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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ COOKING

Crazy for Italian Food: Perdutamente; A Memoir of Family, Food, and Place with Recipes

Joe Famularo
Xlibris (Jun 14, 2013)
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Step one: combine family memories with unique recipes. Step two: stir briskly, adding enticing prose. Step three: enjoy!

Maybe it's true that, as the saying goes, "You are what you eat." But perhaps "You are what you read," as well. Either way, readers will be full and happy having enjoyed Joe Famularo's *Crazy for Italian Food: A Memoir of Family, Food, & Place with Recipes*.

From start to finish, Famularo doesn't simply supplement a cookbook with interesting stories or offer recipes here and there to satisfy a foodie craving; he carefully combines ingredients of family memories and deeply felt moments, folding in an equal measure of food culture and passion. The result is not gimmicky or disjointed, but a complete joy to experience.

It would be difficult to read *Crazy for Italian Food* exclusively as a memoir or cookbook. The two elements are so perfectly married in unexpected ways. Through one complete generation of an immigrant Italian family living in New York City, Famularo looks at raising children alongside recipes for pasta and soup, explores the fears women had in the early twentieth century about pregnancy while describing the patient process of rising and shaping bread dough, and looks at old age and death through the eyes of a grandfather's love for a fig tree growing on the fire escape. Through thoughtful storytelling and honest writing, the author journeys into the heart of his childhood home, the kitchen, and welcomes the reader as a member of the family.

An Italian cooking expert, Famularo does not disappoint with his recipes. His instructions for the classic staples of Italian-American fare—fluffy meatballs, chewy pizza, and comforting minestrone—are easy to follow and yield superb results. More unique creations like "Papa's Immortal Quick Pasta" and "Mary's Italian Cake" are no less impressive. The value of lifting the curtain on a family's unique recipes, particularly when accompanied by the squabbles, the antics, and the unsung heroism of the Italian mama in her kitchen, is priceless.

While the cover of the book is reminiscent of a chain restaurant menu, the interior layout is orderly. The recipes Famularo remembers are included at the end of each chapter, and there is a helpful index at the back of the book.

The author's writing is enticing, as when he warmly captures memories of his mother and grandmother: "The loaf grandma sent was meant to show Mama how good bread is really made." And just how good was it? Find out by trying the recipe.

Not shying away from some of the major issues of growing up as an immigrant gives Famularo's stories real grit, and rewarding his readers with a compendium of tried-and-true recipes is a wonderfully generous idea. "Perdutamente" means "crazy" or "passionate" in Italian. Famularo embodies this concept when it comes to food and family. His book, like a family album, is an absolute treasure and will likely inspire future generations to appreciate their own traditions and recipes and create some new ones.

SARA BUDZIK (April 24, 2014)

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