



Altri tempi, Anni fa ...

Frank Viviano & the Land where Lemons Grow



Frank is a Sicilian who grew up in Detroit, though he has been living in Tuscany for nearly twenty years, while working as a journalist around the world. The dishes from his Sicilian childhood (see below) enrich local Tuscan traditions, including such new tastes as turmeric and cinnamon alongside our old favourites.... His fascinating book *Blood Washes Blood* gives us a true story of love, murder, and redemption in Sicily, the land where lemons grow, as Goethe once called it. This is definitely worth a read. Here we have Frank in his own words:

Three of my grandparents – Francesco Paolo Viviano, Angelina Tocco and Caterina Cammarata – were born and raised in Terrasini, an ancient fishing village on the Golfo di Castellammare. The fourth, Salvatore DiGiuseppe, was from Partinico, a mountain town 25 km to the west. Between 1910 and 1914, all four of them emigrated to America. They settled initially in East Harlem and later moved to Detroit, where I was raised. Our family resided in America, but our lives were almost entirely Sicilian in spirit.



Maternal grandfather Salvatore DiGiuseppe, in Detroit

Nonno Viviano, after whom I was named, was an itinerant fish peddler in Harlem and became a fruit and vegetable wholesaler in Michigan. He imported lemons from the Castellammare coast, which I sold from a pushcart on weekends from the age of eight in the mid-1950s, walking through the streets of the Detroit Farmer's Market crying out *Sicilian lemons, three dozen for a dollar. Viviano's the Best!*

Nonna Angelina was a mystic, a sorceress who cast (mostly) benevolent spells, and a poet. She began working in New York garment factories at the age of 13, and eloped with my grandfather when she was barely 16 and he was 19. They were first cousins, and forbidden to marry. He pretended to kidnap her, and she pretended to fight back, but everyone understood that was theater. The kidnapping meant that the family had to accept the marriage, since Angelina was presumably no longer a virgin. They were together 68 years.



Frank Viviano & Angelina Tocco at their second wedding in Detroit in 1917, a month after her abduction to Canada.

Nonno DiGiuseppe, like Nonno Viviano, was illiterate, spoke almost no English, and arrived alone and penniless in New York as a teenager. Also like my paternal grandfather, he built his own business from nothing. He was a tile and terrazzo contractor, a formidable ceramics artisan who covered almost every surface of the family home with intricate mosaics. He even built his own

automobile in 1925, constructing a wooden frame and decorating it with mosaics, then installing a motor from a Ford Model-T.

Nonna Caterina was the most extraordinary cook I've ever encountered, and I speak as someone who has lived for three decades in Paris and Tuscany, and spent more than ten years in China. She was deeply affectionate, with none of the sharp edges of Nonna Angelina, although their very differences somehow permitted me to love them both unequivocally. But it was my maternal grandmother who comforted me when I returned from my first war as a foreign correspondent, shattered by what I had seen. She understood immediately, and said, *Figliu miu, mi cuore!* in dialect. *My child, my heart!* Then she took me in her arms as though I was still the little boy who was her first grandchild.

A story about Nonno Viviano: There was an elderly African-American gentleman, Julius Green, who had worked for Grandpa at least 30 years when I was a young vendor of lemons. One day I needed help filling my pushcart and called out *Give me a hand, Julie!* That's what my grandfather called him, naturally, since they'd been friends since 1920. To my shock, Nonno walked over and slapped me across the face, the only time in our life together that he did such a thing. *You call him 'Mister Green,' Frankie. Never 'Julie.'*

It was a lesson of huge importance, about dignity and respect, and I never forgot it.

I never ate anything but Sicilian food, not even a hamburger or hot dog, until I was 18. Why would I? Peer pressure couldn't begin to compete with what was on offer at our family table. We dined together every Sunday afternoon at Grandma Angelina's or Grandma Caterina's, often as many as 50 of us. The *'mericani'* kids brought peanut butter sandwiches to school for lunch. I brought *insalata di polpo* and *arancini di riso*. Here are two favorite of my dishes from the vast repertoire of my grandmothers:

Spiedini alla Palermitana

1. Flatten boneless pork loin or veal with a wooden mallet, & cut into 2cm x 4cm strips.
2. Dip into olive oil, then into a mixture of grated breadcrumbs, grated aged pecorino cheese, chopped parsley, salt & pepper.
3. Roll them into *involtini*, alternated on wooden spits with bay leaves & pieces of onion.
4. Grill under a broiler until the meat is cooked.
5. Remove from oven & top with a classic Sicilian condiment, *moighiu*. Its components are: crushed tomato, crushed raw garlic, olive oil, fresh lemon, oregano, salt & pepper.

Bucatini al cavolfiore

1. Roast florets of cauliflower in a hot oven until tender, dusted with turmeric & cinnamon.
2. Sauté chopped garlic in a large pan. Add anchovies to taste.
3. Boil *bucatini*, around 500 grams for 4 people.
4. Add cauliflower to olive oil mixture in the pan, toss, then add roasted pine nuts, sultana raisins & cooked *bucatini*, toss again.
5. Serve topped with *mollica*: grated breadcrumbs sautéed in a pan with a small amount of olive oil, a tablespoon of tomato sauce, chopped garlic, parsley, salt & pepper.

– by Judith Edwards
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