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SENIOR EDITOR

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

The last edition of *Life & Thyme Post* is only three months old. And yet, it was created in a vastly different reality. I distinctly recall reviewing proofs while peripherally absorbing the news—whispers about a virus that was making its way around the globe. I was concerned. But I was able to harbor my concern from the comfort of a café, punctuating editing sessions with cocktails at an honest-to-god bar, with servers and proper glassware and everything. I hadn't yet gone searching for hand sanitizer. And I had never once in my life worn a mask.

Those first few weeks were...well, you know how they were. You were there. Feeling the heaviness of isolation, I'd venture to guess a lot of folks lived off some pretty strange food options in those early days, digging out the canned and dry goods they'd stashed in the back of the pantry, existing on breakfast cereal and granola bars (okay, maybe I'm speaking for myself here). We thought we were briefly bridging the gap until we could get back to our favorite restaurants.

Quickly, though, we realized we were in this for the long haul, and then something cool happened. With trips to the grocery store now limited, friends I knew to have never picked up a frying pan were suddenly talking to me in depth about their sourdough starters, extolling the scientific properties of a good Maillard reaction, recounting the phone call they'd had with their grandmother to walk them through an heirloom recipe, or the Zoom cooking class they'd just taken with their favorite chef.

A lot of people took it as an opportunity to get creative—to actually cook—in many cases using only what they had in their fridge and pantry. At *Life & Thyme*, we thought this was a pretty exciting development, and wondered how we could help. We tried to connect folks at home with farmers who had surplus, or cafés that had converted into grocery stores. And then we turned to the *Post*. We could tap our community and come together as a kind of home cooking collective. And because our friends and contributors are from all over the globe, representing a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures and expertise, there'd be an easy solution to the monotony that can come with home cooking—the boredom of the same old flavors and recipes.

When we started asking around, contributors were thrilled to have the chance to share what they were working on, too. And we got more than just one-off recipes; many wanted to give guides that would help form a solid cooking foundation. Like an exposition on making pasta from Ali LaRaia—one of the world's most time-tested ration foods. Or a formula for Parker House rolls courtesy of Alex Davis. A flour guide delivered by Elena Valeriotte is perhaps especially critical given how the stuff has been flying off shelves. And whether for fighting anxiety or its inherent sterilization qualities, it's not surprising that we were offered a strong volume of stiff drinks. In fact, alcohol even made it into Maite Gomez-Rejón's ice cream recipe. Because honestly, what could be wrong with that?

We learned ways to repurpose and reuse, to revisit old favorites (like the humble sandwich, thanks to Jill Haapaniemi), and how to put that new CSA membership to good use through recipes like Sharon Brenner's *kolokithokeftedes* (Greek zucchini fritters) or a versatile pesto from yours truly.

Being at home has been a little foreign for so many of us. But it's also been a testament to who we are as humans, what we can adapt to, and under what circumstances we can be creative. It may make us a little stir crazy sometimes, but seeing what everyone is whipping up—that's been inspiring. And during a time when isolation has created hardships we could have never anticipated and we spend most of our days attempting to adapt, inspiration is a powerful engine.

As I write this, there are no baristas refilling my coffee, no bartenders refreshing my drink. But my oven is in heavy rotation, right now baking off my first attempt at the naan recipe in these pages, thanks to Meher Mirza. This crisis has redefined so much of our lives, but there have been unexpected benefits to our collective deceleration: a return to a more communal type of living, the space and time to perceive our instincts, and a pace at which we can tune into sensory pleasures.

So yes, editing this time around has definitely looked a little different. But damn, does it smell awfully good here, right at home.

—S.F.



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Q&A

Pasta Grannies Take Tradition Digital

Pasta Grannies creator Vicky Bennison on appreciation for tradition in the modern age.

WORDS BY ALECIA WOOD

What began six years ago as a series of simple videos filmed in home kitchens as a passion project, *Pasta Grannies* has become a phenomenon, now a thriving YouTube channel and recently published cookbook. Chronicling elderly women across Italy kneading, rolling and cutting pasta dough into all manner of shapes, these *nonne* are the stars of a digital anthology that documents the country's waning handmade pasta traditions. *Pasta Grannies* creator, Vicky Bennison, has been splitting her time between London and the Le Marche region of central Italy since 2005. She recently spoke to *Life & Thyme* from London about the series' runaway success, as well as melding tradition with the modern age.

How did *Pasta Grannies* first come about?

I was researching a book, which never saw the light of day, but in that process noticed it was only older women who were making pasta on a daily basis by hand. These were lovely ladies who were getting up at five in the morning to make their pasta. I thought it'd be great to celebrate those women and make a record of what they're doing, because they're the last generation of women who actually had to make pasta to put food on the table. I wanted these older women to be center stage.

We often hear from chefs and other people about their mothers and their aunts and their grandmothers being their sources of inspiration, but we never see them. I felt there was space in food media for all these women cooks.

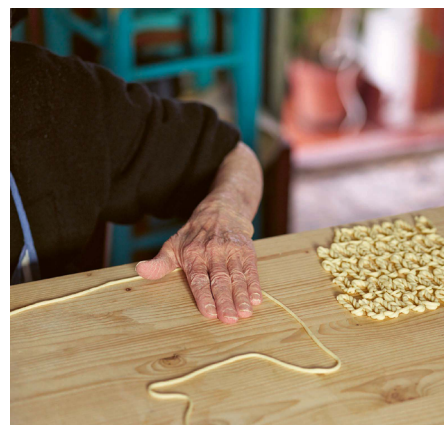
How did you decide to start filming their cooking?

I hadn't actually done any filming at that point, and I think it shows. I knew nothing. That also formed the style; it looks quite journalistic and "as found." Initially, I thought it'd be photography and stories, but the physicality of pasta making just has to be filmed. It doesn't matter how well you describe it; you just don't get the sense of what hard work it is, and what a great upper arm workout it is.

These women have never been in front of the camera before. We find them through word of mouth—they never volunteer themselves. We find them through their grandchildren, organizers of food festivals, friends, or friends of friends. When we meet them, we don't want to be like a TV crew with big lights and take all day to set up. We just come in with small cameras and have a conversation with them as they make pasta.

It's also a craft that requires expertise and practice.

That was a thing for me—making a record of the actual techniques. When someone makes *cappelletti* ["little hats" of pasta stuffed with filling] in Faenza, it's not the same as *cappelletti* in Le Marche. Food changes as it travels out of necessity and [due to] the personal tastes of a household. It's important that even if it changes and other people in other countries are doing it, that it's still there, and still understood and celebrated.



You didn't have formal experience with using social media, yet *Pasta Grannies* has found a strong digital following.

We were filming, and YouTube is simply the obvious place to put film. When I had sixty-three subscribers, I knew exactly who they were. We're now nearing the half-a-million mark, which is fantastic. My most popular video is a pasta from Sardinia by a woman called Cesaria, who's now ninety-five. She's making *lorighittas* [a twisted hoop-shaped pasta]. We've told her many times she's world famous, and she just laughs. I've always felt I was doing something that was important, even if the audience was just me.

It's interesting that a topic so centered on time-honored foods has found a home on such a modern medium.

I think it's fantastic. It's not something I set out to do; it's just the way it worked out. Being able to harness that technology for something so traditional is amazing. It couldn't have happened even ten or fifteen years ago; it's the timing and the felicity of it.

Why do you think it's been so popular?

Everybody loves pasta and everybody loves their grandmother even more, and they enjoy the memories and warm feelings it inspires. It's two virtual hugs: you've got the pasta and the women who cook it.

Less people in Italy are making these intricate, labor-intensive pastas due in part to the commercialization of food production and women from younger generations entering the workforce. Do you think projects like this are helping to renew curiosity?

There's an interest sometimes from the younger generation, from boys and girls, into the traditions and what their grandmothers are doing. I think they've worked out that they can have a career *and* make pasta. Making things from scratch, fermentation and baking—people have discovered it's very relaxing. It's a break from social media and from work.

We're in a moment now that's seeing a sheer explosion of interest not just

in cooking, but in making traditional foods. Do you think that's here to stay?

You've got a movement of people who were already saying, "I want to make things from scratch, even if it's just over the weekend." Then you have Covid-19 that puts an intensity and an immediacy to that general feeling, so it's like a magnifying glass. Would we all still be doing it without social media? Yes, probably, but it's another layer of making something happen even more. People like connectedness and community. People send us daily messages about the pasta they're making—most will start with *tagliatelle* or *cavatelli*. You need to get your dough right before you make fancy shapes.

Have there been any particular moments while filming for *Pasta Grannies* that stood out for you?

Sometimes, there are stories where you think, wow! For example, Letizia, who's now 101 in Sicily. She was very flirty with our camera man. "Will you marry me?" she said. She's in the book and wrote a little essay on what pasta is because she didn't want to forget about her experiences.

Giuseppina in Sardinia, who's now ninety-seven—I absolutely adore her. She has the most wonderful animation and beautiful eyes with a great twinkle. She's such a great laugh. Those who are aged over ninety have such a different perspective of the world—they've survived fascism and two World Wars. I adore all of them. I'm always delighted every time I meet another grandmother.

1. Vicky Bennison, author of *Pasta Grannies*
2. Brigida prepping dough in Ischia
3. Ninety-five-year-old Cesaria making *lorighittas*
4. Guiseppina's *pici* with garlic tomato sauce

Photos courtesy of *Pasta Grannies*, published by Hardie Grant Publishing