

Foreword from the Cookbook Mamma Toscana  
BY ALVARO MACCIONI

My name is Alvaro Maccioni and I was born in Tuscany. If you lived in Tuscany before the Second World War and immediately after the war, food was not as readily available as it is today in supermarkets and delicatessens. Instead, Mamma or Grandmamma went to the vegetable plot at the back of the house and found all the ingredients that could be used to make the dish for the day. We had to decide what was or was not edible from the grasses, herbs and roots growing in the garden. As I was growing up, I became more and more fascinated by food in general and the traditions of using only the vegetables and fruit which were readily available and in season. For example, in Italy, you do not eat pork in the summer. Historically and hygienically, fresh pork needs cold storage, which was only possible in the winter.

Beef during this time was only for the rich and the little bit that the middle and poorer classes could afford was the cut that was unwanted and seldom used. We boiled it or put it in a stew. Steak was beyond our means, from necessity and poverty, we had to be inventive and these simple dishes have become 'delicacies' of Tuscan cuisine today. In England there is an old saying, "necessity is the mother of invention!" In Italy, the phrase, *cucina povera*, (the term was used in the 1700's) referred to this ingenious creation of a meal with the simplest and most basic provision.

As a young man, I decided that I wanted to work in catering. My father forced me to attend the agricultural college and study something totally different. I left in my last year of study, so by the time my father realised I wasn't at college; I was studying catering at the *Ecole Hoteliers* in Lausanne, Switzerland. After two years, I graduated as a *chef du partie*: a trained cook, able to make sauces and to cook an International Cuisine derived from the French.

As I grew up and worked in different places, I began to discover that everything considered to be civilised originated from the place I was born. Two thousand years before Christ, the Etruscans inhabited the area now known as Tuscany; they were the most civilised tribe in Europe. It is quite amazing to think that when the rest of the continent was living in the Dark Ages, the Florentines were enjoying the benefits of the Renaissance.

An interesting architectural detail of the old palaces in Florence is the little tower on the roof called a *piccionaia*, which means 'the pigeon-house'. At the time of the Medici, there was certainly no air-conditioning, the *piccionaia* were used as dining rooms, because you could only get fresh air on the rooftop. These dining rooms in the sky became a status symbol and were used for special occasions. Today we still use lots of recipes for dishes from those days. One dish is *Arrista*, made from fillet of pork or wild boar, first served in 1250 at the meeting of the Ecumenical Council held in Florence. In those days, most of the Archbishops and Cardinals spoke Greek and in order to describe this fillet of roast as delicious, they declaimed "Arristo, arristo!" Arristo in Greek means 'fantastic' or 'well done'. Arristo became Arrista, which is what the dish is now called. Many of my recipes date back to the 1100's- in catering we call this period 'the beginning of time'. Because only after 1100's were recipes written down.

There are many theories about how the dish 'Bistecca Alla Fiorentina' got its name. Some people say that the "bistecca" derives from beef steak. The actual truth is the 'bis' means double- fillet and *entrecote*. It is cooked on a picnic day called *Festa del Grillo*-the Feast of the Cricket- held on Ascension Day. Every family saves up to buy this famous cut of meat. A fire is lit in the Park of the Cascine in Florence, the steak is stabbed on to a two-pronged fork and stuck into the ground. The meat is held in front of the fire in the same way as you would toast scones on picnic in England. The fat falls to ground and not into the fire, which would make the meat smell of burning fat. The meat is only slightly cooked, as 'Bistecca Alla Fiorentina' must always be very rare.

In my cookbook, *Mamma Toscana* I have tried to present the recipes prepared and cooked in the traditional Tuscan way. Because of our geographical position, Tuscan cuisine is the most varied in Italy. We have fish dishes deriving from the coast of Tuscany that starts from north of Rome and extends to the bay of Genoa. We have the Apennine Mountains on our back where dishes like game, wild boar, polenta are still enjoyed. And please remember that Tuscany is the home of one of the oldest makes of wine in the world- Chianti.

All the very old recipes from the time of Caterina de' Medici are sweetened with honey, marmalade and jam. Refrigeration was not available and they were used specifically to marinate meat and to counteract or conceal the smell of the meat which was hung for a week or more. Renaissance recipes often include fruits and sweeteners like honey and sweet wine as ingredients. It is said that food was practically invented in Tuscany! You can find recipes for fried chicken, sausages and fillet steak in antique recipe books dating back a thousand years or more.

Cooking in the high society of Florence in the time of the Medici and Borgia was entertainment-equivalent to what cinema, theatre and television are today. Even in paintings, unless they are religious ones, you will see depictions of food being prepared and cooked. It is very rare to read an old book from Tuscany on any kind of subject where there is not a description of a banquet or a recipe. The artists of the Renaissance in Tuscany are famous today - Michelangelo, Raphael, but chefs were held in the same esteem as artists in this time. Preparation and presentation of food was viewed as a work of art. The techniques used to slaughter and skin an animal, to the design of the pots and pans, all had artistic purpose. Each pan was specifically design to cook a particular dish. Today chefs can become television stars, but in fact chefs have always been stars in Tuscany.

I would like to emphasise that 'Italian cuisine', as a lot of people call it, does not exist in Italy, the cuisine is regional. In the mid nineteenth century, Italy was made up of 52 different states, with 19 different dialects and only became a united country in the 1860's.

The only region that had been comparatively free of foreign influence was Tuscany and that is why Tuscan cuisine is now considered to be the most Italian.

I have titled my book Mamma Toscana, because Mamma traditionally does the cooking, and I always say to the chefs in my restaurant, **'if you can cook like your mother, you are a great chef, if you can cook like your like grandmother, you are even better.'**

For me the mother figure represents Creation and everything from art to business started in Italy. The Monte di Paschi di Siena was the first bank in Italy and, in fact, the world. Founded in 1413, it operated as pawnshops do today, though the collateral was cattle and sheep. The name means 'the hill of the pasture' where the livestock could graze.

When I teach at the Coselli School of Tuscan Cuisine, which I founded in 1966, many students ask me, why do all the famous Italians come from Tuscany - Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Galileo Galilee? This is not because Tuscans are cleverer than anyone else in Italy, but because of the law passed in 1211. This law decreed that the first son of non-servant family had to attend school. The rest of the world came to this idea more than 500 years later.

But there is another side to Tuscany. It is said that when god created the world, he looked at Italy and said, 'I am supposed to be a just man but I have done two bad things - this beautiful boot in the middle of the Mediterranean sea is not fair on the rest of the world and Tuscany is the best part of the little boot'. To equal things out for the rest of the world, he put the Italians in the rest of Italy and the Toscani (Tuscan people) in Tuscany. Italy is the door to Heaven, Tuscany is Heaven, but because of the Tuscan people, it is just like the rest of the world!