

Untold Italy Episode 70 - Cooking with Nonna Nerina

Katy

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 64.

Josie

Ciao and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, I'm Josie.

Katy

And I'm Katy, and we're here to help you plan your trip to Italy.

Josie

Between us, we have many years of travel experience and we want to help you uncover your own as yet untold stories and adventures in Italy.

Katy

Each episode, you'll hear practical advice, tips and ideas to help you plan your own trips to the magical land of history, stunning landscapes and a whole lot of pasta.

Josie

We'll have interviews from experts and focus on local destinations and frequently asked questions about travel in Italy.

Katy

Thanks for listening and make sure to subscribe to our show.

Josie

Now let's get started on your regular dose of Bella Italia.

Katy

Ciao, everyone. Hope you're keeping well and that you've eaten, because if not, you're probably going to get a little hungry. It's Katy here fulfilling our promise to bring you a whole lot of pasta. Now, as you're no doubt aware pasta is an integral part of Italian cuisine and with endless variations that are tweaked from region to region, from ear shaped orecchiette in Puglia to the rich egg pasta served with truffles in the North and a simple spaghetti vongole or carbonara - pasta is everything in Italy and its methods and traditions are passed down, like an heirloom, from generation to generation.

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

Katy

In this episode of our podcast, you're going to hear the story of Chiara Nicolanti and her Nonna Nerina. Before covid they hosted guests in their village just outside Rome and taught them the recipes and stories of their region, making hundreds of friends along the way. When the pandemic hit, they acted really fast and with the help of some of these friends, now bring their dishes to pasta loving people all over the world. It's a beautiful story, best told by Chiara herself. So without further ado, I welcome her onto the show.

Katy

Benvenuta Chiara, and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Chiara

Ciao. Grazie. Thanks so much!

Katy

We're so happy to have you on the show, finally Chiara. Your cooking classes have been such a big hit with so many of our listeners and followers and I know that they can't wait to hear all about you and your beautiful Nonna. Can you tell us your story and how you and Nonna Nerina came to be cooking pasta with people from all over the world?

Chiara

Sure, so thank you so much again. I have to tell you the truth, we know all of this sounds like a joke. So all that happened was quite un-predictable. Me and Nonna - we lived together since I was a child. And I think that the true protagonist of this story is not me, but her obviously. So just to give you a little bit of background, she was born in 1936 in a small, small village in the middle of nowhere, and she spent her childhood during the Second World War. So she didn't go to school or study, you know. So she started to go to work in the fields. But she was so good to make pasta that once a week her mom gave her the permission to stay home and cook bread and cook the pasta for all of the family. And it was a huge family with lots of brothers and sisters and few ingredients available. And obviously she started to practice more and more and she just cooked for her family, for all of her life. She told me how to make pasta when I was really young. But then time flies and I have to study. I have to work. And so I kind of forgot and I left the village. So our village is called Palombara Sabina and is a kind of medieval small village in the middle of the olive trees in the center of Italy. And when I was a teenager, I needed to escape, you know? I say, "Hey I will go away. I will never come back!" And I went to/I started to study literature and art and theater and I started to travel the world and I would never expect to come back. But then I got pregnant and I really felt that I needed my mom and my grandma next to me. So I came back in the village and obviously they were waiting for me. And I was not that happy. The time was really difficult to me. I lost my job and I didn't know what to do with my life. And grandma told me, you're not alone. All the women before you were in the same place, so come here and make some pasta. And she started to make pasta in front of me and to sing to remember when she was young, she told me a lot of things that I never had the time to listen to before. Maybe I was ready, this time to listen in a different way. And she started to tell me about her

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

mom and her grandma and, you know, the rhythm of the seasons and moment, the right moment to pick the tomatoes and make the tomato sauce and the right moment to pick the olives that made the extra virgin olive oil and all of those things together. And to me were just - it was an epiphany. And I took a lot of pictures just for myself to remember. And then one day when my baby was six months old, I decided that was the right time to share that gem with the world because I realized that maybe someone else in the world needed to listen to her story. And that faith - so I put her picture on Facebook and suddenly the world answered like, hey I will come around next week, I'm coming to meet you. And I had to tell my grandma, "oh you know grandma, maybe there will be some people here that want to cook with you" and she was "OK, no problem". As you would be at 81 - 81 years old, and so we open her home and suddenly the home was filled with people from all around the world and there were people in the streets looking for the Pasta Granma. It was just unbelievable, because our village is not is not the touristy place. So even for the inhabitants, it was "so what is going on here, what is the strangers walking in the streets?" And in less than 2 years, we had more than five thousand people. And there were interviewers and journalists from all around the world. We traveled to San Francisco together because we won a prize. She was on TV, she was famous and she didn't know it, you know? She didn't care. So.

Katy

And then what happened? Because then - well we all kind of know what happened because you were really famous and you were in San Francisco. And then this was around March last year. Right?

Chiara

Yeah, and then we were - we opened a second kitchen, because I have to tell you that the other grandmothers in the village decided to be a little bit jealous, it was like "hey, I know how to make fettuccine too. I want strangers to come look at me too" So I say "OK, no problem". So this became a kind of community reality with not just grandma Nerina, but other grandmas from all the village coming together and cooking together, eating together (got drunk together, you know - that kind of thing!). But then the unpredictable arrived - that is this strange virus. And luckily, one of my first guests. He was an American guy, and he ran a business about e-commerce and he came in our home and our kitchen like three times. And the third time he came from San Francisco to Palombara Sabina, I asked him "hey, what do you want?" You know? "Why are you here again?" and he says "You know, I just miss my roots and it's just so special and I would love to collaborate sometime. I don't know how". So when we were in trouble, I give him a call and ask him, hey, you know, I have this idea, why don't we, you know, transform our in-person experience in an online experience? My husband is a picture maker, so we were starting together a way to bring Italy to people who were not able to come because not all the people can afford a flight to Italy. And we weren't thinking about this before and when the corona virus arrived, we said "that's it - let's try it!". And so he built for us an e commerce in twenty four hours. The first week, nothing, nothing happened. We were trying to understand the how to make/to transform our kitchen into a real set with three cameras and microphones, music and to bring everything together in the same space. And then after one week, the first order arrived. I remember it was 1am and I started to cry

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

alone for happiness. And then I don't know what happened, we went viral! And the TV all around the world, started to speak about us, and we went over booked in 24 hours and it was one year ago.

Katy

It's been a wild, crazy ride hasn't it this year? Oh, my goodness. Well, it's such a wonderful story. And it sounds like you share such a special bond with your Nonna, and it really does translate when you're talking to her. So I feel like everyone should really watch because this is a very special bond. And if you've ever had that bond with your Nonna, you will understand Chiara as well. And one of the bonds that you share is pasta. Right? So why is pasta so important to Italians?

Chiara

So I think one of the reasons why pasta is the main dish in Italy is because Italy was not a rich place. Making pasta was the easier way to feed a lot of mouths. A lot of children. The women were the one in charge to make pasta. It was something especially for women. OK? And the traditional Sunday morning in Italy was made by the meeting of all of these women. So the grandma, the daughters, the cousins that aunties together in the same place to make pasta by hand together using, you know, the big rolling pin and just your hands and the bond that the women created in that special moment was just something really, really deep because most of those women didn't go to school. That was the moment to share their oral culture. It was the moment to sing together. And, you know, repeat the things known by heart about the story of the village and the legend. There is a kind of a hidden - a hidden culture around the women that made pasta together for generations.

Chiara

It's really special, and I was telling Chiara before that my daughter, even though we don't live so close to her Nonna, she really values that time. And I think you're right. You know, maybe it's you sort of loosen your guard a bit. You just relax and, you know, there's something about someone's concentrating on rolling the pasta that you somehow then share some things that maybe you wouldn't have if you were just "hey want to have a chat?" It makes people more relaxed and more comfortable.

Chiara

I call it pasta therapy!

Katy

Ah that's a good one.

Chiara

And at the end of this kind of therapy, you have some pasta to eat, so it's just perfect.

Katy

Oh, yeah. Double therapy! I love it. Well there's so many different types of pasta. What I love about Italy is that you can go from region to region and you have like a different experience in all the twenty regions. But there's more than 20 types of pasta there's like hundreds and hundreds and hundreds. So I think you need to tell us what is so special about your region and its pasta dishes?

Chiara

So especially in Palombara Sabina, there is a kind of pasta called gnocchetti palommaresi, that the name sounds like gnocchi, but there is no potatoes inside of just flour and pinch of salt and water and our extra virgin olive oil. We're really, really well known around the world for the production of this special kind of extra virgin olive oil and the oil is so good that the dough is super elastic even though you have no eggs inside. So you can stretch - do you know the Pici?

Katy

Yep.

Chiara

They are thinner than the Pici and really, really long, so with one dough Nonna can make one gnocchitto really, really, really, really long. Like she can play the rope with it, you know? It's super elastic and so, so yummy.

Katy

Oh wow. And what do you serve that one with?

Chiara

Um, it depends on the season. So you can make it with artichokes or usually we make with asparagus - when it's the right season like this is the right season for the asparagus or even with a simple tomato sauce.

Katy

Yeah. The simple is the best. That does sound delicious. And you mentioned the Pici and maybe for our listeners, do you want to explain what they Pici are?

Chiara

Yeah. So the Pici, they are kind of big spaghetti. And the consistency is not that strong, obviously, because the pasta is not dry, is fresh, so when you eat, it is not al dente, you don't have to expect an al dente taste.

Katy

It's soft. Yeah?

Chiara

Yeah. It's soft.

Katy

I think that's probably a good lead into my question is that, you know, I think these days everyone's going out to the shops and buying pasta and you can buy lots of different shapes and you can buy the lasagne and you can buy gnocchi and you can buy rigatoni and all of that. But why should we make pasta from scratch? What's the difference?

Chiara

Nonna will say, first of all, you know, which are the ingredients that you use, so you know that you're healthy because you need so few ingredients that you can buy the best ones. OK, so organic eggs. And this is really important that the eggs from chickens that were free, you know - free to pick the rice, you know and really free! And obviously, if you can buy the flour from a mill, the flour would not be too refined. And so it will have not too much gluten inside. A lot of people that think they have an intolerance to gluten because the flour that they use in the shop is too refined. So there is too much gluten inside. When you eat flour that is worked in a simple way, just with the mill that's pressed it, there is less gluten and so it's so much easier to digest and be healthy. And then, you know, once you make your home-made pasta once by hand alone, I am quite sure you will not buy the one from the store no more. Quite sure about it.

Katy

Yeah, it's true. And it's also there's a very special ingredient that if you're making it, you put some of yourself into it and you're making it. You know, like my mother-in-law always says the secret ingredient is love. And it's true. If you're making it for yourself, you want it to be good and you want to be proud of what you're making. So of course, you want it to be amazing.

Chiara

And you know, when you make pasta so relaxing and you are so into it that you just you are just in another world. I was talking before telling 'pasta therapy' but it's true. I mean, because when you make pasta it is a tactile sensation, you know, it's something that goes deep. And it happened a lot of times that people could remember things they thought they have forgotten, you know, and you're just in touch with yourself. And obviously you will love the pasta so when you eat it, it will be so much better, I promise.

Katy

Absolutely. And it's like - I think it's something in our lives - we've been going really, really fast. And this is not a quick process is it? You've got to really slow it down and take your time. Otherwise, it might not work out so good.

Chiara

You know that one of the main secrets to make pasta is to give it time to rest, to have a nap, Nonna says. So a traditional way to make it, once you stretch the pasta with the rolling pin to put that on the bed, you have a napkin, obviously, and then on the bed to breathe and then you don't know when is ready. She will know it. So you need to check and when it's changed the color and the consistency is a little bit different - that's the moment to cut it. If you wait too much, it will crack when you cut. If you don't wait enough to once you go to cut the pasta with stick on itself. So it's the rhythm of life and it will be different everyday.

Katy

Absolutely - because it's true - like the consistency, maybe the eggs a little bit bigger or you added a little bit of water too much. And it's really interesting. I think I've mentioned this on the podcast a few times, but my mother in law talks to her friends. Well, they have this same conversation about making biscotti. It's like all this time I use one egg yolk and this time I use two - like they have this same conversation every time we see them. But it's just like a really beautiful - like you said, it's in with the season, it's even what the temperature is in the air. And it's a beautiful thing.

Chiara

Yeah and even if you have an open window, everything can change. And the temperature, the humidity, even the temperature of your hands when you knead the dough can change it.

Katy

Yeah, yeah. And I think it's nature as well, isn't it? So you have to be in touch with not only yourself, but you're in touch with nature. And yeah, like I said, it's therapy. There's a lot of people selling that therapy for a lot of money- to get out into nature. Maybe they just need to make pasta. Now, Chiara, you're doing a lot of virtual classes online now, aren't you? How does it work? Because I know when you have people in the kitchen, like it was very interactive, you know, you had Nonna, you know, you had the music and people could interact directly with Nonna - and she's a very special lady, obviously. But how does it work when you're bringing it online?

Chiara

So, first of all, we'll let the people choose the recipe according to the day. So there are different recipes every day. Some are a little bit more difficult, some are a little bit more basic. So we try to let the people choose the right one for their level of pasta skill and then we usually we welcome our people with a video about Palombara so they can enter inside the mood a little bit and with some just good wine together with the ingredients list. And then we open it, we open the cameras and we are in the different grandmas kitchen around Palombara. And there's always be a grandma with her grandchild. The grandchild is the one in charge to translate because obviously Nonna Nerina and all the other grandmas, they don't speak English. So there is always the translation, not just the language, but the translation of a different world. OK? So there's always a big part to the storytelling. Really like that the people can ask grandma and there's always a different reason why a person decides to book

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes

an online class with a grandma. They are there for a special reason. So it's really beautiful for us to understand who we have in the other part of the camera. And then we start making pasta from scratch and we use the original tools, the ones that our great great grandmother give us, like dowry, like a dowry you know - something that we passed down through generations. And we just spend time together and time flies usually. A course can last one hour and a half or two hours. According from the people we have in the other part of the camera. And Nonna has music and Nonna likes to dance, Nonna likes to sing together. She sings a lot of Italian stupid songs. And we showed a traditional way to make pasta with the big rolling pin. But because usually people don't have that huge one we show how to use the small rolling pin too or the pasta machine. So we try to understand which is the right way to make it. And at the end, no matter if you were a chef or if it was the first time you broke an egg - you will have your pasta in your plate ready to be eaten.

Katy

Oh, fantastic. And you have people from all over the world joining you.

Chiara

Yeah, we are taking classes for different time zones, so we're starting in the morning for the Japanese and Chinese people. And then we go in for the Australian people in the morning. And then, for example, we have the American in late afternoon and during the night we stay up till three a.m sometimes. Because people say, "Oh my God, I want to do it please open another class."

Katy

I love it. You would never have thought maybe a year ago that you would be doing this.

Chiara

No, no. Absolutely no.

Katy

You're basically helping preserve these traditions, not just in your village, but all over the world. And it's such a beautiful thing, really, isn't it?

Chiara

Yeah. And what I can tell you what we didn't plan or so this last year - is the heart of all of this is the humanity. I think, before it was clear to us that people were looking not just for a pasta recipe, they were looking for something else. During this year, we had people that really experienced loneliness, and it happened a lot of times that the people booked the class without having the ingredients - just to have someone there, in their kitchen cooking together. And usually you can recognize when people is in that bag more because they don't open the camera at the beginning. I can tell you at the end of the class, all the cameras are open and everybody know that they have a grandma in Italy waiting for them.

Katy

Oh, my goodness. I think I'm going to tear up right now. That's just so lovely. It's so true, though. It has been a very lonely time for so many people. And Chiara and I were talking early just about that sense of community that you get in Italy. It's very special and I think you've explained it really well, how the pasta making works with getting women involved in cooking together. And it's just such a beautiful thing that you've been able to bring that to so many people around the world. What's been your favorite memory? Do you have one that stands out?

Chiara

I can tell you that one of my first memory ever. I remember I used to wake up and my door had glass ok? So I could see the light I used to stay there without telling everybody I'd woke up - maybe I was two years old and I could smell the sound and I can still remember - when you stretch the pasta it makes a special sound like. *sound of hands rubbing together* Something like this. I can hear it. It's just your hands that stretch the pasta gentle, like a caress. Nonna say don't stress the pasta, caress it. And one of my first memory is this sound. *sound of hands rubbing together*.

Now we're all going to have that memory. That's beautiful. Nonna must have made you a lot of bowls of pasta in your lifetime do, but do you have a favorite one that's she's made you? What's her favorite pasta?

Chiara

This is difficult. So in the Christmas time, we have a cannelloni. That is a kind of bump??? OK? It's two days to be done, they have meat inside. And once you eat one cannelloni, it's enough for one week. But maybe my favorite one is the simpler one that is Fettuccine with mushrooms and peas. Maybe because it's Nonna's favourite recipe and she makes it so good. I don't understand why! But it's just my God, am just here salivating thinking about it, you know?

Katy

Delicious. Does she make pasta every day? Just for herself to eat or...

Chiara

Before yes - her routine was to make the pasta every day for the children. And now she makes pasta every day with the classes. Even though I try to stop her. I tell her "Nonna you are 85. You need to rest. Don't worry there are the other grandmas taking the class". No way. She's always there.

Katy

She wants to. She's going to be the queen of pasta.

Chiara
Yes!

Katy
I love it. I love it. Oh goodness. Now I know you've been enjoying doing the classes online, but would you be doing live classes when travel resumes?

Chiara
Of course. I miss to squeeze my guest in my arms. I think we'll keep both. We will keep going with the online classes. We are planning to record some classes too, because sometimes people can be difficult to have some free time. So we are actually working on an academy with some video recorded a little bit more professional. OK? And we will keep going with online classes and with the in person one. And we really hope in maybe in June, hopefully maybe not. We'll see.

Katy
Let's be positive. Exactly. Chiaia. I think everyone wants to come and meet you and Nonna person. But while we wait, then obviously we still want to stay in touch with you. So how can our listeners find out more about you and Nonna and the Nonnas and your cooking classes?

Chiara
You'll find us on the we are on nonnalive.com. Nonnalive dot com. And there you can find all the classes. We make some seasonal recipes too. Like for the Mother's Day we will make some pasta with flowers, edible flowers inside, and then you can find us on the social media and we'll make a lot of mess every day, you know?

Katy
Your Instagram is kind of fun, too, actually, because you do the profiles of the Nonnas too don't you? It's cute.

Chiara
They drive me crazy every time, ok? Every day there's something that is going on that is crazy. And our Instagram is @pastawithgrandma.

Katy
And do they always want to know how many likes they got?

Chiara
They don't know what Internet is OK?

Katy
But they love the camera, I can tell you - they love the camera.

Chiara

You have no idea. You have no idea. They're all actress - they didn't know it, but they all are.
Prima Donna!

Katy

Prima Donna! Sophia Loren!

Chiara

Yes!

Katy

Grazie Chiara! Thank you so much for joining us from beautiful Italy today. I hope one day we can make pasta together in person.

Chiara

You have to come! OK?

Katy

I'm coming.

Chiara

Thank you. Grazie Mille.

Katy

Grazie Mille.

Katy

Wasn't that a beautiful story? Pasta therapy is probably what we all need right now, I think. I mean, when you're eating and enjoying pasta, you get one kind of pleasure, but it goes to a whole other level when you've spent the time working and rolling the dough and caressing it, as Chiara said. There is infinite satisfaction in talking or contemplating while making your pasta and then your sauce with just the right ingredients to coat the pasta. Just so. It's definitely food for the soul. Of course, we put all the details on how to follow Chiara, Nonna Neriana (and let's not forget all the other Nonne. Ciao to you lovely ladies!) into our show nights at untolditaly.com/70, for episode number 70. So let's hope sooner rather than later we can meet them in person and learn some Italian songs while we roll some pasta. If you enjoyed today's show, it would be wonderful if you could give us a rating or review either on your favorite podcast app or on our Facebook page @UntoldItalyTravel, that helps the people of the Internet know that our podcast is worth listening to. And I'll be honest, it gives us a huge thrill when we read them. Coming up next week, we've got another trip report from some listeners from Oregon in the United States. This is a beautiful story of discovery that help solve a mystery and has inspired future travels to the Prosecco region. I hope you'll join us next week to hear all about it. But until then, it's Ciao for now.

Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes