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THE PBS TRAVEL SERIES WITH KATHY MCCABE

DREAM OF ITALY®

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Kathy McCabe

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Editor's Note



I love introducing our readers to foreigners who have created fascinating lives in Italy! Twin sisters *Lisa* and *Toni Brancatisano* are two such people.

Lisa, a trained fashion designer, embodies creativity, most notably watercolor painting. I started to notice her paintings on her Instagram account during Covid-19 and was particularly taken with her watercolors of dogs. I started to think about asking Lisa to paint a magazine cover—this month's! The Florence *Duomo* at Christmas was her idea, but if you look carefully, there's a little terrier, my contribution to the scene! If you'd like to order the print itself, you can do so on our website.

Lisa's twin sister, Toni, finds her inspiration in food, from cake design to culinary history. Toni leads tours for Eating Europe, which is owned by my friend Kenny Dunn, and their Rome tours were one of my late mother's favorite things to do in Italy. Toni is all about food, and she was gracious enough to share her family recipes that have an Italian/Australian/British flavor for Christmas. I look forward to *tortellini in brodo* all year—watch the *Dream of Italy* episode in *Bologna* where I learn to make *tortellini*!

One of the highlights of my summer this year was attending a 50x50 Save Venice event in Denver, where I live. It was so great to get back to socializing, and this event was exquisite, featuring an opera singer and the famous *Aperol* spritz! I was brought to the event by my friend Amy Parsons of *Mozzafiato*, whom you read about in a previous issue. Amy introduced me to the ever-engaging Tina Walls, who is the president of the Board of Directors of this conservation organization. Talking to Tina and delving into the work they've been doing made me feel like we should honor Save Venice on its 50th anniversary.

I always welcome your feedback and ideas.

Email me at kathy@dreamofitaly.com

Kathy McCabe

In this issue



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From Australia to Italy



FOOD

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PHILANTHROPY

Save Venice:
50 Years of Art Conservation



SISTER ACT

From Australia to Italy

The stories of how people end up living in Italy—and what they pursue—are fascinating. Twin sisters Lisa and Toni Brancatisano grew up with a Calabrian father and British mother in Melbourne, Australia.

Since moving to Italy within a few years of each other in their 20s, both have raised families and pursued interesting career paths. Lisa is married to *Emiliano* and has two sons, Thomas (7 years old) and *Matteo* (10); Toni is the mother of *Annabella* (21) and Joseph (17). Based in Florence, Lisa, who painted the watercolor for this month's cover, has come full circle back to her love of painting after exploring fashion design and magazine publishing. Toni, who lives in Rome, evolved from making jewelry to putting fondant cake making on the map in Italy to starring in a beloved food show on Italian TV. Fortunately, you can learn more from both sisters as they offer fascinating food and related tours of their adopted hometowns.

Kathy McCabe: Your dad was born in Italy. So how did he end up in Australia?

Lisa Brancatisano: Our dad was eight when the family immigrated from *Calabria*.

Toni Brancatisano: It was 1950 when *Nonno Vincenzo* came to Australia with the two eldest sons, and then in 1955, our *Nonna Concetta* traveled to Australia with the seven remaining children. Dad is one of eight boys and one girl. The girl came second to last. At the time it was normal for the men to leave the women behind. The idea was that they would go first, find work and save money to establish a home before sending for their wife and children to join them.

My grandmother expected all her sons to find a nice Italian girl to marry, preferably from the south. Would have been best from *Calabria*. My father was the only one who did not marry an Italian out of all his siblings, and my grandmother was not really happy about this, although her biggest fear would have been that her son *Giuseppe* was never going to eat well again for the rest of his life.

KM: Your mom wasn't Italian. How Italian did you grow up? How many of the traditions did you keep?

TB: Every year we would get together with all our cousins and we would do the pasta sauce making day, we would then also do the sausage making day that we would call "making the pig." Funny we would call it that because we were dismantling the pig and making the sausages. As kids, we would run around and observe. I don't think Lisa and I appreciated those days as much as we do now. Now I look back and think, "I'm so glad I had that."

LB: Every Sunday, the first thing in the morning, Mom would put on the meat in the tomato sauce, and Sunday was always a big pasta lunch. So the meat would slow cook for three or four hours in the tomato sauce, and then she would strain it out and we would have pasta with the sauce and then our second course was the meat with a salad.

TB: Christmas Eve was British, and then Christmas Day was with all the Italians. (On page 9, Toni shares some of her family's holiday recipes.) Like Lisa said, every Sunday we would wake up to the smell of Mom cooking the pasta sauce. Mom was an amazing cook, and I think we have her to thank for that. She would do all the Italian recipes, which was amazing.

In Australia growing up, we were the Italians. Here, my surname is so Italian, they know my father is originally born in Italy. But I think as long as I speak Italian with a strong accent, I will never be considered Italian here by the Italians. I always feel like I have to prove myself food-wise too.

KM: I think you told me your father has a very "Italian" job? Is he still working?

LB: He just turned 75, and he still goes six days a week into the wholesale market. He sells produce wholesale, specializing in exotic fruits, and our two brothers, Vin and Chris, both work with him too.

When we were little, Dad had a fruit shop. Then he sold it and went into the wholesale business with his father and brothers. Today, all of our uncles and most of our cousins still work in the fruit and vegetable industry.

KM: Did you think you were going to live in Italy when you were growing up?



Lisa and Toni's father, Joe, at work

LB and TB: We both swore growing up that we would never marry an Italian. Although our father was a typically strict Italian father, thanks to our English mother's influence he allowed us to do things that maybe his older brothers wouldn't have permitted their daughters to do. Namely, we were both exchange students in the U.S. when we were 15, for a year of high school.

I think this experience gave both of us the travel bug and was probably the catalyst that is responsible for the travel we continued to do that resulted in us living in Italy. I know neither of us ever imagined we would live our lives here. I do believe that growing up with traditional Italian values and a strong Italian identity helped us adjust to life in Italy, because after all, having a *bella vacanza Italiana* and living everyday life here are two very different things.

KM: Toni, how did you end up in Italy?

TB: I came here for a holiday in 1998; it was the end of three years overseas. I was a registered nurse, and I thought I'd do a typical Australian working holiday, so I went to London to be a nanny to triplets. Three 2½-year-old girls. I ended up staying over three years in London.

I came to Italy, thinking it was one last summer abroad before returning to Melbourne. I had to leave London because I had exhausted every visa option, and I think a Tuscan summer was definitely a way of procrastinating. But instead, I met my ex-husband and got married. After all, a Tuscan wedding sounded like an excellent idea at the time! When I left Australia to nanny in London, I hadn't considered I would never return to nursing.

KM: You're both now pursuing creative endeavors.

TB: I've always loved being in the kitchen, always loved cooking for other people and having dinner parties, but I don't think I ever considered it a career option at



Toni decorating a cake

school. I was more the traditionalist and Lisa was more the crazy creative in high school. She went off to study fashion, and I was going to be the sensible twin, and I became a registered nurse. I used to say to people, “She got all the creativity in the womb, I don’t have one creative bone in my body.”

When I started living in Italy, I did several jobs. One was working in reception in a boutique hotel, and then I started selling costume jewelry privately through a friend in London. I was then inspired to make my own costume jewelry. That was when I started to realize that I too have a creative side.

Then I went into cake decorating. With cake decorating, you can just go crazy with your creative skills. Cake decorating was a hobby that became a profession, and I went from doing birthday cakes to five-tier wedding cakes.

When my daughter, *Annabella*, turned two, I wanted to make her a Barbie cake. In Italy, all the birthday parties I took my daughter to were all the same: little pizzas, all the same pastries and all the mothers would buy them all from the same shops. In Australia we grew up with our mothers making our birthday cakes. It may not have been anything to look at, but you loved it because mom made it.

My mother died when I was pregnant with *Annabella*, and it dawned on me that a lot of my memories with my beautiful mother were food related. When I became a mother myself, it dawned on me the importance of

creating memories and I was like, “What are my children going to remember me for?” I felt this responsibility to create special childhood memories for my kids. I thought, I’ll make them a birthday cake, and at least they’ll say, “Every year Mom would make us this amazing birthday cake.” So the first was the Barbie cake. *Annabella* thought it was beautiful. All the mothers thought it was beautiful.

I got to the stage where it takes one person to ask you, “Would you make a cake for a party?” And you sell that first cake and then it begins. I’m self-taught; I bought a lot of cake decorating books from England and America, because at the time you couldn’t find anything on cake decorating in Italy. Times have definitely changed though in Italy and now the country boasts so many talented cake decorators.

When I was doing wedding cakes, I did an audition for a TV show. It was the first cooking reality show on the Food Channel in Italy, and it was called *La Scuola—Cucina di Classe*. This was at the end of 2009. I passed the auditions and got in, and after a few weeks, I ended up winning. It made huge news in Australia because the Australian had beaten the Italians in a cooking show.

KM: That’s incredible. What were you making for your dishes in the show?

TB: We had our main chef who was with us every episode. He would do a recipe that we would have to copy exactly. We also had a guest chef every episode who would do something, and we would have the same ingredients, but we had to be creative and do something different. There were themes like pasta day, soup day, fish day, dessert day.

I won, and the prize was to have a show on the Food Channel. My TV show was on cake decorating and baking, called *Le Torte di Toni*. The first three seasons of the TV show were with my daughter, *Annabella*. She was 10. Each episode I would teach *Annabella* a new cake.

KM: How did your career evolve after the TV show?

TB: At first, my work involved travelling around Italy holding cake decorating classes most weekends. I also participated in many trade fairs as a judge for cake competitions and doing demonstrations. I eventually stopped making big cakes professionally and moved to Rome. My blog evolved, with me wanting to include savory recipes too to prove that I’m not just the cake girl. I began hosting food tours through Eating Europe and on my own. I teach cooking lessons if requested.

I sometimes do private catering events here in Rome, and in the past this has included catering for the

Australian and New Zealand embassies in Rome. I also sometimes do food styling jobs, evolving a recipe for a company, cooking, photographing and styling pictures that are published on Instagram, and over the years I've been lucky to work as an assistant to talented food stylists on ad campaigns for companies including McDonald's in France and *Martini*.

KM: Lisa, what made you want to come to Italy?

LB: I wanted to learn to speak Italian properly. When we were 21 our parents said, "Do you want a big party? Or we'll give you the airfare to go overseas." I took the airfare, and I bought a one-way ticket in 1993 when I was 22, because I had no intention of doing a short trip. I wanted to get the most out of it that I could.

KM: Did Toni come at that time too?

TB: No, I bought a car.

LB: I booked a one-month Italian course in Florence and I was placed with a family. I could choose to lease an apartment, but I thought, "No, if I live with the family, then I'm really going to make an effort to learn the language and speak out of necessity."

A few weeks after arriving, I met an artist, *Marco*, who taught me watercolor painting. I ended up staying in Florence with him for about two years, and we'd sit outside the *Uffizi* Gallery selling artwork. And you know what's funny? I see the same artists today from 30 years ago; they're still the same people.

I ended up eventually leaving Florence. I wanted to travel and see more of the world, and so I went to London for a year before eventually returning to Australia. I had always worked in the fashion industry, and I went back to working as a designer. Ten years later, I was a freelance fashion and graphic designer, but didn't love the job. I had sold my apartment in Melbourne and decided to visit Toni in Italy in 2006, when she mentioned that she had some friends who wanted someone to speak English to their kids in the afternoon at their beach club. These friends also had a fashion business distributing well-known international brands exclusively in Italy and so a few days later, while talking about my work in fashion, they offered me a job as a brand and marketing manager in Florence. It was a perfect example of destiny pulling me back to the city I had called home all those years ago. I don't think I would ever have been able to just turn up in Florence and find a job in fashion so quickly.

KM: How did you then decide to leave fashion design and start a magazine and start giving tours?

LB: In 2010, I started a blog as a way to start documenting my life here in Italy and because I wanted to write a book about Tuscany. It didn't last very long as when *Matteo* came along in 2011, I didn't have much time to work on the blog with a newborn and a full-time job and so didn't get back to this project until 2016. I thought I would mock-up a "chapter" one day, and then printed it and showed it to my boss, who by that time was also the owner of two luxury residences in Florence, asking if he would like to place them in the apartments for their guests. He loved it and so we started printing a small run for their apartments.

I would also include an article on the residences and so we decided to register *This Tuscan Life* as a proper magazine so we could distribute it further afield, and that is how the magazine came to be. It was a monthly issue at first and featured a town to visit, the artisans, traditions and naturally recipes and a special cocktail created by Harry's Bar. The magazine then became a larger bi-monthly issue and then the final year I produced four collection issues—Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer—and stopped working on it when the pandemic hit. In 2019, I decided to leave the fashion job and focus more on the magazine and *This Tuscan Life* experiences. This is how I started also doing food, shopping and artisan tours.



Toni's book, *La Torta Perfetta di Toni*

KM: You now are really known on Instagram for your watercolors, which inspired me to ask you to paint our cover. How did that come about?

LB: During the pandemic, I had gone to *Maremma* and taken some gorgeous photos of *Castiglione della Pescaia* and this beautiful road that has the cypress trees and the umbrella pines with all the poppies. I thought, "This would be a beautiful painting." During our strictest lockdown, we were stuck inside and I suddenly had some spare time so I pulled out my box of old watercolors and painted that scene. I started to paint some other things like tomatoes, grapes and flowers and then I did a portrait of my sons. One day a friend of my mother-in-law asked me, "Do you think you could do a portrait of my dogs?" I said that I could try and so practiced a few dogs and she ended up being so happy with the final result.

Once I started to post the watercolors on Instagram, I started to get more requests and private commissions. I



(left) Painting of Pippi; (middle) Florence Duomo at Christmas print; (right) Lisa in her studio

really have to thank Instagram for a lot of my watercolor work and now it's also word of mouth. I've since been commissioned to do a lot of corporate jobs as well. I just painted and designed a yogurt label, collaborated with *Betty Soldi* on a wine label for the *Fattoria Poggio Alloro*, created place settings for the amazing vineyard dinners held at *Querceto di Castellina* and I'm now doing a collection of postcards for *Dario Cecchini*.

I have painted a lot of dog portraits this past year, which is always special, especially when I am painting a beloved pet that has passed away. I have been fortunate to witness a few of these that were surprise commissions being received, the most recent being *Pippi*, a sweet Jack Russell who got bitten by a viper in *Umbria*. When I delivered the portrait to the lady who had commissioned it, the owner wasn't supposed to be there but had decided to tag along and come to Florence that day.

I felt for her as she opened the package and knew she was devastated by the loss of her dear dog. As she opened the portrait, she burst into tears, which got me started and her friends as well. Here we were in the central market all crying and hugging. It was a very special moment and I felt so honored to have been able to give her a special memory of *Pippi*.

KM: Did you learn in school how to paint?

LB: Marco taught me a lot in the early days. I studied fashion design and loved fashion illustration. In Australia, I used to paint with a group of women once a week but was painting with acrylics. I hadn't touched the watercolors though since I was in Florence all those years ago in 1993. I've watched a lot of tutorials online this past

year and have learned so much thanks to them.

KM: Can you tell people about the process of painting this piece, *Florence Duomo at Christmas*?

LB: I painted it non-stop for seven days and I went and took a lot of additional photos of the *Duomo* so I could understand the details better. I wear glasses when I paint, but I also used a magnifying glass for some parts and I have really tiny brushes for some of the smaller details. I did take a lot of breaks though, which I think is important when you are creating something with this much detail.

It's good to take a step back and observe the work from a distance. I try and distance myself from what the object actually is, if that makes sense, and look at the shapes within and just concentrate, even on the negative spaces. I'll take lots of photos; sometimes you can see things clearer like the hues and shadows through a photo or with fresh eyes after having a break.

I was frustrated at times with the *Duomo* because there were some details that were just too tiny to get perfect, and I kept reminding myself, "Hey, it's a painting. It's not a photograph!"

The whole facade of the *Duomo* was the hardest, all those details in the long columns where all those little arches and statues are. And trying to get the color right too, because the color changes depending on the sun, light and the photo. 🌸

For more information on Lisa, her painting and tours, visit
www.thistuscanlife.com

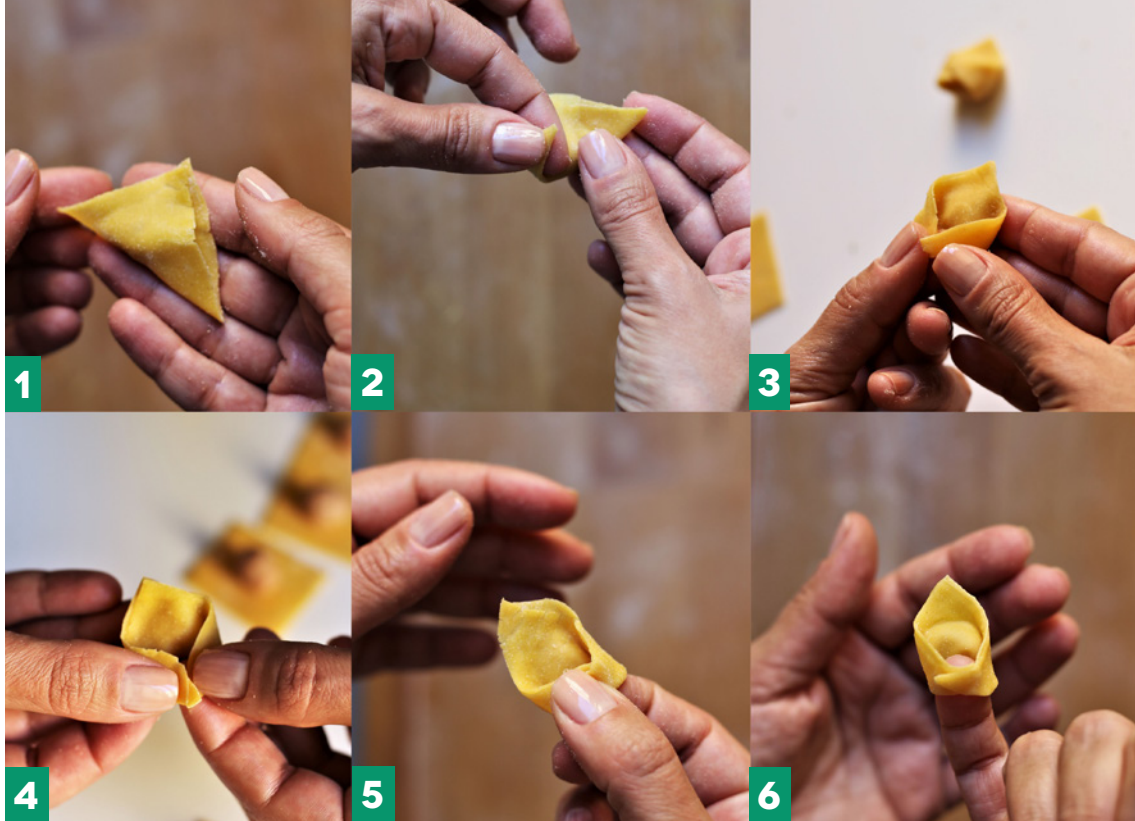
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www.tonibrancatisano.com



CHRISTMAS RECIPES

FROM OUR FAMILY to YOURS

by Toni Brancatisano
photography by Toni Brancatisano



How to fold tortellini

My sister and I try to incorporate both Italian and Australian-British traditions into our Christmas cooking here in Italy. These two recipes are our mainstays for our family Christmas gatherings.

TORTELLINI IN BRODO

Tortellini in broth is a classic Christmas recipe, originating in *Bologna*, although it became more of a part of my Christmas lunch traditions when I moved to Rome, as it wasn't something I would often do when I was in Tuscany. Traditional first-course pasta dishes enjoyed during the festive season change from region to region; even the filling of the *tortellini* can vary.

Families usually spend time together making the *tortellini* by hand in the days leading up to Christmas Day, and traditionally they are served in *capon* broth. (A *capon* is a castrated rooster that has been fattened for eating.) Any sort of meat broth is acceptable to use if you don't like or can't find *capon*.

You could certainly have the broth cooking while you make the *tortellini*, accomplishing the recipe in four hours (depending how quick you are at making the *tortellini*), but I prefer to have the pasta made at least the day before. Many families today buy the *tortellini* from specialty fresh pasta stores, which makes it a quick and easy first course to prepare for a Christmas lunch or dinner and allows you to spend more time on a more elaborate main meal.

Having said all that, there is never a wrong time of the year to enjoy this very satisfying, soothing and delicious recipe that is the epitome of traditional Italian comfort food.

Serves 8

FOR THE PASTA

Note: You can also buy good quality *tortellini* and cook them in your homemade broth.

Ingredients

- 4¼ cups type 0 flour
- 5 eggs
- Pinch of salt

Directions

1. Sift the flour in a bowl. Make a well in the middle of the flour and add the eggs to the flour with a pinch of salt. Start beating the eggs with a fork, incorporating the flour a little at a time. Next, knead with your hands, incorporating until you get a smooth and elastic dough.

2. Cover the dough with plastic wrap and put it to rest in the refrigerator for 1 hour. Use a pasta machine to roll the pasta thin. Cut the dough into 1½-inch squares, using a ruler to measure. Cover with plastic wrap until you are ready to use the pasta to avoid it drying out.

FOR THE FILLING

Ingredients

- 1 Tbsp butter
- 2 to 3 sage leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 3.5 oz pork loin, sliced
- Salt and pepper
- 3.5 oz *prosciutto*
- 3.5 oz *mortadella*
- ½ cup *Parmigiano Reggiano* cheese, grated
- 1 egg
- Nutmeg
- 8 cups homemade or good quality store-bought meat broth

Directions

1. Melt the butter in a pan with 2 to 3 sage leaves, a bay leaf and a sprig of rosemary. Brown the slices of pork loin and season with a little salt and pepper.
2. Add the pork loin to a food processor together with 1 Tbsp of the juices from the pan and pulse roughly.
3. Add the *mortadella* and *prosciutto* and process together. Add to a mixing bowl.
4. Add the grated *Parmigiano Reggiano* cheese, 1 egg and freshly grated nutmeg to the meat mixture and mix until smooth.
5. Place a small amount of filling (¼ tsp) in the center of each square of pasta and fold to close in a triangle. Press firmly along the seams to secure and squeeze out any air pockets, then overlap the two corners at the base and press to seal. Use a tiny amount of water to help secure the seams of the pasta if the pasta squares have become a little dry.
6. Bring the broth to a boil and cook the freshly made *tortellini* for 2 minutes. Serve *tortellini* together with the broth.

FARAONA (GUINEA FOWL WITH CHESTNUT STUFFING)

After the pasta course of Christmas lunch or dinner is over, the main meal almost always involves some sort of roast meat. If meat isn't on the menu, the entire meal (*antipasto*, *primo* and *secondo*) is probably dominated by seafood.

Once again, where you live in Italy will probably determine what meat you are serving, and this can range from pig, lamb, *capon* or goat. Turkey has become a more recent addition to Italian Christmas tables, but for a bird that is a bit more traditional (and easily found) I like to use a guinea fowl. Guinea fowl, or *faraona*, is a lovely gamey bird, perfect for the main event of Christmas lunch. However, this recipe can easily be adapted for chicken, duck or turkey.

I decide a couple of weeks before Christmas what I'll cook for our main course, and I don't always do the same thing every year. Roast pork was our traditional meal growing up in Australia, and I often make that for nostalgic reasons. We would celebrate a very British Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve (my mother's traditions), and then Christmas Day was a large gathering with my father's side of the family—very Italian, with pasta being the first course and often goat being the main. There was always more than one roast meat to choose from, and considering my father is one of nine children, you can

imagine the huge banquet that was enjoyed by us all—aunts, uncles and numerous cousins.

Stuffing a guinea fowl, turkey or duck has been my go-to in recent years because I enjoy the process of making the stuffing and either tying or sewing everything together. I always roast potatoes, onions and sweet potatoes to accompany whatever meat dish I cook; gravy is also obligatory. I serve peas, *broccoletti* or *cicoria* as my greens.

Serves 6 (assuming you are accompanying it with roast vegetables)

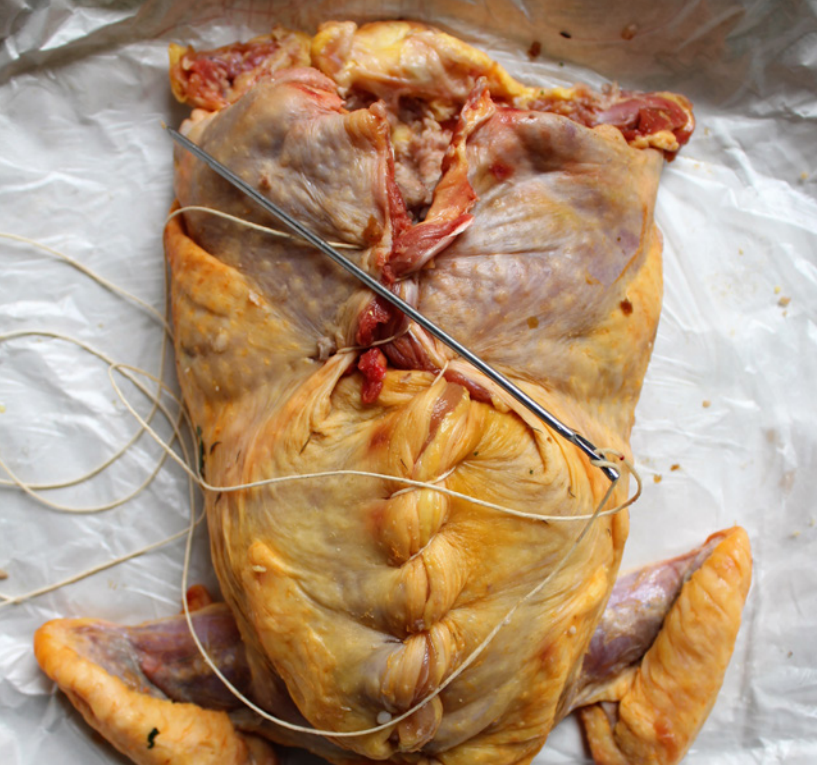
INGREDIENTS

Note: Although you can use a can of pre-cooked chestnuts, I strongly suggest you buy fresh, raw chestnuts if you can and cook them the night before.

- 12 oz chestnuts
- 4 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 3 celery ribs, chopped finely
- 1 medium onion, chopped finely
- 1 small carrot, chopped finely
- 3 Tbsp fresh thyme leaves
- Handful parsley, chopped
- 3.5 oz pistachios



The finished farona



Sewing the bird together



Butter-rubbed bird

- 7 oz veal, minced
- 7 oz pork, minced
- ½ cup mixed currants and candied citrus peel
- 2 slices rustic Tuscan-style bread, chopped finely
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1 guinea fowl, deboned (can also use chicken, duck or turkey)
- 3 to 4 slices bacon
- Fresh rosemary sprigs
- 4 Tbsp butter, softened
- Salt and pepper
- Kitchen string

DIRECTIONS

1. Cook the chestnuts for the stuffing the night before. Roasting chestnuts will bring out their sweetness more, but boiling them is also a great way to cook and quickly soften them. I like to do both. Whichever way you choose to cook them, it is imperative that you use a sharp knife to cut a cross or X into the hard outer skin of each chestnut. If roasting them, place them on a baking tray and roast in the oven at 400° F for 20 minutes or until they are soft inside. To boil the chestnuts, add them to a saucepan of water, bring to a boil and allow to cook for 20 minutes or until soft. Wait until they have cooled slightly and then peel them. Chop the chestnuts roughly. (I usually boil them for about 15 minutes first and then add them to the oven until they split open, about another 10 to 15 minutes.)

2. Preheat the oven to 350° F.
3. Make the stuffing. Pour 4 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat and cook the finely chopped onion, celery and carrot until the onion is translucent. Allow to cool.
4. Stir in half of the thyme and all of the parsley, chestnuts, pistachios, minced meats, currants, candied citrus peel and bread. Next, pour in 1 cup of chicken stock. Use your hands to thoroughly mix all the ingredients together, allowing the bread to soak up the chicken stock.
5. Lay the deboned guinea fowl skin side down.
6. Add the stuffing, ensuring it is distributed evenly in a loaf-like shape down the middle. Close the bird around the stuffing and lay 2 slices of bacon along the seam.
7. Use kitchen string to tie the bird together. Use a separate piece of string to tie the wings close to the body. Insert two long sprigs of rosemary under the string alongside the speck.
8. Mix the remaining fresh thyme into the butter and use your hands to rub it all over the bird. Add salt and pepper and place on a roasting rack in a baking tray, bacon side up.
9. Roast for 1½ hours at 350° F or until the thermometer inserted into the thickest part reads 150° F. Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 20 minutes. Cooking times may vary depending on the size of the bird. 🍷

SAVE

DREAM OF ITALY DEC 2021 / JAN 2022 | 3

Giovanni Cucco
injecting resins in the
Madonna Hodegetria
mosaic, Torcello

by Kathy McCabe and Elaine Murphy



Mercury and the Three
Graces by Tintoretto,
sponsored by
Adelina Wong Ettelson
MATTEO DE FINA

ENICE

50 YEARS OF ART CONSERVATION

Though a beloved city of art, Venice has always been in a precarious position when it comes to preserving that art. The city simultaneously suffers from the fate of being built as a series of islands on an oceanic lagoon and bears the effects of flooding, humidity and saltwater that threaten precious art and architecture.

With so many masterpieces, and so much constant maintenance needed, conservationists have their work cut out for them in *La Serenissima*. For the past 50 years, conservation organization Save Venice has stepped up to answer the call.

Though Venice floods seasonally due to *acqua alta* (high water), the water typically recedes within days, remains at a fairly low level (despite its name) and does not cause much damage or disruption. However, the floods can sometimes be catastrophic, the most infamous occurring in November 1966, leaving the city under six feet of water and trapping residents in their homes for 24 hours.

“The floods of 1966 brought the world’s attention to the fragile nature of the artistic patrimony here. There was an appeal initially by UNESCO that anyone who’d been inspired by Venice—art historians, musicians, writers or even tourists—should try to get together and give something back,” says Melissa Conn, director of the Venice office of Save Venice.

In the aftermath, experienced art restorers came from Florence—which also had its own epic flood in November 1966—to help clean up Venice. Those restorers formed conservation committees that eventually became Save Venice in 1971.

“Our mission is to promote and protect the artistic patrimony, so that can be restoring a building or painting or sculpture, or promoting exhibitions, publications, works of art, archives and fellowships for students who are working on topics of Venetian art,” says Conn.



CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES AND PROJECTS

Modern technology has led to advancements not only in the techniques of the restoration process, but also in the methods used to examine art and determine its origins, conservation needs and history. Infrared photography and ultraviolet imaging help restorers see beneath the surface



Church of San Sebastiano

of the paint and understand what they need to remove, clean and repair.

Many artworks have been previously restored, but those earlier restorers likely did not have the same tools and understanding of how to best preserve the pieces, nor the proper paints and pigments to replicate the original color palettes. Meanwhile, architecture requires constant maintenance, especially given the humid climate and seafront location.

With a team of experts such as art historians and artists at hand, Save Venice works on restoring 40 to 60 projects at a time, whether on site around the city or in its restoration lab. Some of the more noteworthy projects they have tackled—all of which you can see in Venice—can be found at the Church of *San Sebastiano*, the *Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta* on *Torcello* and the Church of *Santa Maria* and *San Donato*.

In restoring the 16th-century Church of *San Sebastiano*, Save Venice focused on *Paolo Veronese's* wall and ceiling frescoes as well as oil paintings on wood and canvas. Conservators stripped yellowed varnish and excess paint from the massive ceiling frescoes illustrating the story of *Esther* from the Old Testament to restore *Veronese's* original color palette and protect the wooden frames surrounding the paintings.

The team also took measures to prevent humidity and saltwater—two natural enemies of art conservation prevalent in the Venice lagoon—from entering *San Sebastiano* by treating the porous brick walls and façade, weatherizing windows and installing new flood barriers.

At the *Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta* on the island of *Torcello*, conservationists worked simultaneously on restoring more than 2,400 square feet of Byzantine

mosaics and strengthening the brickwork behind the mosaics to ensure the walls of the church could support the weight of thousands of tiny tesserae. Where mosaic pieces had been lost, the area was filled in with paint so that the gaps are not visible from a distance.

During the restoration process on *Torcello*, workers discovered never-before-seen and previously unknown frescoes from the ninth century, painted in a Carolingian decorative style and depicting the Virgin Mary and Saint Martin. These frescoes were eventually covered over by the mosaics, and prove that the church attracted Western European artistic styles alongside Byzantine art.

HISTORY OF ART PATRONAGE

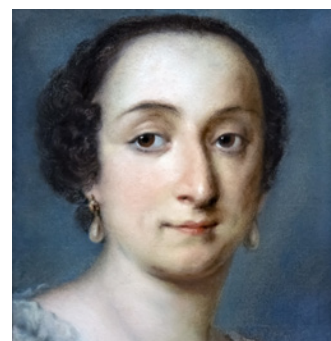
The roots of modern conservation sponsorship extend back to the era of art patronage, which was prevalent in Venice. Unlike Florence and other cities dominated by noble families like the *Medici*, Venice was a city of elected officials and merchants who earned their wealth from professions such as shipping, trade and navigation.

During the Renaissance, the Venetian Republic government commissioned art to showcase the city's culture to foreign traders coming to buy silk or spices, or to diplomats visiting on government business. As a result, even the most obscure, off-the-beaten-path churches have art by great masters like *Titian*.

“Certain artists were promoted by particular noble families, who would want that artist to decorate their chapel in a certain church. There were also private collections that now have become part of the state museums or the city museums. The Venetian Republic commissioned artworks because Venice was the motherland and they had to show off. They wanted everyone to come here and be in awe. Venice was meant to shine, and you had to show the best of everything,” says Conn. “Now that we have the *Biennale*, Venice continues to be at the center of an artistic scene.”

Now, that support for the creation of art has turned into support of patronage for preservation. Sponsors are always needed to fund Save Venice's work—individual works of art, buildings or parts of projects can be adopted for conservation—and the organization has made its name

on fundraising for and restoring 1,672 works of art during its lifetime. The projects highlighted in this issue range from \$3,000 for a group of three pastel portraits by female



Portrait of Lucietta Pellegrini Sartori by Rosalba Carriera



MATTEO PRANDONI/BFA.COM

Tina Walls (right) at a conservation workshop during 2020 Carnevale Gala

artists Rosalba Carriera and Marianna Carlevarijs, to up to \$98,000 to fund the entire restoration of the iconostasis at the *Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello*.

After being on Save Venice's Board of Directors and hosting events for almost two decades, Adelina Wong Ettelson wanted to take her involvement to the next level. She funded her first conservation project two years ago, a *Tintoretto* painting from 1578 called *Mercury and the Three Graces* that is currently on display in the *Palazzo Ducale*. Restoration work on the painting was completed in 2020, and she has since been able to see the finished work in person.

When she was deciding which painting to sponsor, she says, "*Mercury and the Three Graces* just spoke to me. There was something about the lines and the mood of it.

"To know that I was involved in helping restore this beautiful painting to its original glory was so exciting for me. I've never done anything like this," she says. "It's a natural evolvement of where I want to be with the organization and how I want to support it. I was definitely interested in the painting area, so I just had to wait for the right one that resonated with me."

PEOPLE ARE THE BACKBONE

Tina Walls, who first visited Venice on a trip in high school in 1971, was invited to become involved in Save Venice by a fellow art museum board member. Now the president of Save Venice's Board of Directors, she says, "I was immediately impressed with the projects, the supporters' passion for Venice and Venetian art and culture, and the sense of shared community." She attended her first *Carnevale* gala in Venice in 2008 and has since participated in several balls, galas and trips with the organization.

Similarly, Wong Ettelson was initially drawn to Save Venice for the community of like-minded art lovers, but became more involved because she was struck by the organization's mission to preserve art. She became the chair of the Young Friends of Save Venice committee for

members under 35 years old, then joined the Board of Directors 10 years ago. She is now the chair of the events committee on the Board of Directors, planning the organization's balls and galas.

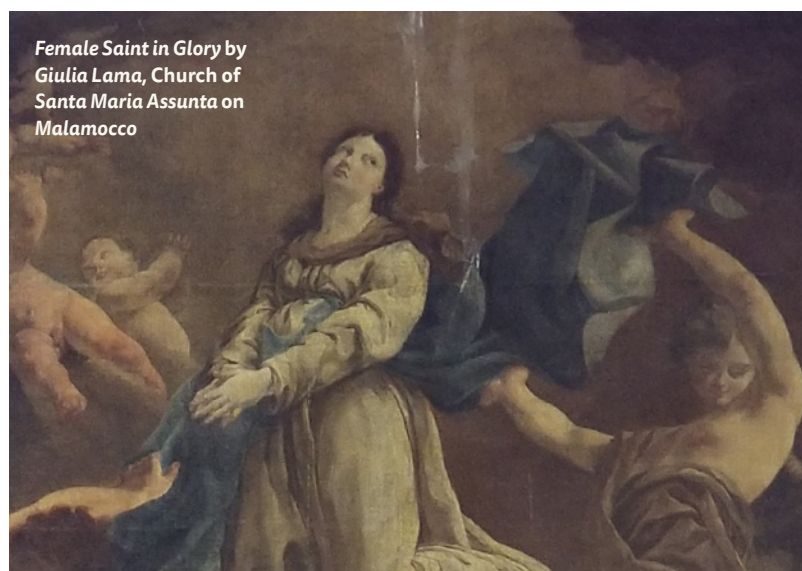
Wong Ettelson's favorite events are ones hosted in people's homes that enable guests to see how Venetians live. "I think that's really what traveling and exploring is all about—to understand. It goes back to the people and the connections. Every one of us wants to see more behind the scenes, or what it feels like getting to go see *San Sebastiano* and understanding what it actually takes to restore all the beautiful tiles and the entire church," she says. "That was what the Venetians did in the old days when they asked an artist to do an entire church or entire building."

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

As Save Venice completes its first half-century—a milestone that coincides with the city's 1600th birthday—it is focusing on Venetian women in art by both restoring their artworks and researching their lives. During the Renaissance, Venetian women painted, wrote poetry and pursued other artistic exploits, but few of them have been recognized or studied and little is known about them. Many worked alongside their fathers or brothers in art workshops, but when the women married, they often left their artistic pursuits behind. Some, however, continued to paint and took over the workshops after their fathers' deaths.

Among these female artists is painter, poet and scholar *Giulia Lama*. She studied under her father, *Agostino*, and continued to paint after his death in 1714. Her oldest known pieces were created in the 1720s, when she was almost 40 years old.

Lama's oil painting *Female Saint in Glory*, currently in need of restoration, hangs in the Church of *Santa Maria Assunta* on the island of *Malamocco* and dates to the 18th century. Its surface is currently covered in pigeon



Female Saint in Glory by Giulia Lama, Church of Santa Maria Assunta on Malamocco

droppings, discolored varnish and cobwebs, while the original paint itself is buckling. A previous restoration used paint that was darker in color than the original paint, covering the bright color palette and small details.

Two other artists spotlighted in the campaign are *Rosalba Carriera* and *Marianna Carlevarijs*, whose 18th-century pastel portraits will also be preserved. This work will focus on the frames, glass and mattes, including photographing the works and remounting them with acid-free materials to protect them for the future.

Native Venetian *Carriera* began her career painting miniature scenes on the lids of snuff boxes and later became one of the first artists to use pastels for portraits. A self-taught painter, she took commissions from European nobility, diplomats and Venetian court ladies for portraits. *Carlevarijs*, whose father was also an artist, studied under *Carriera* and adopted a similar style to her mentor.

Save Venice's anniversary campaign capitalizes on growing interest in these women. In recent years, papers presented at the Renaissance Society of America conference have focused on female artists, spurring momentum for scholars to more heavily research women's influence in Renaissance art. Sponsors can adopt a painting by one of these women or contribute to research that will create a database of women artists in Venice and their accomplishments.

SAVE VENICE MEMBERSHIP

Though Save Venice welcomes sponsors, another way to support the organization is by becoming an annual member and joining local chapters throughout the U.S. Memberships start at \$100 per year, and members receive swag like a tote bag and newsletter, access to live virtual art lectures, invitations to weekend excursions in the U.S. and exclusive one-hour conservation tours by Conn and her colleagues to see restoration work up close (sponsors can also, of course, visit the pieces they've sponsored in person).

The tour takes members behind the scenes to a Save Venice conservation site in Venice where they learn about conservation techniques. For example, in the Church of *San Sebastiano*, members learn about Save Venice's campaign to restore *Veronese's* paintings and frescoes and visit the elevated monks' loft that is not open to the public. Sometimes there is a chance to interact directly with a restorer, although this is not always possible.

"It's very much a hands-on individual tour. I tell you about the conservation behind the scenes, and it's a very special experience," says Conn.

With the shift toward virtual events due to the pandemic, Save Venice is organizing more online art

history and conservation lectures for members. The lectures are given by art historians, specialists and experts and provide a great introduction to Save Venice for new members. "Because they're so passionate, they really make it fun to listen to," says Wong Ettelson.

Both sponsors and members receive invitations to exclusive, high-profile events hosted by Save Venice. Pandemic conditions permitting, the annual black-tie Masquerade Ball in New York takes place in April, bringing in more than \$1 million in donations and sponsorships as well as attracting new members and press coverage. Wong Ettelson explains that the ball is seen in the fashion world as a "mini-Met," referring to the Met Gala hosted by *Vogue's* Anna Wintour. (The ball was not held during the pandemic but will return to New York in April 2022. Ticket prices for past balls have started at \$1,500, of which all but \$300 supports Save Venice directly.)

Another large event is the biannual gala held in Venice. The four-day event includes visits to the restoration sites, tours and lectures in museums. In the past, Save Venice has hosted smaller events before the ball in conjunction with sponsors such as *Dolce & Gabbana*. The gala is a more intimate experience, with about 100 to 150 people, while the Masquerade Ball hosts around

MATTEO PRANDONI/BFA.COM



Adelina Wong Ettelson at the Masquerade Ball

500. The members-only 50th anniversary gala will be held in Venice in October 2022; the cost for past galas has been around \$6,000, including a tax-deductible donation to Save Venice starting at \$2,250.

"It's not just one piece of art. It's revelations through having these private moments where it's not the standard tourist spiel, and you're getting to have experts and people who know exactly what they're talking about in a very nice, private setting," says Wong Ettelson of attending these private events.

Further, for those who are in Venice and want to contribute on a small scale, Save Venice organizes treasure hunts around the city that cost between \$20 and \$30. A popular treasure hunt for children involves searching for unique doorknobs, while others require participants to listen to the sounds of Venice or visit many of the works restored by Save Venice.

Other 50th anniversary celebrations include 50 celebrations around the world until March 2022, including



Mosaics at the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello

dinner with experts. Donors can host a “50 for 50” event at a venue of their choosing by contributing between \$5,000 and \$100,000. All hosts will receive an event planning kit.

To join as a member or sponsor a piece, contact Kim Tamboer Manjarres, director of development, at kim@savevenice.org

PROJECTS AWAITING SPONSORSHIP

Sponsors can adopt one of 12 apostles depicted on the iconostasis of the *Basilica of un-italicize Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello*, a rare example of artwork from Byzantine Venice. The Virgin Mary sits in the center of the wooden panel, with the 12 apostles surrounding her. The tempera paintings of each figure by *Zanino di Pietro*, dating to the 15th century, are set against a gold leaf background that matches the brilliant golden mosaics in the rest of the church.

Currently, the paint is flaking and some of the paintings have large holes where paint has been lost. The wooden panel will be removed and taken to a conservation lab in Venice, where restorers will clean it, reapply any salvageable flakes of original paint and fill in the gaps with new paint.

In addition, a narrative collection of nine paintings by *Vittore Carpaccio* is being restored in the *Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni* (also known as the *Scuola Dalmata*), and two will be on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 2022. The *Scuola Dalmata* was established in 1451 as a confraternity for Venetians who were originally from the Dalmatia region of present-day Croatia. Between 1502 and 1508, *Carpaccio* was commissioned to paint a series narrating the stories of the *Scuola Dalmata*’s patron saints Jerome, George and Tryphon for its meeting house.

These paintings are affected by yellowing varnish and a more muted color palette that artists used during another restoration in the 1940s, obscuring the paintings’ original, more vivid colors. At the *Scuola Dalmata*, visitors will be able to see unrestored paintings alongside both restored paintings and photographic reproductions of works that are undergoing restoration. Sponsors can donate up to \$78,000 toward this project.

HOW SAVE VENICE HAS EVOLVED

After 50 years, Save Venice remains true to its mission of responding to a city in need. With catastrophic flooding in 2019 came destruction to artwork and buildings all over Venice. At that time, Conn organized volunteers to clean out churches, rinse tiled floors and do restoration and structural work. Save Venice launched its Immediate Response Fund, which raised more than \$700,000 to provide quick aid to projects affected by natural disasters and requiring urgent conservation steps. One of its most monumental projects was the 5,300-square-foot mosaic floor in the Church of *Santa Maria and San Donato* on the island of *Murano*, which had been previously restored in the 1970s, as well as in 2012–2015, but was damaged again in the 2019 flood.

Walls says this project was especially meaningful to her, as it was the first project she sponsored, during the 2012–2015 restoration. “It was a passion project in honor of my father, who was a brick mason and highly creative with his designs for family and friends. I was impressed that the church’s priest kept the loose mosaics that had detached from the floor in recent years and that in the 2012–2015 restoration, they were used to maintain and conserve the work that had been completed after the previous conservation work in the 1970s,” she says.

The church’s especially low elevation on the island of *Murano* meant that the mosaic floor was submerged in seawater for several weeks and needed cleaning and repair. The restoration team also fixed holes in the walls where tidewater seeped in, removed rotting structural elements and restored mosaic tesserae.

During the pandemic, Save Venice continued its restoration work, but also provided a haven for academics. Expats working on their doctoral degrees were unable to access libraries to conduct research, write or study, so the organization opened its own Rosand Library to them. The library was donated by professor and *Titian* expert David Rosand, who left his personal collection of 6,000 books to Save Venice, and opened in 2015.

“Having the Rosand library and study center puts us on another level of not just conservation but also academics, working with the academic community and promoting scholarship,” says Conn. 🌿

DREAM OF ITALY

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Festive Phrases (Frase Festive)

Buon Natale

Merry Christmas

I miei migliori auguri per un Natale pieno di gioia

My very best wishes for a Christmas full of joy

Buone Feste

Happy Holidays

Auguri di buon anno

Best wishes for the new year

Auguri—Auguri anche a te

Merry Christmas—And to you

Felice Anno Nuovo

Happy New Year

Ti auguro un Natale pieno di amore e felicità

I wish you a Christmas full of love and happiness

Buon Hanukkah

Happy Hanukkah

