

WAKEFIELD PRESS

AMORE AND AMARETTI  
*A Tale of Love and Food in Tuscany*



Victoria Cosford completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in languages, including Italian, and has taught Italian cooking for more than twenty years. She now lives in Byron Bay and writes a popular weekly food column for the *Byron Shire Echo*, where she is employed as a journalist.

The background is a black and white photograph of a textured stone wall. In the upper right corner, there is a decorative illustration of a cherub-like figure, possibly Cupid, with wings and a bow, surrounded by foliage. The text "Amore and" is overlaid on the wall, with "Amore" in a large, white, cursive font and "and" in a smaller, white, cursive font to its right.

*Amore and*

# *Amaretti*

**A tale of love and food  
in Tuscany**

**Victoria Cosford**



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**For my two sisters,  
whose unbounded faith in me  
never once wavered.**



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## PRELUDE



I might be walking along a street when I hear it. Unmistakable Italian words, a sentence, a conversation, uttered in that musical poetry so immediately familiar that I am shocked out of my previous self-absorption and swallowed into the sensuousness of the sound.

Yet here I am in Australia, in another hemisphere where I rarely give a serious thought to Italy, the country that changed my life and indirectly brought me to the place I am today. I am living in Byron Bay, writing about food in a weekly column, reporting on general news stories for the local newspaper, and occasionally teaching Italian cooking.

Someone famous – was it Virginia Woolf? – once said, ‘Do the hardest thing’. It seems to me that my time spent in Italy was precisely that and it has brought me circuitously to contentment and the reward of true love.





1982–1986

*Florence, Isle of Elba, Perugia*

*Quando si ama, anche i sassi diventano stelle*  
*- When you're in love even pebbles*  
*become stars -*

One Florentine Friday night a man with a tea towel tossed over one shoulder unclasps his watch and places it at the end of the table I share with twenty international students. This is how it begins, in a restaurant in a cellar. We belong to the Michelangelo Institute where we are studying the language and culture of Italy; every Friday night we unwind over dinner in a typical Tuscan trattoria.

When I think about the small incidental objects that had the power to transform my life, I always return to that watch. Over the years it became magnified in my mind, effulgent with significance. Its territorial presence on the table of *bis* restaurant means that Gianfranco can come and go with ease, with a sort of claim on the two foreign women it lies closest to, my sister and me. Toward the end of the evening, there he is sitting with us conversing in a clumsy cocktail of languages over wine.

Gianfranco is a country boy from a village in Umbria whose Italian is loose, lazy and colloquial, whose French is meagre though elegant, whose Dutch, owing to a ten-month-long marriage to a Dutch woman, is fluent, but whose English is sparse; we understand each other magnificently.

He smokes Marlboros and wears expensive gold jewellery and tight jeans; there is a swaggish indifference to him to which I am drawn so that by the end of the night, when somehow we have ended up at a bar at Piazzale Michelangelo, I am already a little in love. He is dancing on the mirrored floor with my sister and I am dancing with Roberto, the apprentice chef, who is asking me

to translate into Italian the words of a Chicago song, which I do badly. Gianfranco brings me a glass of Cointreau with ice in it and we sit down together with our knees touching. Roberto and my sister seem to melt away.

I had been in Italy for several weeks. I had already fallen in love with the country, the people, Florence, the director of the Institute. A degree in languages at university had led me indirectly here via jobs in advertising and nursing, a lonely year in London growing fat as a live-in barmaid, and the break up of a relationship grown too cosy, too lazy, with a gentle man named Tony whom I no longer loved.

Tony had arrived in London before me and met me at the airport, as arranged. In our six months apart, while he did the overland Magic Bus trip and I saved up, I had already changed, so that when I put my arms around his cheap new leather coat I felt that I was embracing a brother, not a lover. His decision to return to Australia was met with relief on my part; my adventurous life had only just begun. I found a job at the Museum Tavern opposite the British Museum and moved into a small room upstairs, where I worked my way through *War and Peace* on evenings off after solitary excursions to other pubs to sit over glasses of South African wine and dry-roasted peanuts.

My younger sister had flown from Australia to join me in Italy and the Institute had organised rooms for us in a boarding house near the Duomo that we shared with Scandinavian girls enrolled in the same course. London was already seeping out of me. I had begun to sling jumpers casually around my shoulders, the way Italian girls did, and knot scarves loosely around my white Anglo-Saxon throat ... And now, there is Gianfranco.



Gianfranco picks me up from the boarding house near the Duomo for our first official date. He has parked illegally, and our

awkwardness is overshadowed by our haste to flee the city centre, like criminals in a stolen car, and by the time we are driving through outer suburbs I am almost relaxed. Our stop-start conversation is punctuated by my tedious admissions of not understanding and carries us all the way to an unremarkable hotel on the town's edge. Gianfranco parks the car and bustles me inside in a proprietary way I find both arousing and significant, then orders food from a waiter he clearly knows well. Earlier nervousness has narrowed my appetite to a thread but I do my best to try a little of everything: sliced meats and pickled vegetables, a winy stew on steaming gold polenta, little red capsicums stuffed with rice and herbs. We drink wine, which later allows me to float up the flight of stairs to an impersonal room with little more than a bed and a television set where I am undressed by Gianfranco, the blinds lowered. A fleeting sense that I have been too easily won is displaced by the great and glorious joy of our coming together, a feeling that I have disappeared inside his body.

But still I am unconvinced he really likes me. I console myself by concentrating on his less appealing qualities, like his brashness, but I close my eyes to a mouth of chipped and neglected teeth in my determination not to be superficial. I have been told about his reputation with foreign women but cannot believe he actually finds me attractive. It is easier, in those cautious early days, to persuade myself that I am using him as much as he is using me, to be the hard bright woman I really am not. But in truth I am always in Gianfranco's power: he has the advantage of being himself, on his own terrain, master of the language while I struggle, apologising and requesting enlightenment.

As it turns out I have nothing to worry about. Miraculously – quite magically it seems to me – Gianfranco begins to betray the fact he is as enraptured by me as I am by him. When I have established that '*ti voglio bene*' means 'I love you', and I hear him tell me often, I begin to shyly say it back.

I study my lover. His cheeks point outward when he smiles. He roars his welcome to customers and friends; rooms feel empty when he leaves them. He moves quickly, heels clicking across the uneven stones of his restaurant and while crossing roads. He has friends everywhere: fashionable, glittery Florentines whom he intimately addresses as *dottore*, plumbers and carpenters and shopkeepers, and a vast repertoire of waiters and cooks with whom he has worked. His profession is chef but he is better suited to front-of-house with his boyish boisterousness and his easy charm.



I have never met anyone like Gianfranco before, a man so sure of his place in the world. He whistles loudly, in perfect pitch, and dispenses with the endings of names, so that after a while I become simply 'Vee'. I marvel in those early days at the miracle of having found him, at being swept up into the orb of his volatility and spontaneity, driven to edge-of-town hotels for the night, taken to country restaurants and to the seaside.

I am not spending the amount of time with my sister that I had expected. The late, unslept nights also mean that I am missing classes at the Institute, but I am beyond caring. The language and culture of Italy are filtering through, regardless.

Gianfranco sweeps me into small shops up side streets, where after good-humoured haggling he hands me a beautiful suede coat with a fur-lined hood wrapped in tissue paper, or a leather skirt, or gold jewellery. He never pays full price for anything; his audacity is breathtaking. We emerge into the sunlight holding hands, each with new reversible leather belts. He is funny, smart, generous beyond measure: this is all I see in those early days. I am gradually substituting the cool stone rooms of his restaurant for those of the Institute, until one day I simply stop attending the course. Most lunchtimes I sit in the front room of the restaurant typing out the daily menu with one finger, spellbound

by the names of the different chiantis recommended each day: Geografico and Cappezano, Grignanello and Castello di Volpaia, Lamole di Lamole and Villa La Pagliaia. Then I move inside to the warmth of the dining room to sit beside my beloved and pick disinterestedly at the tidbits he places before me.

Evenings I am back, perfumed and partyish, to sit and sit and sit, drinking too much, writing love poems on the recycled paper placemats which double as menus, before reeling off into the late night on Gianfranco's arm. Gianfranco drives his blue Fiat very fast up the narrow snaking streets to Fiesole with Deep Purple thundering out the open window. One time, with my sister in the back, I turn around to say that it wouldn't matter if I died at that moment, I am so brimming with happiness, and when she agrees we look at each other a little shocked.



No longer students at the Michelangelo Institute, my sister and I are obliged to look for accommodation elsewhere. We move from the boarding house and, thanks to an advertisement in the free weekly *Il Pulce*, into an apartment in an unfamiliar suburb away from the heart of the city, sharing with Anna and Franco. Initially we adore this unconventional couple; they strike us as modern and un-Italian. Anna is tall with a long plait of black hair which reaches to the waist of her billowy Indian dresses; Franco, a stub of a man, has his long hair tied back in a ponytail. Posters on the apartment walls depict peace marches and alternative lifestyles. Remnants of the sixties, they have a little art and craft shop nearby, filled with mostly dust-covered junk and generally devoid of customers. The evenings when my sister and I have not caught the bus into the Santa Maria Novella Piazza to descend stairs to Salt Peanuts, our favourite underground jazz cellar, we sit at the long table in our room drinking chianti and eating bread and cheese with the door firmly closed.



## SPAGHETTI ALLA PUTTANESCA

*Olive oil*

*1 medium onion*

*3 cloves garlic*

*4-6 slices pancetta*

*Dried chilli (optional)*

*2 tablespoons black olives*

*5 anchovies*

*1 tablespoon capers*

*1/3 cup red wine*

*400 grams peeled tomatoes*

*Salt and pepper*

*Chopped parsley*

Heat the oil, then add finely chopped onion and garlic together with sliced pancetta and chilli, if desired. Sauté 5 to 8 minutes on medium heat, stirring frequently, until translucent. Throw in olives. Cook several more minutes then add finely chopped anchovies and capers. After several more minutes, slosh in wine. Bring to the boil and bubble until evaporated, then add peeled tomatoes and about half the tin of water. Season cautiously with salt and pepper, bring back to the boil then simmer 30 to 40 minutes. Garnish with parsley.