

# Altri tempi ... anni fa ... Recipes and remembrances ... *Laura and the Lost Doll*

In the heart of old Barga live and work Laura and her husband Giuseppe. They both know a little English since they spent some time after their marriage in Scotland, but they have spent most of their lives in Barga, running their Caffè Capretz under the graceful arches in the old town, at Piazza Salvi. Laura cooks, making pasta *da morire*, while Giuseppe works at the counter, and doing *l'amministrazione*. Of course, like most people that's his least favourite job.

I talked to Laura after she'd finished making the day's pasta. She told me that her *nonna* Giulia was born in Marseilles, but soon came to live in San Pietro in Campo, where Laura's *mamma* Rosina was born. Laura described Rosina as an exceptional woman who knew how to do everything, *sapeva fare tutto*. Giulia sadly died when Laura (one of

two sisters in a family of four) was six. Rosina, who trained as a tailor, grew up to be a mother herself, conscientiously teaching her young daughters all the skills of what was then traditionally the woman's trade: cooking. I can vouch for the fact that in Laura's case she did a very good job. But more of this anon.

Laura describes herself as a little girl full of mischief, who sometimes refused food and had to be cajoled and spoon-fed. Her deepest recollection is of an

American woman, also named Laura, who gave her a Christmas present she has never forgotten.

The American Laura, a *signorone* (a big shot), lived in a home opposite the little girl's. The child marvelled at her neighbour's tall Christmas tree, stretching up it seemed almost to the sky, covered with brightly coloured Christmas lights. But the present! Laura stretched her arms wide. It came in such a big box! It was a huge, almost life-size doll, almost as tall as little Laura herself, with a painted ceramic face, dressed in a long dress and old-fashioned apron, hair tied back from that perfect china visage. What a marvel! No-one else had an expensive doll like this. She moved, she walked, she felt almost alive ... and Laura herself felt very special having such a gift. *I remember everything!* BUT the snag was that the doll was so special that her mother put it on a high shelf and hardly ever allowed her daughter to play with it, in case the face got chipped. The doll stayed there when Laura moved out, and eventually her sister took it for her own small daughter. This still brings tears to Laura's eyes. *But if I shut my eyes I can still see her.* The doll may remain nameless, but she is still vivid in Laura's mind, like so many of our early memories.



Her mother was a marvellous cook, and Laura jokes that when she first took him home her husband Giuseppe fell in love with her mother's *pomodori verdi fritti*.



To make this magical dish all you need do is cut up green tomatoes in thin slices, cover with a batter made of flour, *acqua frizzante*, and egg, and fry in a shallow pan on both sides. The special ingredient here is the *acqua frizzante*, which makes the batter light.... Try getting that one in a restaurant....

Her other favourite dish (and we did not consult Giuseppe here) was *coniglio (rabbit) in umido con polenta*. Here again,

simplicity is the essence. Make a *soffritto con sapori* (garlic, rosemary, carrot, a stick of celery). Let all these sweat in some good olive oil, then add pieces of jointed *coniglio*, which have already been boiled (save the water). You can make a delicious gravy with some of this water plus white wine, along with tomatoes and good black Tuscan olives. The dish is then served with polenta gussied up in any way you choose, with herbs and spices or just plain old plain, which is delicious too.

Quantities, as always with these old recipes, are up to you.



*polenta with pomodoro and rucola*

Laura, my warm thanks go to you and Giuseppe, and to that memory of the marvellous walking doll, who can still walk freely through your dreams.

— by Judith Edwards  
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