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Arrangiarsi Or The Zucchini Blossom Blues*

Caterina Edwards

Mid-September and the temperature drops to minus five. When I inspect the garden in the morning, most of the plants are frozen dead. The summer has been short, cool, and full of rain. I hoped for a mild, sunny fall, deluding myself that there would still be time for the tomatoes to ripen on the vine and for the zucchini plants to produce both flowers and vegetables. To me, the taste of the zucchini blossoms, dipped in a light flour and club soda batter, fried to a golden brown and sprinkled with sea salt, is subtle, delicate, and the essence of summer.

This year that fleeting pleasure was not to be. This year (and too many other years) our plants produced one zucchini, as long as my little finger, and one pickable flower. It wasn't worth mixing up the batter. The absence of zucchini stretched across the province; radio gardening shows buzzed with frustrated vegetable growers. There were exceptions: down the lane, one backyard sported several plants glowing with yellow blossoms. Each time I passed, I was tempted to reach through the metal wire and pick a few. "They won't miss them", I'd say to my husband. "They're not Italian". But he would shake his head disapprovingly. The proprietors of the envied garden are botanists: I classify them with the Italian-Canadians that keep their fig trees alive by burying them in the winter. With their esoteric arts, they flout the Canadian climate and the integrity of Mediterranean flora.

The city where I live, Edmonton, is on the fifty-third parallel and the most Northern city on the continent. Yet in our house, we try to eat as if we were living in my husband's birthplace, Palermo, which is on the thirty-eight parallel. Italian cooking has always been about fresh and high-quality ingredients. The first "Italian" book of recipes, the thirteenth-century *Liber di Coquina*, produced in the Angevin court of Naples, begins with a long series of vegetable recipes, including ten different preparations of cauliflower. Conversely, in the rest of

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Europe during medieval times, such recipes were considered unworthy of written cuisine: meat was the symbol of power; the fruits of the earth were for the poor and the peasants. Theoretically, out here in the west, we should be eating more like the French or English aristocrats and less like those of the Italian states. We should revel in our famous beef and root vegetables and stop longing and searching for fresh tuna, crunchy finocchio, and ripe figs or persimmons. We should, but reason rarely rules our taste buds and stomachs.

When I was growing up in Calgary in the late 50s and early 60s, my mother cooked, as much as possible, in the Italian style. Like other immigrants, she had to compromise, improvise, and persevere. In those days, Italian food was neither fashionable nor entirely respectable. I remember many of our English dinner guests asking in worried voices, “you didn’t put garlic in this, did you?” One dear lady refused to try even a bite of spaghetti with tomato sauce, because she found it too *foreign*. Calgary had a small population of Italians, and the necessary ingredients (including some, like red peppers, now widely available in supermarkets) were difficult if not impossible to find. In 1959, a small grocery store called Mario’s opened in Bridgeland, which was then the Italian neighborhood, and Mom was happy to have a source of olive oil, authentic parmesan cheese, and dried pasta. But so much was still missing.

If my mother had stayed in Venezia, she would not have spent so many hours in the kitchen. Her sisters and nieces in Italy bought their bread, pasta fresca, and sweet treats from professionals. Mom baked her own bread, as well as jam pie (*crostata*), apple strudel, almond cake, and hard cornmeal cookies. Describing the typical Canadian cup of coffee as “dirty dishwasher”, she tried buying green coffee beans and roasting them to the correct level of darkness for the stove-top moka machine, but burnt them so often she gave up. She made her own tagliatelle, ravioli, lasagna sheets, and the even-more-labour-intensive crespelle and potato gnocchi.

Shortcuts, canned and packaged food were for Canadians, who, she insisted, were lazy and didn’t know how to eat. Most of the produce at the local supermarket, shipped in from California or Florida, was not up to her standard, especially the pale, hard tomatoes. My father planted a large garden: lettuce, carrots, peas and tomatoes. Most years, his zucchini flourished. Still, each August we made a pilgrimage to the Okanagan valley in search of properly ripened fruits and vegetables. The distance between Calgary and Penticton is 670 kilometres, but the drive took longer than seven hours. The two lane road, which went up and over the Rocky Mountains, was always clogged with slow moving RVs and massive trucks. Once there we scoured the area, Kelowna to Osoyoos, visiting a circle of farms and fruit stands to ensure we bought only the best. The way home was particularly unpleasant. The Ford Falcon would be overloaded with cases of

tomatoes, peaches, and apples, plus smaller boxes of apricots, peppers, and eggplant. With at least five cases piled on top of each other in the back seat, my sister, Corinna, and I would be squeezed together in the small space left. Since the Falcon didn't have air conditioning, we'd be bathed in sweat and the smell of overripe fruit. (I'd make it worse for myself: I'd try and escape by reading and then I'd be car sick.)

At home, the Heruclean labour began. Corinna and I were the kitchen slaves. Everything had to be processed, peeled, boiled, pickled, canned, and/or made into sauce or jam quickly, quickly before fermentation or rot set in. And at the end of each exhausting day, either Corinna or I had to get on our hands and knees and scrub the by-then disgustingly sticky floor.

Unfortunately, my father, who was not Italian, also subscribed to the do-it-yourself ethos and made wine, an illegal act in Alberta at that time. Few Okanagan farmers had vineyards then, so we were spared another trip; he bought grapes shipped in from California. It was Corinna and my job to take turns in a big wooden barrel, stomping the fruit and releasing the juice. Imagine being enveloped in cold, slimy grape flesh, poked by scratchy stems from sole to mid-calf. In our adult lives, until now, neither my sister nor I have ever admitted to the humiliation of being grape stompers. But when I was thirteen and she twelve, we were outed by an Italian cartoonist, not long after a group of journalists from his country dined at our house in Calgary. Of course, Dad served his rough, foxy wine, and he must have explained the process. One of the Italians had an enormous camera: he took many pictures of Corinna and me. Two weeks later, in *Corriere della Sera*, a major Milan newspaper sold all over Italy, a condescending article appeared on the mores of the Italian immigrants of the wild west. It was illustrated by a caricature of us two sisters cheerfully stomping grapes in a giant barrel, emphasized by what were presumably flying juice drops.

Unlike my father's wine, my mother's canned goods were exquisite. As Corinna said recently: "In the cold and dark of winter, opening a mason jar of tomatoes or peaches was like unleashing a beam of sunshine". Yet I will never can a tomato or cook up some jam. I view much of my mother's food processing as unnecessary and time wasting – at least nowadays. Since my childhood years, the attitude to Italian food and drink has changed: today it is celebrated, even fashionable. The Italian Centre Shop in Edmonton carries more than the basics. An enormous number of esoteric ingredients are available, including buffalo milk mozzarella flown in from Campagna and canned San Marzano tomatoes, certified to be from a small region around Naples and considered by gourmet chefs to be the best sauce tomatoes in the world.

This relatively recent bounty makes it easier for me to continue to cook in the Italian style. I can't change: it was how I was raised. We continue to have a *primo*

and *secondo*: pasta, risotto, and polenta are routine. We obsess about coffee beans and spend too much on espresso and cappuccino machines. When my daughters were babies, I fed them *brodo* and *pastina*, rather than baby food from a jar. (And when the time comes, I expect they too will feed their children as I fed them.)

I make as much as possible from scratch: I turn the tomatoes the garden produces into sauce, the basil into pesto. I preserve by freezing, rather than canning. *Mi arriangio*. (I make do.) Although my compromises and improvisations are different from my mother's, in one significant way I am fighting the same battle. In this Northern climate, I can't depend on a large harvest of tomatoes or healthy basil. I'm learning not to expect zucchini blossoms. But I still hope – dream – that next summer, we'll have a full crop.

Many of the recipes for fried zucchini blossoms suggest stuffing the flowers with mozzarella cheese, anchovies, and even shrimp. We like them best coated in a simple batter. Make sure you choose the male blossoms; they don't turn into zucchini, but exist only to "fertilize" the female flowers that do.