



INTRODUCTION

While eating a platter of Italian dishes that I had prepared, a friend of mine from Texas observed: "I like this, but it's not my usual palette of flavors. The seasoning and vegetables that you use are different from my everyday ones."

I'm back in my hometown in Italy to spend a year. I haven't lived here since 1981. Today I buy thick Madre pearl buttons for my silk shirts and an octopus for dinner. Same sewing store and fish market as twenty-five years ago. I am pleased that my knowledge of the town has not decayed into old memories.

At home I put the octopus in the pressure cooker and choose thread for my buttons. While sewing I am trying to decide whether to use a dressing of lemon and olive oil for the mollusk, or one of rice vinegar, soy sauce and wasabi. Today is a gray fall day, conducive to sadness, yet its cool light combining with the yellow velvet of the living room chairs and the marine smell escaping the safety valve of the pressure cooker make the moment perfectly enjoyable. Everything is as though mixed on an artist's palette. This is how I try to understand moments. Maybe all we have to do in order to live well is to learn how to combine colors, materials and flavors. We should buy things not to have them but to fit them into expanding compositions:

Living room, apartment, building, town.

Lunchtime, day, month, year.

We go through life with a moderate knowledge of many things. We are given talents in a few areas. We love specific activities. With time we learn to function well through an intelligent combination of our knowledge, talents and loves. Experience teaches us that our philosophy of life and our knowledge of ourselves must

determine our taste. In other words, wisdom should dictate the composition of everything within our lives.

I can take pictures and cook. My sewing skills are poor. I love to run even though I was not given an athletic body. Yet as I look at my life there is, at present, consistency, a logic to all the different parts. My choices in specific contexts are often dictated by experiences I have acquired in other apparently unrelated fields.

I've always seen cooking and photography as being closely related, even though my pragmatic approach to each discipline is diametrically opposed.

I always use measuring instruments to shoot and develop. Light meters, graduates and thermometers are indispensable to me, my comfort tools. In the kitchen, on the contrary, I ignore measuring cups and scales and choose as tools of comfort knives, cutting boards and various pans and pots. These distinctions are just about methodology, which is always more closely related to the demands and nature of the materials used than to any personal philosophy. A fish can be weighed, yet trying to cook it according to a cooking chart's time per pound often results in disaster. If you want to learn how to cook you must learn the look and feel of a done fish. By contrast, you can't go by intuition but must rely on thermometers and light meters if you want to be a photographer. Of course, some schools of cooking resemble my approach to photography, while some schools of photography seem not unlike my approach to cooking.

There is a branch of high French cuisine that is very similar to highly sophisticated product photography. The purpose is to showcase the technical ability of both chef and photographer and impress the taster/viewer. The strategy relies on the use and display of rare ingredients (foie gras, diamonds, 50 year old cognac), which are transformed into a creation that has little to do with the original texture and flavor of the food. The results have little to do with ordinary life or its celebration. They are unrealistic, intimidating works aimed at overwhelming the consumer and the senses. One is immobilized: "I can't do that!" The illusion of desire is ignited by impossibility: "I wish I could do/have that." This is the femme/homme fatal of both food and images. Virtuosity is ultimately shallow because it serves exhibitionism and voyeurism instead of deep sensations.

Meanwhile, Sears portraits are the fast food of images. As features are bleached away in the even light of a "soft box," the photographer coaxes a generic smile from his sitter. The subject's character and personality are smoothed away. The lighting and innocuously tasteless light blue backdrop give an illusion of professionalism. These im-

ages give to the relatives of the sitters as much substance as a generic burger gives to our stomach and to our taste buds: a pretty face instead of a likeness, a mystery patty instead of protein and the taste of rare beef. These forms of photography and cooking stem not from philosophies but from marketing strategies, which rely on the awareness that many do not have a philosophy of seeing or being; in other words they cater to clients who have no aesthetics or ethics.

A ripe tomato peeled and sliced on a plate and dressed with olive oil, fresh basil and salt is, without doubt, a dish. It is also a meal that anybody can prepare and afford, especially in late spring or summer. The photograph at the beginning of my introduction is lovely, perfect in its simplicity, a minor work of art that heightens sensations through the pleasure of looking, yet it was taken without effort and without the need for expensive equipment or elaborate skills.

There are dishes and photographs that are given to us as gifts of the earth. The photographer/cook only has to take what the planet has given and transform it into pictures or dishes with as little alteration to the original as possible.

Simple cooking done with what is fresh or in season and good 35mm photography share the principle that photographers and cooks are only mediators of remarkable physical realities. Intelligence, humility and close observation are at the basis of this philosophy of seeing and tasting—a philosophy that has created some of the best dishes and images ever.

This book, which contains a collection of images and recipes, is neither a photography book nor a cookbook. I like to think of it as a collection of essays that elaborate on my definitions of seeing, looking, tasting and cooking with pleasure. The philosophy and knowledge expressed in the essays are completely mine. The recipes and images belong to anybody who will appreciate them, since they were never claimed as originals. Within this text they are evidence of my theory and examples of my taste.

LA SCAMPAGNATA: AN APOLOGY

The word “scampagnata” signifies an outing in the nearby countryside. This kind of trip should not involve more than a thirty-minute drive. A scampagnata has three components: a picnic, a walk and the collection of something edible. Mushrooms, wild salad, greens, nuts and berries are all classic scampagnata crops. This activity is profoundly Southern European. We don’t go into nature, we go to the country. We can’t imagine a festive event without a meal. We can’t justify the enjoyment of a walk without a purpose, hence the harvest.

Last week four adults, three children, a dog and I set off to the chestnut woods outside a small mountain village in Piemonte. Three hours later we came home with two pounds of wild mushrooms, eight pounds of chestnuts and six pounds of walnuts. We did with our kids what we had been taught to do since childhood. At home the men set the table then they slipped away. The girls went to their bedroom to play. We, three women who had known each other forever, started preparing dinner. We drank wine and talked, thankful for the privacy of the moment. What was our mothers’ duty had now become our escape from immediate family. As always we confused one another’s glasses, traded culinary tricks, and agreed on how good we looked at forty.

Within an hour a tomato-based fish soup, tuna mousse, roasted peppers and a salad were ready. The kids ate first; we supervised and yelled if anybody discarded a squid tentacle or a mussel. “Eat that or no dessert.” Then my friends’ husbands came and we sat for hours talking a lot and eating relatively little. At about ten-thirty the girls joined us for pastry. A long narrative discussion followed about which sweets we had enjoyed most and why. My friends’ characters and nature



emerged as they described the effect of a flavor on their tongue. Their morals became transparent as they confessed the level of guilt provoked by cream puffs. At twelve-thirty we went to bed. We were inebriated and calm.

I realized that we reproduce and improve on what our parents teach us. My generation of women had the privilege of choosing whether to marry, cook, have children, but we also had the privilege of having been taught how to cook, take care of a home and tend a child. My friends and I did not have the choice of whether to work or stay home. My friends married for love men who were far from rich, and I had, for years, a partner unable to earn her keep. We all chose to cook. We turned ourselves into chefs to outdo our mothers. We prepared food every day to honor our parents’ frugality and health. We kicked men and significant others out of the kitchen, and we brought our children into the kitchen when their games were boring so that the preparation of food would seem a substitute for play. In the kitchen we constructed rituals that confirmed our acquired power. Scampagnata and women in the kitchen were the center of our upbringing. The art of cooking and the knowledge of what is edible in the wild are the gifts of our childhood. The next day the mushrooms were frozen, the walnuts shelled and some of the chestnuts roasted with hardly any effort. I felt the approval of generations past.

As I start writing this book I realize that when somebody tells me to cut tomatoes I never have to ask: “Cubes or sliced?” I already know from experience how I will cut that fruit in relation to the type of recipe. I can’t begin to imagine what must be like to grow up outside a kitchen, or without the moments of instant recognition and the feelings of triumph that come when a large porcino is found. I apologize in advance if I forget to include instructions; they will be forgotten here and there. I hope my omissions won’t cause alienation. After all, this text is not a manual. It’s an introduction to a way of living in which physical pleasures are instruments of self-knowledge. The appreciation of a flavor or image tells us who we are, what we know and where we are in life. I hope that what I give you agrees with your state of mind, palate and stomach. Please accept the imprecise instructions, allow for interpretation and cut your vegetables as you please.