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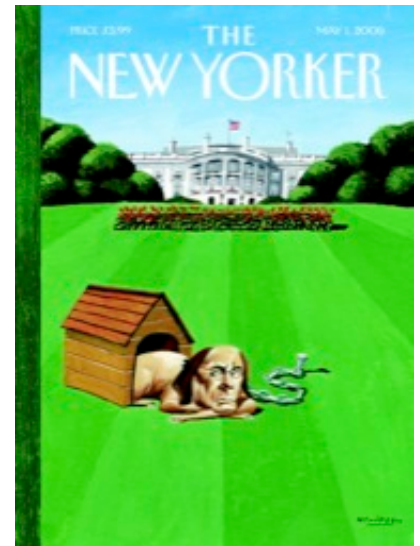
NOTES OF A GASTRONOME

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE

How I became a Tuscan butcher.

by Bill Buford

MAY 1, 2006



I wanted a pig.

My friend Paul sold pigs. He owned Violet Hill Farm and had a Saturday stand at the Greenmarket on Union Square. But Paul had only sucklings. I'd returned from Italy and didn't want a suckling. I wanted a proper pig, a big one. Could Paul get me a big pig?

Well, yes, he probably could. His neighbor had sows, and if I ordered one before it was slaughtered it wouldn't have to be inspected by the Department of Agriculture. This, Paul said, was a good thing. In effect, he explained, I'd be buying a living animal—"Think of it as a pet"—rather than a dead one cut up by a butcher. (The rustic logic of animal husbandry is based on a belief that all government agencies are bad, even if they were established to prevent you from getting ill, which you would have thought was good.) But when my wife and I appeared the following Saturday the pig was definitively dead, wrapped in a transparent plastic sheet and flopped across the back seat of Paul's vehicle: a medium-sized animal, about two hundred pounds, with everything on view—hooves, legs, piggy tail, snout—plus, stuffed in the cavity, the lungs, heart, and liver.

The challenge was getting it home. The transparent sheet insured that every passerby knew what I'd bought. It was not your normal parcel of urban shopping. It was not your normal Greenmarket purchase, either, and many people looked at me as though I were a bad man. One woman stood in front of me with her arms across her chest in open disapproval. I was tempted to prop our pig against the organic wheatgrass stand. ("Mind if we leave this here while we get a cup of coffee?")

Cars are not permitted in the Greenmarket, but I had a Vespa. Without it, I wonder what I would have done. Flagged

a taxi? I strapped my purchase onto the rack over the front wheel, hooves dangling on either side, a pair of ears just underneath the handlebars, my wife on the back. The three of us, precariously poised, putted home. I parked in front of our building, and, cradling my cargo in my arms, staggered to the door, musing, Is there a law against this?

The doorman, Gary Miro, welcomed us with the delight of an unapologetic meat-eater, and we stepped into the elevator. But, before we ascended, a problem appeared in the Saturday-morning dress of a Wall Street banker, who had come in behind us.

“Gary, do we want another passenger?” I was struggling. Two hundred pounds was akin to a big man. What’s more, things had shifted, and blood was pooling up in a crease of the plastic.

It was a summer day in a small elevator: the doorman, the banker, and, just behind, my wife, me, and my pig. The banker turned. I don’t know why. Maybe he smelled something, although the smell, as these things go, wasn’t bad. He conducted an inventory of the details apparent in the plastic sheet, and when the door opened he exited with considerable dispatch.

“Did you hear the sound he made?” Gary asked with undisguised glee. I had heard it and was distressed. I had been uncomfortable in the Greenmarket. Now I’d made my neighbor sick.

I deposited my pig on the breakfast table. I emptied out the refrigerator and washed down the counters. I sharpened a knife and reflected on the difficulty of a pig at home. I hadn’t wanted to upset my neighbor. I didn’t know him well but gathered (from the doorman) that he, too, was a meat-eater. My pig was a more elementary form of things he’d been eating for years. The realization confirmed something I’d always suspected: people don’t want to know what meat is. They don’t think of meat as an animal; they think of it as an element in a meal. (“What I want tonight is a cheeseburger!”)

For me, meat wasn’t a cause. I just believe people should know what they’re eating. At the Greenmarket, you overheard discussions about fertilizers and soils and how much freedom a chicken needs before its eggs are free-range. Wouldn’t it follow that you’d want to know your meat? I had brought home a freshly killed animal—better raised than anything I’d find at a store—and, in preparing it, I was hoping to rediscover old-fashioned ways of making food. This, I felt, could only be positive. But I was sure getting a lot of shit for it.

I’d been in Italy six months, and the idea of buying a pig at the Greenmarket occurred to me when I was there. Most of the people I’d met knew what to do with a pig—or else had a grandmother who knew, or an uncle. It seemed like the next natural step that I should have this kind of knowledge as well.

The commonplace about Italian cooking is that it’s very simple; in practice, the simplicity needs to be learned, and the best way to learn it is to go to Italy and see it firsthand. I ended up at a butcher shop. I would have been happy anywhere, but the butcher was the first person to say yes.

The butcher was Dario Cecchini. I’d heard about him from Armandino Batali, the proprietor of Salumi, in Seattle, and the father of Mario, the celebrity chef. The story was that Mario had gone to Italy to learn the simplicity of Italian food, and the experience had changed his life; his father then did the same. Dario’s had been one of Armandino’s first stops.

I phoned. “Signor Cecchini,” I said, “I am a friend of Mario Batali.”

“*Accidenti!*” he declared (which seemed to mean something like “Well, I’ll be God-damned!” but what did I know?).

“Mario is the son of Armandino,” I said, reading from a script. (My Italian was no better than Chapter 18 of “In Italiano,” the textbook used at the Scuola Italiana del Greenwich Village.)

“*Accidenti!*”

“And I would like to be a Tuscan butcher.”

“*Accidenti! Vieni! Pronto! Ora!*”—Come! Quickly! Now!

One week later, I was in Chianti—Dario’s butcher shop was halfway between Florence and Siena, in Panzano—feeling that when my stay was completed I, too, would be a different person, but I had no idea how.

Panzano was small—a hamlet of nine hundred people—but large enough to have two versions of itself: an ancient town and a new one.

The ancient town was a maze of old and imitation-old: remnants of a castle (the archways), a medieval wall, a

medieval church (rebuilt in the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries), bad sewage, noisy neighbors, and no privacy—a characteristic feudal fortification built on top of a hill during the long wars between the Sieneese and the Florentines, a shelter for the people who worked the land. You could see that land spreading out in a series of basinlike valleys: more giant bathtubs than conventional river-carved ravines. I was surprised by how much was wooded and wild. What was cultivated was mainly grapevines: their proliferation represented the only significant change in the landscape in the past five hundred years. It was the beginning of April, and the vineyards were lines of plowed dark earth, a mathematical map of gnarly black stumps with tight fists of tiny green leaves that would open any day now, like a hand.

The new town was made of stucco. Like many hill towns, Panzano had been occupied by the Nazis, who torched buildings along the main road when they retreated. The conflagration destroyed structures that had been standing for centuries, including the Antica Macelleria Cecchini (the Ancient Cecchini Butcher Shop), which had been in the same spot, run by the firstborn male of the Cecchini family, for eight generations.

My first day of work was gray and windy, and few people were out. But the *macelleria* was in a frenzy. It was a “production day.” I would learn this later; then I understood only that I was always having to get out of the way of people moving very quickly. In the front was Dario, standing on a raised platform behind a display case. The day before, a Sunday, when I’d dropped by to say I’d arrived, the shop had been packed with people. There had been loud music and free red wine and plates of creamy white *lardo* (raw pig fat). Dario was a towering figure in his late forties—overdeveloped shoulders, gigantic hands, and monstrous fingers—and very much the master of ceremonies. He had a crewcut, and around his neck wore a pink bandanna that matched the pink in his cotton shirt and his clogs. On seeing me, he stopped what he was doing and started declaiming the *Inferno* from memory: he crouched low; then he thrust himself upright; he made his eyes big; he made them small; he wagged his finger; he brought his hands together in prayer. It was possibly the most melodramatic performance I’d ever witnessed. The crowd loved it and erupted in uproarious applause. But now Dario was in a silent fury of productivity.

In the back, there was an oven and a butcher block, where an older man worked. He was *il Maestro*, and all exchanges ended with this title. It was: How are you today, Maestro? Would you like a coffee, Maestro? May I remove these scraps, Maestro?

Around eleven, the Maestro had something to eat, which was bread (“the Maestro’s loaf,” cooked in a wood-burning oven) with olive oil and sprinkled with salt.

May I prepare it for you, Maestro?

May I remove the plate, Maestro?

Only two people were allowed to use a butcher knife—Dario and the Maestro. The Maestro was sixty-two, dressed in his own white smock (everyone else was in a medieval floor-length apron), and had silver hair, a thin, expressively lined face, black eyebrows, big ears, and a large masculine nose. “Look at that face,” a friend of the Maestro’s instructed me some time later, when I’d become comfortable enough in Italian to follow some of the shop banter. “Isn’t that the face of an Etruscan? Don’t you recognize it from the tomb paintings? It’s as old as these hills.” The Maestro was deliberate and understated, and spoke with what sometimes seemed like an exaggerated gravitas, gathering his long fingers together like a piece of punctuation. The fingers were enormous. Astonishingly, they were bigger than Dario’s. The Maestro’s hands were so big they made me uneasy. (Why were mine so small? I’d ask myself, staring at them on my walks home. Maybe to do this job you needed forest animals at the ends of your arms; otherwise, take up pastry.)

The shop was managed by Carlo and Teresa, a husband and wife (formerly Florentine factory owners, making dress shirts for men, until men started wearing T-shirts, and their business went bust), who were, by their own description, living in “reduced circumstances.” Carlo tended the accounts. He was fifty-five, with a dark mustache and a dark manner: a hard man with a soft, bruised heart. For the first year after the bankruptcy, Dario told me, Carlo never spoke, not a word. Now he speaks—every few days, he also smiles. The difficulty for me was his accent. Florentine speech is exaggerated. In the Tuscan hills it’s an exaggeration of an exaggeration, a spit-spraying fricative howl, more animal than human. Even today, I try not to ask Carlo a question, because I fear I won’t understand the reply.

Teresa looked after all the prepared items—jellies, terrines, beans, some sold in packages, some by the ladle. None of it was what you’d expect in a conventional butcher shop. I would learn that most of it was so unusual it wasn’t found in

any butcher shop.

There were others—Riccardo, looking like a cartoon version of the butcher's apprentice (round and fleshy with rosy cheeks and floppy black hair and seeming fourteen; he was actually twenty-one), and Rashid, who appeared one morning from Morocco without a passport, and Lucia, who washed the aprons, and Miriam, who read the papers for articles about Tuscanness—but the operatic center, the spectacle that people drove miles to see, was Dario.

He was born across the street from the butcher shop, on September 10, 1955, in the house of his father, Tullio. Tullio had been known for his charm, his athleticism, and his winning way with women—a distress to his own father, who, on his deathbed, ordered his son to stop being a ladies' man and settle down. Marry Angelina, he'd commanded, a local girl, whereupon the father died, and Tullio promptly married Angelina. Today, when Dario talks of his father, he invokes a teacher, often of lessons in how to see—an aesthetic appreciation, an understanding of painting, and a proudly possessive view of the Renaissance, inculcated during informal tutorials, father and son at museums together, which went something like this: "You see that statue of David? You see that painting of the Last Supper? They're Tuscan. We did those." What the father did not teach his son was how to prepare meat.

Dario did not want to be a butcher and was resolved to be the first Cecchini in three centuries not to be. He wanted a college education, and studied veterinary science at the University of Pisa. "I wanted to cure animals, not butcher them." In his second year, his sister phoned: their father had cancer. Dario was summoned to a hospital, where his father, dying, confessed to having made a mistake: he had not taught his son how to butcher. "Go to the Maestro. I've spoken to him. He will teach you." Whereupon the father died. And, following the deathbed imperative, Dario abandoned his studies and asked the Maestro for his help, and he agreed to give it.

The village Dario came back to was different from the one he'd grown up in. Only old people remained, he recalls; everyone else was leaving (*fuggendo*—fleeing, as though from a pestilence). His father's customers had been *contadini*, small-plot holders, who did a farming called *agricoltura promiscua*, a promiscuous mix: vines and olive trees, livestock and vegetables. The local cow was a white breed called a Chianina, a work animal, distinguished by its height (it towers over conventional cattle), its size (calves can weigh nearly fifteen hundred pounds), and its strength. The Chianina had been here as long as anyone could remember (*da sempre*, since forever), and you couldn't cultivate the hilly land without them. They were also prized for their deep "beefiness"—a unique, complex flavor that comes from worked muscles, sometimes tough, rarely fatty, like an animal in the wild. The *bistecca fiorentina* is traditionally cut from a Chianina. But mixed farming had been disappearing.

In 1956, a devastating spring freeze—the worst in two centuries—killed most of the olive trees, including ones that, hundreds of years old, had seemed capable of living through every adversity. And the death of the trees, so associated with the area as to be a symbol—one that meant permanence and durability—crushed the spirit of the people who cultivated them. Other freezes followed, severe enough to kill off the new plantings. Farmers wanted out. Many abandoned their homes: who wants a stone house with dirt floors, no plumbing, and ruined vegetation? There were other factors (everyone has a list), including a bungled effort by an interventionist government to help (too little, too late); the advent of supermarkets; the ubiquity of refrigeration, or paved roads, or travel agencies; the culture of electricity (if only that hadn't arrived). In sum (call it "the very late arrival of the twentieth century"), they amounted to the end of a long era in rural Tuscany. Today, the farms are gone; so, too, are the Chianina. For vines, you need a tractor.

One afternoon, I joined Dario at his home, Il Greppo, a stone house like those abandoned by farmers in the seventies. (To reach it, you are carried on up a steep road by the butcher shop, heading into the wild, uncultivated part of Chianti.) Dario's first five years had been lonely. One moment, a student's life: "I'd discovered movies. I had girlfriends, read books, attended gallery openings. From there, to a butcher shop in Panzano. It was like going to Africa." He'd been living in the family home across the street, traversing the same piece of earth ("*la stessa terra!*") his father had walked on: and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. He was cutting himself. Incompetence or fear? Both, he said—a debilitating terror. His arms were covered with scars. Knives frightened him. "I saw only the blade and kept ruining the beef. I hurt myself terribly." He wanted to do everything quickly, urgently, even though he knew nothing. The Maestro slowed him down. "You can't do traditional work at a modern pace. Traditional work has traditional rhythms. You can be busy, but you must remain calm." Il Greppo was where Dario could be calm.

It was like a neglected museum. Apart from an upper floor—where a bathroom had been installed—the property was largely untouched since its last inhabitants. The ground floor dated from the thirteenth century, most of it taken up by an open-hearth kitchen—a giant source of heat, a place to cook by and be warmed. Dario grew still. “I come here to smell. Sometimes I do nothing but sit in a corner and smell.”

I tried to take in the room’s musty history, but couldn’t stop my mind from recognizing the absurdities of where I found myself: are running water, gas, and electricity really so evil? Even so, scrutinizing the silence, I couldn’t deny the room’s eerie power. I walked across the hearth—gray ash rubbed into the clay floor—and looked into the bedrooms. They were small, space for a bed, not much more, windows with crisscrossing metalwork. During the hot months, they admitted a breeze and the smells of animals. In the winter, shutters wouldn’t have kept out the cold, and everyone would have gathered round the fire. I stood in a doorway, lost in a meditation on the house’s diurnal habits. People made love here, sweated through pregnancy, gave birth, nursed children, became ill, died, a fire burning in the kitchen. In this room, the next generation did the same, the fire still burning. And the next generations, for nearly a thousand years.

I began—my Greenmarket pig wetly sprawled across the breakfast table in its floppy entirety—by cutting an arc around the hips to remove the hind legs, the *prosciutti*. In Italian, a *prosciutto* is both limb and preparation, the salt-cured ham you see hanging from deli ceilings. I wasn’t going to cure these—a ritualized business traditionally done in January—but do something I regarded as “Dario’s summertime pig.” Dario learned the recipe from an elderly *contadino*, who had learned it from his father on his deathbed, when the *contadino* was a boy. The father had ordered him to convey the recipe to someone at the Cecchini butcher shop: not Dario, because he wouldn’t have been born yet, but most likely Dario’s grandfather. The *contadino* wasn’t sure why it had taken him so long, apart from his not having a vehicle. But he was happy to have fulfilled his father’s wish and passed an old Chianti preparation into the appropriate hands before it disappeared.

You started by breaking the legs down into their major muscles, using your fingers to find “the seams.” The Maestro had taken me through the process and created a road map of sorts. The result was a bowl of pork pieces—around a dozen. Next, you brined them by tipping an abundance of salt into a bucket of water and swirling until it half dissolved into a soupy paste. Two days later, you removed the pieces and cooked them slowly in white wine, leaving them to cool overnight before storing them in olive oil in the morning. The pieces, half cured, wine-flavored, and submerged in oil, keep for a year.

The recipe, I now appreciate, was probably devised to clean up problem pork during the hot months. In general, you don’t kill pigs in the summer unless they’re ill, and Dario once let slip that the *contadino* had used the recipe for his sick pigs—not the kind of information a butcher forthrightly shares with his customers. (“Here, try this, a bit of diseased pork I incinerated.”) In the event, what Dario did or didn’t say was immaterial, because no one bought it. Who wants fat (pork) in fat (oil)? But the meat was actually lean, with the texture of fish, and in a moment of marketing clarity he renamed it *tonno (tuna) del Chianti*. In 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture recognized it as a food unique to the region, and today you find it on restaurant menus throughout Chianti. I prepare it with beans, lemon, and olive oil—like tuna.

“Ric-caaar-DO!” Dario had a way of saying a name so that the middle syllable was stretched out long and impatiently, with a last irritated stress on the final one. Riccardo appeared, panting, his cheeks even rosier. “*Final-meehn-TE!*” Dario would say, stretching a middle syllable and spitting out the last one. Often, Dario simply invoked ingredients. “*Pe-PE!*” he shouted (that irritated final punch), and, in the back, everyone scrambled to find the pepper. “*A-GLIO!*” Dario said to no one, but booming, because he was playing a loud Puccini opera, and someone grabbed garlic from a straw basket, peeled it, and rushed it over. “*Boh!*” he said, a vocalized grunt conveying his wonder that you hadn’t known he needed it without his having to ask, and then minced it in a hand-cranked mill stuck to the counter with a suction cup.

I tried to be helpful. I swept floors, washed pans, pulled rosemary leaves off stems. After two days, I knew enough to grind the pepper when Dario called for it. On my third day, I prepared red peppers for a fiery sweet jelly that Dario calls a *mostarda*. Seeing me writing down the recipe, Carlo grew concerned that I might walk off with the shop’s most lucrative secret. Then he took me aside, a businessman trying to get back into the game, and suggested, in his heavy

Tuscan accent, that maybe, when I got back to New York, the two of us could set up an enterprise together: “America is a very big country.”

I went home with red hands. What is this place? It was famous for its *bistecca fiorentina*. Each steak weighed five pounds, was four to five inches thick, and cost nearly a hundred dollars. But it was rarely sold. On my first morning, three requests were refused for no reason I could understand, except, in Dario’s eyes, the customers hadn’t been deserving. Then, instead of selling meat, the place closed down for pepper jelly.

The next day, we made a terrine called a *pasticcio rustico*. In fact, it was very, very *rustico*. I couldn’t imagine people eating it (neither the Maestro nor Teresa would touch it) unless they were very poor and without a refrigerator and hallucinating from starvation. The principal ingredient was old pork that had been aging in its own blood, sealed in a plastic bag. When you opened one, the smell hit you like a stinging slap of stinky molecules. The smell was so bad (“*Che mal odore!*” Teresa shrieked) that Dario rushed back to turn on the extractor fan: customers were uncomfortable. Another day, we prepared salt—bags of it, mixed with dried herbs—putting it through a grinder to make *profumo del Chianti*. The result was indeed aromatic and evocative of summer camp when I was eight, and, having been finely pulverized, was very snowlike. But, for the next six hours, we poured fluffy salt into tiny one-and-a-half-ounce jars. Weren’t machines invented to do this sort of thing?

There were mishaps. I bashed myself, I cut myself, I caught on fire. I fell: I had been myopically focussed on peeling garlic, and hadn’t noticed a bin of beef at my feet until I walked into it. Teresa looked up, dumbfounded by what she saw: this large American, inexplicably horizontal. When I landed in the meat, she rammed a fist into her mouth to stop from laughing hysterically until she confirmed that I hadn’t been injured, and that’s what she did: laughed hysterically. Then I was asked to help make the *soppressata*.

From what I can tell, *soppressata* is meat and lard in an intestinal casing—like salami, but bigger and fattier—and each region has its own version. Dario’s is a *soppressata medicea*, a sixteenth-century preparation, with the cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, orange zest, and sweet wine that would have featured in a Renaissance kitchen. (For Dario, Italian cooking peaked in 1533: why fix something that was never broken?)

I weighed the pig bits: two hundred pounds of knuckles, heads, feet, toenails, tits, tongues, plus some misshapen parts I couldn’t identify. The Renaissance ingredients were added, and it was all boiled slowly until it became a gray sludge. The pot was then allowed to cool—but only a little. A pig’s bony bits are full of gelatine and solidify like concrete if they reach room temperature.

We began. Teresa filled a cup with the lumpy mixture and emptied it into a canvas sack, not unlike a coarse sock, and handed it to me. I tapped it, letting the mixture settle, wiped off the sides—goo seeping through the weave—closed it up, and passed it to the Maestro, his gigantic hand enveloping my puny paw. He then looped a string around the bundle, like a parcel for the post office.

We established a rhythm. Teresa, the handover, the Maestro. At some point, Teresa started humming. She hummed so much I rarely noticed: a background noise of cheerfulness. But the Maestro noticed and joined in, whistling. The tune was “O Sole Mio.”

The three of us continued. Teresa filled a sack, I tapped it, the Maestro tied it. Meanwhile, Teresa hummed and the Maestro whistled. Then they reached the end of the song. The Maestro cleared his throat.

No, I thought. He wouldn’t dare.

“*Che bella cosa,*” he sang. It was an impressive baritone. “*Na jurnata ’e sole.*” What a beautiful thing a day in the sun is. I don’t think I’d heard the words before. I was impressed that someone knew them. Then again, if anyone was going to know them, he’d know them, wouldn’t he? After all, he’s Italian.

Teresa replied. “*N’aria serena,*” she sang. Hers was a perfectly reasonable mezzo-soprano. She knew the words, too. She filled another sack and handed it to me, singing, “*doppo na tempesta.*” In the serene air after a storm.

“*Pe’ ll’aria fresca,*” the Maestro continued, “*pare già na festa.*”

“*Che bella cosa na jurnata ’e sole,*” Teresa replied. She set down her sack. The Maestro put down his as well and took a deep breath. They were preparing for the high notes of the famous refrain. (No, I found myself saying quietly. Please, don’t do it. Don’t you know this is a landmark piece of Italian kitsch? Think of Dean Martin. Think of Elvis.

Please, stop.) They didn't stop. They tilted back their heads, projected their voices to the ceiling, and bellowed. "*O sole mio,*" they sang in unison, "*sta 'n fronte a te! O sole, o sole mio . . .*"

When they finished, they were silent for a long time. Finally, Teresa spoke. "*Bravo, Maestro,*" she said, wiping away a tear.

"*Brava, Teresa,*" the Maestro said, clearing his throat.

The refrain continued in my head as I walked home that night. Who would believe what I'd witnessed? No one would believe it. I'm not sure I believed it, except that I was covered with the evidence. I had *soppressata* gunk all over me, and two fingers were stuck together. I'd stepped in some as well, scarcely surprising, since there'd been *soppressata* slopping all over the floor. I could hear it: it made a sticky suction-cup sound as my heel pressed into the pavement and tried to come away again. Meanwhile, the refrain continued. In fact, I was humming it. It might be kitsch, but it was catchy. Also, I couldn't remember a job where people sang while they worked.

My Greenmarket pig, without its rear legs, was shaped like a big box and snugly occupied the bottom half of my refrigerator. Today's project was the front, the forelegs, which I removed, another big arc, to keep the shoulders intact. Traditionally these are tough cuts, good for slow braising (or only good for slow braising). I was going to make sausages.

When we made sausages at the butcher shop, people often ate the meat raw, straight from the bowl, which—I don't know, call me old-fashioned—just seemed wrong. But it illustrated an attitude toward good meat: if you're lucky enough to get it, don't mess with it. The recipe the shop used (to the extent that one existed—everything was pretty much eyeballed) followed the same if-it's-good-don't-touch-it philosophy, and was three parts meat to one part back fat (from the top of the pig), plus garlic, pepper, and salt: that was it. You mushed it together until it became an emulsified pinkish goop, which you then stuffed into a cannister that looked like a giant bullet. At one end of the cannister was a spout: this was where you slipped on the casing, about twenty feet of pork intestines, which the meat mix went into. (The task of getting the intestines onto the spout, which was not unlike putting on a condom the length of an African serpent, involved a universally recognized hand movement, and predictable Tuscan jokes were made at my expense.)

Tuscan sausages are smaller than their American cousins, each one demarcated with a string, a graceful loop drawn tightly into a knot—looping and tightening, looping and tightening, a symmetrically floppy, aesthetically appealing rhythm. Visitors often watched. One man whispered, "That's how my grandfather made them." Sometimes they wanted to chat (How could I chat? I'd blow my cover). I survived by limiting my replies.

"*Salsiccie?*" someone always asked.

"*Sì,*" I answered forcefully, a singsongy Panzano rhythm, packing in all the notes that the locals seemed to get into a one-beat word.

"*Di maiale?*" they asked ("Pork?"), with tautological tenacity.

"*Sì,*" I replied, impatiently, so they understood that I was very busy.

Once, I got in a jam. "What herbs do you use?" I panicked. "*Sì!*" I said inexplicably. I couldn't bear the prospect: the romance, the history, the handmade integrity of it all, only to discover that the sausage-maker was an American.

In the event, sausages were my breakthrough. Never in his life, Dario said, had he seen anyone master handmade sausages so quickly. "You are a natural butcher. In the history of your family, there were butchers. It is in your blood."

From now on, I was a butcher in training, although I was skeptical of the role performed by my family blood. I didn't have the heart to tell Dario, but I'd taken a one-day sausage-making course at New York University. O.K., it wasn't a Tuscan butcher shop (I'd caused consternation among my colleagues when I returned to my editorial job smelling of pork fat), but I'd learned some basics. No matter. I'd been promoted, and Dario handed me both his knife and, in recognition of the solemnity of the occasion, a steel glove to protect me from injury, the very thing he had used when he'd started out. (It was gigantic. I could have fit my head inside, and there was no way I could wear it.) My task, under the supervision of the Maestro, was to bone pigs that would be made into *arista*. *Aristos* is a Greek word meaning "the best" and, according to local legend, refers to a preparation first served at a Florentine summit in 1439, a convocation of Roman Catholic and Greek Churches: at the end, the Greek prelates were so satisfied they chanted, "*Aristos, aristos, aristos.*" Today, *arista* appears regularly on Tuscan menus, and although no two plates are the same, they feature an

herbal mix stuffed into the best cut, what Italians sometimes refer to as the *carré* (the rack).

Dario used half the pig, the torso, which was boned and rolled up with an extravagance of herbs—garlic, thyme, fennel pollen, pepper, rosemary, and double-ground sea salt—and then cooked it in a hot oven for four hours until it emerged as a noisy sizzling racket, the fat rendered and popping, trailing a black acrid cloud of smoke, a glistening and rather beautiful thing. When sliced, you got the *carré*, tasting like a tender steak, the bacony stomach, and everything in between. But it was an unquiet food, which sent your taste buds in many directions—a slice was burned and tender, caramelized and salty, lean and fatty, exploding with herbs—and I could never eat much. After a few bites, your mouth was exhausted from the sensory pounding.

At 6:15 A.M., I stood in front of a pig. The Maestro was going to show me how to remove the bones from one half; I'd do the other. He took my knife, and his initial instruction went something like this. “*Guarda!*” (Watch!) “You do this” (*Così*). “You do that” (*Così*). “You cut these”—*tagliali*—“one by one. You work the spine loose, and *basta.*”

He handed me the knife.

“Right,” I said, and rehearsed the instruction, in a series of kung-fu strokes in the air. “I do this. I do that. I cut these one by one. I work loose the spine. And *basta.*” (Who knows what I said?)

So, first: I did this. “This” involved pushing the animal onto its side—a hefty, slippery operation—so the back was on top. Why? No idea. But the Maestro said, do it this way. Therefore I did.

Second: I did that. “That” involved working loose a rectangular chunk of meat attached to what must have been the piggy’s shoulder. (Shoulder? Neck? This business of figuring out what the animal bits once did was, I concede, a peculiar piece of speculation.)

Next: I cut “these” up. “These” were the ribs. To remove a rib, you sliced down one side, sticking close to the bone, constantly aware that every gram of tissue was meat and meat must never be wasted. If you looked up and your blade swerved, you were made to feel very bad. (It wasn’t the lost revenue; it was that you’d squandered some animal: the rearing, cleaning, caring, fattening, slaughtering, transporting, and now butchering, and, at the end of a disciplined line of purposefulness, you’d lost your concentration—*Cazzo!* You dick!—and a bit of the animal couldn’t be used. How could you!) Then you sliced down the other side, the white of the rib again flaking up against your blade. What you were doing was creating an outline of a bone and freeing it so you could pull it up by the tip, tearing the tissue underneath while also trimming it gently—pulling and trimming, pulling and trimming.

Finally, I worked the spine free. This was an early lesson in using a butcher knife: not to use it. I used my fingers instead—and gravity: *that* was the point of heaving the pig onto its side, so that, with all the poking and pushing, the spine might fall away naturally. Then: *basta!* I looked at my watch. It was eight o’clock. Half a pig had taken me an hour and forty-five minutes. There were twelve more to do.

The Maestro came over to inspect my work. “You see that part,” he said.

“This part?” I said, pointing to a pink rectangular steak.

“Yes, that part. It’s the best one of the animal.”

“This part,” I said. I recognized the significance of the exchange. I was being instructed by the Maestro himself.

“Exactly. That part. It is very good.”

“This must be the *carré*,” I said, giving the word my best French inflection.

“*Bravo*. It’s true. Some people call it by the French name.”

“Thank you.”

“In Italian, it’s called the *lonza*.”

I repeated the word, and thanked the Maestro.

He continued. “This is also the tenderest part.”

“I see.”

“It is also very precious and very expensive. And you have sliced it in half.”

“Oh, shit,” I said in English. “I did that? Fuck.” Then, remembering I was in Italy, I said (in Italian), “That was a mistake, wasn’t it?”

“A very big mistake. That piece here is central to the entire preparation. Do you understand?” (*Hai capito?*) “But

you've cut it in half. *Non va bene.*"

"I won't do that again," I said, trying to be reassuring.

"*Bravo,*" he said, and resumed his task, which involved a very large thigh.

My pig was legless, but there was one more cut, just between the shoulders, that I was hoping to have for dinner on the third day. This was the meat encased by the first four ribs, the "eye" of the chops. In Italian, this is called the *coppa* or *capocollo* (*capo* means head and *collo* means neck). Cured, it makes for an especially lean *salume*. Roasted whole, it is called a *rosticciana*, the best meal in the house. I cooked one on the bone, in a hot oven for about thirty-five minutes, and then ate the freshest meat I ever had in my life.

I made *arista* on the fourth day, boning the halved torso, finishing both sides with a black blanket of pepper, a green blanket of rosemary, and the salt blizzard, then rolling them up like giant Christmas logs and cooking them until they were blackly smoking.

On the fifth day, I made a *ragù* for two hundred people.

On the sixth, I made headcheese, boiling the skull until the meaty bits came loose and set in their own gelatine.

On the seventh day, I contemplated the lungs, tempted by an ancient Roman recipe I found in Apicius, who recommends soaking them in milk, filling each cavity with eggs and honey (what, when you think about it, could be simpler?), sealing them back up, and boiling them until ready, the lungs bobbing like pool toys. He doesn't say when a lung is cooked, but I concluded that the virtue of having two is that if the first one isn't quite ready you know to wait a little longer for the second. In the end, I didn't cook the lungs. It was hard to throw them away. It seemed so wasteful—why buy a pig if you're going to throw away the lungs?—but I'd been working on this pig for a long time. It was the seventh day. I needed a rest.

We had many meals—four hundred and fifty of them, or what worked out to less than fifty cents a plate—as we ate from the snout (which went into the sausages) to the tail (which I added to the *ragù*). But the lesson wasn't in the animal's economy. This pig, we knew precisely, had been slaughtered for our table, and we ended up feeling an affection for it that surprised us. ♦

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