



It's Never Just the Food... Recipes, Memories and Funny Stories of My Grandmother and Me

Gregory Gallerano

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Gregory Gallerano's autobiographical cookbook, *It's Never Just the Food...* is a delightful introduction to his big Italian-American family whose Sunday dinners are always a grand production. Gallerano provides plenty of anecdotes about his coming of age in 1970s' New Jersey, where being an overweight gay teenager obsessed with musical theater was not the height of cool. Luckily, he had his parents and his pint-sized grandmother, "Mamma," to support him, whip up reversible drag queen costumes, and ease the pains of being a teenager with lots of love, laughter, and home cooking.

The book straddles the cookbook and memoir genres successfully by including down-to-earth, humorous introductions to each recipe. There are generous servings of both family stories and heirloom recipes, and while some anecdotes about the author's awkward teen years may be gently self-deprecating, readers are never left with a bitter aftertaste. Rather, they will laugh along with Gallerano as he relates his first junior high school party with the popular crowd. When he frets over what to wear and what to bring, Mamma suggests a nice tortellini salad. He immediately wants to hide behind his offering when he arrives and catches his first whiff of marijuana at the party. A "pot" of pasta salad is not ill-received by this gaggle of teens with the munchies, but our hero soon realizes he is out of his element and calls for a ride home.

Gallerano packs a lot into this slim volume. There are over sixty recipes here, and many dishes are shown in color by photographer Christine Brewer. Additionally, Gallerano provides many reduced-fat versions of these recipes (though he very practically skips trying to make zeppole, tiramisu, and the other desserts with fewer calories), so this is a splendid little introduction to homestyle Italian cooking.

This dense cookbook would benefit from some layout adjustments. The recipes are printed in an easy-to-read font and type size, with plenty of white space to break things up, but the preceding stories are often clumped together in overly large paragraphs. The inner margins are very tight, making it difficult to read the book without cracking the spine. The food photos also vary greatly in size; reducing the larger shots would not only add room for more readable margins, but would add consistency to the overall book design.

There are also a couple of minor errors: Long Island is not part of upstate New York, even to most Jersey residents, and Gallerano's knowledge of 1970s' pop music was self-admittedly limited to disco, so that he misspells Lynyrd Skynyrd. However, these faults add to the charm of this folksy cookbook/memoir.

It's Never Just the Food... is an endearing testament to Gallerano's extended family and in particular to Mamma, who was always there to comfort him while she was peeling vegetables, braising veal, or making her long-simmering pasta sauces. Gallerano writes in a conversational tone, so that the reader immediately feels like a friend, wincing when Mamma scolds him for an extended sulking and triumphing along with him when he wins his many acting gigs. The combination of these engaging stories and the tempting recipes make this book a worthwhile addition to any kitchen bookshelf.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (July 1, 2010)

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