

made the Division 1 play-offs. We drove out to Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, and we got spanked. The drive home was the longest sixty miles I have ever traveled. I learned about much more than football playing for our school team, the Purple Knights: As a sophomore on the sidelines, I developed patience. And as a junior, getting to the play-offs and losing, I gleaned something about riding out the ups and downs of life.

For all of their careful rearing of me and my brother, Scott, the one thing my parents could never instill in me was a love of learning—or maybe I should say a love of school. I have to say that I hated academics. They bored me damn near to tears, and my educational future stretched out before me as a bleak and barren road to nowhere. I knew that I had the ability and drive to do something, but I had no idea what that might be. Though I lived in a decidedly landlocked region, I was rudderless.

I did have something of a hobby, however, although I didn't think of it that way at the time. My father was and is a zealous home cook, and as I grew into my teens, I started helping him out in the kitchen and our backyard garden, cooking omelets, soups, and other simple dishes and growing vegetables. We'd often sit and watch cooking segments on the morning shows, like *Good Morning America*, where, in those days, celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck demonstrated recipes every Friday.

I was also a passionate eater who gravitated toward bold food. I loved big in-your-face flavors and textures, from a bag of Fritos to a bowl of chili. My favorite kind of food was Italian, which was popular in our town, as it was in small towns all across America. I looked forward to nothing more than spaghetti and meatballs, or pasta with cream sauce. Today I recognize that those dishes, or at least the versions we ate in Beloit, were Americanized renditions, but that didn't change the basics, such as the smell of garlic and oregano that hit you when you first set foot in an Italian restaurant, or the potent flavors of the most-often-called-on ingredients, such as tomatoes or Parmigiano cheese.

A lightbulb went off for me when Dad and I started tuning in regularly to a television series called *Great Chefs*, narrated by Mary Lou Conroy. The show profiled some of the biggest chefs in the United States and around the world, and—most important for me—depicted them *in a professional kitchen* as they worked. The more I watched, the more I was drawn to the idea of cooking for a living, and as soon as I graduated from high school, I took a job in a local restaurant called the Butterfly Club. As a line cook there, I learned how to pump out au gratin potatoes and fry fish during dinner service. I loved everything about it, not only the act of cooking, for which I had a natural aptitude, but also hanging out with the guys in the kitchen, both during work and after hours.

Cooking quickly became a calling, and a sanctuary. I decided to commit to this new direction, and after about six months at the Butterfly Club, I applied for that job at Spiaggia. By the time I moved to Chicago, I was so relieved to be on the right track that not only did I go to work, but I also, at last, became a passionate student, taking culinary classes at Kendall College in the suburb of Evanston. It was a grueling schedule: My first class was at eight-thirty in the morning, and I'd show up with everything I needed for the rest of the day and night, namely my chef's clothes and knife kit for the restaurant. After learning the basics of Western cuisines, such as braising and sauce work, all of it based on the French tradition, I'd sleep on the "L" into Chicago, then arrive at Spiaggia, change into my uniform, and cook my way

through the dinner shift, not returning to my apartment until after midnight.

Whether standing in the French-focused kitchen classroom or cooking in the Italianate restaurant kitchen, I always had the exhilarating feeling that I was learning and moving toward something, and this helped me power through the long hours when my body, despite my youth and athletic training, would feel the burn of my schedule.

After completing the nine-month course at Kendall College, I continued to cook at Spiaggia, working my way around the kitchen, in time learning how to prepare an array of dishes including zuppa di pesce, lamb chops scottadito (glazed with balsamic vinegar), and osso buco. Though dressed up for their big-city restaurant environs, these and countless other dishes had much in common with the kind of food I had loved eating all my life, brimming with robust flavors and luscious textures that I responded to more than the fussier, restrained French classics I had learned in school.

I also began reading books and magazines about Italian food and culture and how the two are intertwined. My interest expanded beyond the food itself to the language used to describe it and to the stories about where dishes hailed from and how they came to be, such as carpaccio with arugula, Parmigiano-Reggiano, olive oil, and lemon, or stracci, a wide pasta, served with a mushroom ragù; and I felt a growing desire to try those and other classics in their native regions. The food began to paint a picture for me: eating sublimely salty anchovies, I would imagine the Amalfi Coast in the south of Italy, the sun peering over the docks during summer, even as I was immersed in a brutal Windy City winter; a spoonful of that farro and bean soup, and I'd see the rolling, manicured hills of Tuscany; and carne all'Albese, an Italian steak tartare showered with white truffles, brought to mind the fog-shrouded mountains of Piedmont, in the north.

Chef Bartolotta and his lieutenants at Spiaggia knew passion when they saw it, and they were only too happy to help me learn as much as I could, exposing me to as many new dishes as possible and patiently answering my endless questions. One of my favorite things to cook was risotto, because it required constant stirring and attention all the way through the cooking process, rather than simply popping something in the oven. One night, Billy Joel appeared at the kitchen window, asking who had made his risotto of Taleggio, Brussels sprouts, and borlotti beans. When I raised my hand and he told me, "That was great," it was a high point of my life.

But there was only so far I could go in Chicago, and after two years, I'd reached a point of diminishing returns. Though I'd never been to Italy, I felt that I had to take the logical next step and cook there for an extended period of time. I spoke to Bartolotta about it. He wasn't surprised, having had the same desire earlier in his career, and he did what any chef who wants the best for his cooks would do, arranging for me to *stage* (intern in a professional kitchen, often unpaid) for ten months at the same restaurant he had: San Domenico, a two-Michelin-star dining temple in the town of Imola in Emilia-Romagna. The region is renowned for its rich and lusty food, from locally produced gems such as balsamic vinegar and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese to dishes such as tortellini in brodo (meat-filled pasta in broth) and cotechino (a lightly spiced pork sausage that's simmered and served with stewed lentils and fruity mostarda).

SETTING SAIL

The next thing I knew, I had arrived at the airport in Bologna, a young American cook with a duffle bag at my feet. Lorenzo Boni, a former cook from San Domenico who was acting as an emissary for the restaurant, picked me up and drove me into town, where he and his father owned a restaurant on Via San Vitale. As it had for so many before me, the flesh-and-blood Italy proved just as enchanting and unspoiled as the Italy of my imagination. A light rain pelted the car's windshield. Outside, a nonstop symphony of Vespa engines ripped through the air. It was a Saturday afternoon, and as we slowed down in town, a picture of daily life came into focus: People walked to and fro carrying brown paper bags full of groceries, nodding at each other in recognition.

A sense of unreality passed over me: this seemed more like a romanticized film set than an actual town. I joined the staff at the Bonis' restaurant for their pre-service, or "family," meal. There was baked branzino (sea bass); a small tomato salad dressed with extra virgin olive oil and sea salt; and ricotta tortelli sauced with brown butter and sage. The humble meal, more simple and elemental than the fancified restaurant food at Spiaggia but equally flavorful, was the first validation of my decision to come to Italy.

In my hotel room later, I pushed open windows that let the sounds of the town flood the room—those Vespas, the rain, the occasional impromptu conversation on the sidewalk. In the morning, I crossed the street and ordered my first true-blue cappuccino, impossibly frothy, and a brioche, which I was surprised to see, but which in time I'd learn was commonplace in parts of Italy that are relatively close to France. I felt conspicuous, a big, pasty, fair-haired American clumsily sipping my drink. Copying those around me, I dunked the brioche in the cappuccino for a little taste of heaven—cloud-on-cloud action, I joked to myself.

The next day I met the man who would become my mentor: Valentino Marcattilli, an accomplished and inexhaustible chef with caffeine and nicotine pumping through his veins and an irrepressible, impish sense of humor. Valentino had been at San Domenico on and off since he was sixteen years old and had *staged* in some of the great kitchens of France. Having helped open the New York outpost of San Domenico in the late 1980s, he also spoke better-than-broken English, which was extremely rare in the small town of Imola. He picked me up in his beat-up station wagon, which smelled vaguely of herbs from years of market visits, and delivered me to San Domenico, where he showed me to my living quarters. The restaurant operated in time-honored European fashion, employing a handful of *stages* who worked for nothing and putting them up in a row of dorm rooms over the restaurant, where a few of the more seasoned, salaried cooks lived as well. When I was there, it was a mix of Italians, Germans, and a Japanese kid with whom I shared my room. My Italian was limited to two words, ciao and cappuccino, and I wondered what I had gotten myself into. That night, my roommate and I, having nothing but food in common, sat and looked at cookbooks together, pointing to dishes we liked and nodding our approval.

On my first day on the job, Antonio di Cesare, a hardworking chef's chef, took me into the kitchen, introduced me to the other cooks, and assigned me to the meat station. Mercifully, having worked with Valentino at the New York San Domenico, Antonio

spoke English and was able to show me the ropes. My first task was to break down a saddle of venison, removing the meat, roasting the bones to get a stock started, and then portioning the meat into individual servings that I marinated in rosemary, crushed juniper berries, garlic slivers, and olive oil.

This was all revelatory to me: In most American kitchens, the world is divided into prep and service. The prep guys do the butchering, slicing and blanching of vegetables, and other advance work, and then the line cooks come in, fire up the dishes, and get everything on the plate, piping hot, for the customers. But in Italy, if you work, say, the meat station, you are responsible for the entire process, from butchering in the morning to putting the finished plates up on the pass to be delivered by the waiters to the diners that evening. I gleaned much from my inaugural task with the venison, from the butchering itself to the stock making to the idea of adding juniper berries to the marinade to the cocoa powder in the sauce we made from the stock, which added body and offset the venison's gaminess.

Before I knew it, I was cooking a wide variety of meats and game for such classic dishes as roasted squab with spinach and porcini mushrooms, squab liver timbale, and venison with chestnuts, all the while learning how to break down the beast itself.

So began my great Italian adventure.

It's clichéd to rhapsodize about Italy's culture of warmth and friendliness, but only because it's what strikes so many visitors: The country's bigheartedness was first revealed to me behind the scenes in San Domenico's kitchen, which operated on a hair less testosterone than a typical French one. I'd heard enough about the Gallic hierarchy to know that the way things usually worked was that as soon as somebody got a little authority, he began verbally abusing those beneath him. In Italy, though, or at San Domenico at least, the senior cooks were more like big brothers than lords and masters: As long as you worked hard, and tried your best, they were patient and nurturing. I've adopted the same style in all my kitchens today; one of my favorite lessons to impart to other chefs is that screaming doesn't make the food come out better or faster.

The most profound takeaway from my first months at San Domenico was a heightened connection to raw ingredients, and to the earth and the seasons. In Chicago, most of the foodstuffs arrived at the restaurant from large food-service corporations, packed in corrugated cardboard boxes or shrink-wrapped in plastic. At San Domenico, everything came, or was procured, directly from the actual sources, almost all of which were located less than an hour's drive from the town center. If we needed to make chicken stock, one of the chefs would send me around the corner to the butcher to ask for some bones. The farms weren't far-off places where anonymous workers tended to the fields, but close enough that the farmers themselves would show up at the restaurant's back door with all kinds of riches, like the forager, with dirt still caked on his boots, who would reach into his pocket and pull out three white truffles as if they were a handful of change. Or the woman who periodically showed up with whatever she'd deemed most appealing and appropriate to Valentino's style at her farm that morning. She might arrive one day with, say, a faraona (guinea hen) and a case of eggs. Valentino would never refuse her: If she had rabbit, he'd buy it from her, then break it down and use every part, sautéing the livers, making a farce (stuffing) from