

Untold Italy Episode 149 - Pasta Grannies: Preserving Traditions Across Generations

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 149.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

This is the Untold Italy travel podcast. You're listening to episode number 149.

Who loves pasta? Yes we all do. Any type you care to mention for me. Hello Ciao everyone and welcome to a special episode of Untold Italy devoted to pasta and the women who are preserving its traditions throughout Italy. Today I'm chatting with Vicky Bennison, the founder of the incredibly successful YouTube and other channels - Pasta Grannies - with over 2 million subscribers! So incredible.

We're chatting about the importance of pasta to Italian culture and her second book dedicated to the fresh pasta recipes of the Pasta Grannies. Vicky's first book won a James Beard Award, the equivalent of the food Oscars in America, for Best Single Subject in 2019; and this next book is destined to do the same. So let's jump in and chat with Vicky about the heartwarming pasta recipes and the women who make them.

Katy

Benvenuta Vicky. Welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Vicky

Thank you very much indeed for inviting me.

Katy

I'm so excited. But before we get started, Vicky, I wanted to wish you Auguri! Congratulations on your second Pasta Grannies book. It's such a beautiful and generous book, and it's full of mouthwatering recipes and very deep, detailed instructions on how to make them. And I've been pouring over them, but I have to admit, they're making me very hungry.

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Vicky

Good.

Katy

I know. I mean, you can't really stop reading Italian cookbooks because they just keep making you want to know more. But anyway, before we get chatting about the book, how about you introduce yourself and the Pasta Grannies Project to our listeners?

Vicky

Okay, so my name is Vicky Bennison. I'm the creator of Pasta Grannies. It got going about ten years, nearly ten years ago now. It has, across all the social media platforms, two and a half million followers. And the book you're referring to is my second one. The first one was published four years ago and has been published into six languages, I think. And it also won a James Beard award. So this is the follow up. It's a response to the pandemic. And so this time, I've selected all those recipes that were really popular on the YouTube channel. Everybody loves lasagna.

Katy

That's so true.

Vicky

I could post lasagna every week and everybody would be happy.

Katy

And crazily, some people think that there's only one type of lasagna. It's infinite. Yes, lasagna is infinite, isn't it?

Vicky

Well, certainly for every region there's a lasagna, so they all have their own variations. So when people say you can't put ricotta in it, it's like, yeah, head south and you can.

Katy

Exactly. So maybe just take a bit of a step back. If people don't know the project, explain exactly what you do, because it's really unique and it's really special.

Vicky

Yes. So, ten years ago, I was in Italy, just bought a house, just moved there, and I noticed that it was only older women who were making pasta by hand on a daily basis. And I thought,

someone's got to make a record of these women. And it turned out to be me. I'd never picked up a video camera before, and I did so because pasta making is very physical. There's a rhythm to it, and words just don't do it justice. So I picked up a video camera, and the place to put videos was this fairly new thing called YouTube. And very slowly, because it was just me and word of mouth and friends of friends, whenever I found a grandmother, I would film them. And then it gradually got going. And YouTube, when you want to publish a book, you need to demonstrate an audience. So I then had to start taking YouTube seriously and post every week. And that's how it got going. Yeah.

Katy

It's such an amazing project, documenting all these recipes. I mean, it's a lifetime's work, isn't it? Really?

Vicky

Yeah. I mean, there are hundreds of different shapes and different names, so the same pasta can have different names and the same name can apply to different pastas. So it gets really confusing. And I'm not a purist. It's like, yes, if this village says it's this way, that's fine. I mean, I'm merely the conduit, the messenger, or whatever it is. I don't stand in judgment on what anybody has to say about pasta naming because it's very complicated.

Katy

I wonder if you get into which one is better? Because I think that's always such a hilarious activity in Italy. They always think theirs is the best, whether it's olive oil or pasta or whatever.

Vicky

Yes, always. That's great. Very proud of their food.

Katy

They really are. And, you know, it's such a great story. And what I really love, Vicky, is that you show so much respect for these ladies. And what I really like in your introduction to this latest book, you made a point to say that these ladies are the Nonna. They're not cute. And I was just wondering why you wrote that.

Vicky

Because a lot of people say that, and they're well-meaning and they are, of course, cute, but they are so much more than that. I think I wanted to sort of stress that there's more depth and variety to their experiences, and we quite often lose sight of their experience. So we just need to listen to them a bit more and we can learn quite a lot of them. You know, they still have things to say about the way that we live now, about the importance of not throwing food

away. We kind of understand that, but we haven't internalized it, for example. I mean, obviously some people have, but, you know, yeah.

Katy

Just as a general society, we've got a long way to go.

Vicky

Yeah.

Katy

I think there's some unfortunate stereotypes around older Italians, especially women, and they float around the Internet, and they're not particularly helpful. And the amazing thing about your project is not only - do you draw out the recipes, but you draw out these women's personality and their stories. So it's really humanizing. And I think it's just such a fantastic way just to show that these women are real. They've got amazing stories of their own, and they do much more than just making pasta.

Vicky

Yes. I mean, pasta is nowadays the vehicle to get to know the women. I always say that people come to the channel for the pasta and stay for the grannies, and that's wonderful. We still look for pastas, but equally, we always give space - we try to give space for the women to say a little bit about their lives. Some women don't want to, and that's absolutely fine. We kind of get a chink into their life, and I think that's wonderful. And, of course, it could apply to any culture. It just so happens that I live in Italy and that's what I started to do.

Katy

Yeah. Anything that can really bring out people's personalities and their histories, it just brings I don't know. We love that on our podcast. It's why we love talking to people from all around the world who have a passion for Italy, because there's something about the culture that just really draws people in. And also, like you mentioned, this underlying sense of sustainability that has never really gone away there. And I think we all need to look to these people to see how maybe we can adopt some of those things in our modern lives that they've been doing forever.

Vicky

Yes. So that kind of industrialization of agriculture is happening in Italy. Food culture is changing in Italy, but they still have their roots and they still have close connections to the countryside. In the way in the UK, they lost it about a century or so ago. I'm not a food historian, but we're so used to buying things from a supermarket, whereas even, you know, in Italy, where I live, the fishmonger comes round in his van twice a week. There are several

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butchers, there are a couple of pasta shops. You know, people are still shopping properly rather than just sort of doing a quick shop at the supermarket once a week. And I think because people care about the products that they're buying, even if they can't grow their own. And I think that's true across Italy, even though there's huge diversity in the gastronomies.

Katy

That's what we love. You can go from the top to the toe and it can be completely different.

Vicky

Yes, it's amazing. We've now nearly ten years down the line. We've done most of the regions of Italy. We still haven't done Molise and Aosta.

Katy

Oh, they're very tricky. I'm on a mission to do the 20 regions as well, but those two are elusive.

Vicky

I know. So we sort of got close last month. We were in Abruzzo. We still didn't make it into Molise.

Katy

Well, that's interesting, isn't it? Because Molise actually produces a lot of pasta for international and local consumption.

Vicky

Yes, I know, I know.

Katy

I always noticed on the packets that's from Molise, so I'm like, They've obviously got good wheat down there.

Vicky

Good water.

Katy

Good water. Yes. That's always a secret ingredient, I think. So you mentioned that sort of finding the grannies originally was like a word-of-mouth process, and their fabulous pasta dishes, but how do you find them now?

Vicky

Well, I have a granny finder. Her name is Livia, Livia de Giovanni. She lives in Faenza, and it's her job to use my wingwoman. She finds grandmothers. So, for example, at the end of November, we'll be going back to Piedmont and probably Liguria. And so - she's on a mission, so she likes to set herself standards, and it's like, no, we're not having anyone under 90. And it's like, well, we can have a few. The way that we work together and she's the one that's doing the negotiating because you never deal with a grandmother on her own, we're always working with families. And grandmother wouldn't agree to appear on an episode unless her family had agreed and thought it was a good idea. So we start with the family, and if everybody's happy, then the Signora appears on an episode, right? Yeah.

Katy

I can imagine that it might take quite a little bit of time to build up the trust with the families. In some cases, yes.

Vicky

I think it's important, though, so the conversation starts before we arrive with cameras so that it isn't we're strangers, but we're not complete strangers. We try and get ladies in their own home so that they're much more relaxed. We find that if you put women, you know, they sometimes they choose to go to their daughter's kitchen because they think it looks smarter and they don't know where the knives are and stuff like that. And they instantly get more anxious about being in someone else's kitchen. So we like to kind of keep them in their own homes. So that helps with the conversation, keeps them feeling spontaneous and relaxed. And we have small cameras. We don't rehearse, we don't stress them. And I think that shows in the episodes that are produced.

Katy

Okay. So there's a bit of editing that goes on afterwards I can imagine.

Vicky

There's lots of editing.

Katy

You do such a great job because personalities really come out. I mean, it's horrible to ask favorites, but do you have some episodes that stand out in your mind that were particularly fun?

Vicky

They all are wonderful, I think, of the book. So we've got Pina, who did the chestnut gnocchi with walnut pesto. And there's a great story in that one. I mean, she was quite perplexed. Why are you coming back? Why are you here? Why do you need to learn how to make gnocchi? You should know how to make this. We kind of do it know to make gnocchi, but we want to know how you make gnocchi. And all her ingredients come from around her, whether it's her vegetable garden or the woodlands around her. So, I mean, that's great. And Cicci, who is in a neighboring village, another woman that appears in the book, she also forages for mushrooms, and they appear in her recipe as well. And it's just wonderful. I mean, I'd like to sort of follow them for the entire year just to see what they get up to.

Katy

That would be really fun, wouldn't it?

Vicky

Yeah.

Katy

The other thing about it is so seasonal as well, isn't it? I'm sure they have dishes for each season.

Vicky

They do. And of course, the use of a freezer has crept into their repertoire. They're not averse to modernity at all. So I mentioned Cicci and her porcini sauce. They're not in seasonal year, so she does freeze them for use year-round and that kind of thing. So they're not stuck in the past.

Katy

No. I think it's really lovely, though, because you can imagine, like, if you were going home to Cicci's house for, I don't know, if you're one of her grandchildren, you'd be like, oh, I really want to go at this time of year, because she's going to be making that delicious porcini mushroom dish that she's gone and found out in the woods. And what I love about Italian families is I'm sure she does go out there with their grandchildren to find the mushrooms. And it's a lovely activity to do with your family, too.

Vicky

Yes, I think certainly she keeps her daughter on her toes because she insists on living - both these women, in fact, that we're talking about, both insist on living on their own. And of course, it's the family's responsibility to make sure they're okay. And if they're really far up like they are, it's a lot of driving. I remember Cicci saying to me, conspiratorily, sometimes I take the phone off the hook! Because she doesn't have any mobile signal either.

Katy

Oh, my goodness, that's so funny. I just want my 'me time'. Never mind going to the spa, I'm just going to go up the mountain, take the phone off the hook. Oh, my goodness. So when you're going through all the different regions and you mentioned you've not gone to two, but I completely understand that. Have you noticed that there are any similarities between the women and the pasta that they cook?

Vicky

Everything is determined by locality and climate and what grows when, you know, the pasta that they make, you know, in central northern Italy, is with soft wheat pasta, and southern Italy it's durum wheat pasta. And of course, nowadays, northern cooks are adding a little bit of durum wheat to their pasta dough to give it a little bit more body. But that's quite a recent thing in the last couple of decades, so there's that. And then that in turn determines the kinds of shapes that you can make. So it all starts with the wheat, if you like. The soft wheat pasta is much more extendable and you can make things like all the cappelletti, tortellini and things where you're kind of wrapping the dough around small amounts of lovely meat and cheese and that kind of thing. Whereas the durum wheat flour produces a plastic, but not elastic dough. And that means the shapes, you can create cappelletti shapes which hold when you cook them, and they don't go into a kind of mush or collapse. So you get these lovely shapes from them. So that's why there are differences. It starts from those types of wheat that you're using.

Katy

It's just incredible because I think if you go to a supermarket in any of our English-speaking countries, you can go in there and you just think it's just pasta. But it's not. It's so varied.

Vicky

Yes. And of course, dried pasta isn't a second best to fresh pasta, it has a different role. And I think for our women, it was often the case that dried pasta, you would have to have the money to buy it. So actually, it was quite a middle-class thing and an aspirational thing to be able to have. If you could afford to buy the flour, that would have been cheaper, and therefore something, if you wanted pasta, you had to make it yourself, basically, to put it on the table. And it wasn't necessarily a daily thing - on Sundays, that kind of thing. It depends on how poor you were. If you're a farmer and you're growing wheat, that would be fine. The

local mill would bring you your flour on a regular basis. And a lot of women have said to me, flour, it smells different from when we were young. You could smell the grass, the wheat in the flour, and you can't do that. It doesn't have that nutty smell anymore. And I think it's very interesting. The nature of flour has changed in their lifetimes.

Katy

And I wonder if that's got something to do with the increase in gluten intolerance in Italy, I'm sure it does, unfortunately.

Vicky

I'm not in a position to comment on that, but certainly there's an industrialized and they're buying in wheat from elsewhere in the world, so it's a huge commodity. And I think other authors talk about the sort of decreasing diversity in species like Dan Saladino. I mean, he's very good on that kind of thing. So I'll leave it to them. You can interview them.

Katy

It's really fascinating, though, that we like to think that we've improved on a lot of things, but really, some of these traditions that have gone on, it's maybe good to go and have a look back at what was done and sort of maybe adjust what we do now. So, apart from those two regions, how many pasta dishes do you think you've tried in the past ten years?

Vicky

Well, there are 400 episodes.

Katy

There you go. 400?

Vicky

Yeah. And even when we sort of find ourselves filming, for example, tagliatelle, there's always some differences to be found. And also, of course, there's a different personality. So every episode is unique. Every pasta dish is unique. Yeah.

Katy

400. Congratulations. That's an amazing body of work.

Vicky

Yeah, you can tell I have an elasticated waist on my trousers.

Katy

Well, that sounds very sensible to me. I like elasticated waists. Can you pick a favorite, though? If I had to actually make you, can you pick a favorite pasta dish?

Vicky

Oh, that's very hard. But I think in book one, there's the Pansotti dish, which is these little belly button ravioli, and they're stuffed with foraged greens, wild greens, and they are served with a walnut sauce, walnut pesto, and it's absolutely delicious. It manages to be sort of so full of flavor and very elegant at the same time. So that's one, I think, from book two, one of the dishes that I make most often is probably Carla's risi e tochi, which is sort of dialect for chicken stew risotto.

Katy

That sounds delicious.

Vicky

Oh, yeah, it's really some people get anxious about risotto, and this is the sort of gateway dish that stops you from feeling anxious about it. You make a chicken stew. You then fish out all the meaty bits, your chicken legs and things, take flesh off the bones and chuck in rice to the juices. Add a bit more wine and a bit more water and stir it all up. Cook the rice, put the meat back in and voila. The key ingredient in that is the rosemary that gets added. It's sort of something about chicken and rosemary and as you know from roasting it, but it's just this wonderful dish, and the family is so, yeah, you can make a risotto out of anything. It's like 'okay'.

Katy

It's really interesting. I know. Here in Australia, in Master Chef, risotto is known as the danger dish. It's like, if anyone cooks risotto, they always get voted off. This is really funny. Maybe they should cook this one.

Vicky

Yes, maybe. I mean, and the other thing is that if you're a beginner with risotto is to use Carnaroli rice rather than any other, because it's much more tolerant, cook too long or not stirred enough and all that kind of thing.

Katy

I'm really impressed with you that you do your own cooking as well. I think a lot of people like to admire cooking shows, and then maybe they're too scared to jump in. But you obviously enjoy cooking yourself very much, so yes.

Vicky

I'm also one of those that started cooking at a very young age. My mum was very keen on it, so she put us to work. I don't know how much of the washing up she had to do, but.

Katy

Yeah, as a mum of small children that use an inhibitor to allowing them in the kitchen, but good on your mum for doing that.

Vicky

Yeah, absolutely.

Katy

You know what? I think the one that's been catching my eye and the one that I'm going to try is the porcini and prosciutto lasagna. Oh, my gosh, that looks so good.

Vicky

Oh, that's amazing. Yes, it's a very good lasagna, that one, and it's just kind of rich and sophisticated. It's a mixture of the prosciutto and if you've got truffle, add a bit of truffle. It's called Vincisgrassi. It's invented by a chef for the aristocracy in the Le Marche province which is near where I live.

Katy

Is that in Le Marche? Yes, it's a very underrated region, that one. It's very undiscovered.

Vicky

Yes, and it's been like that for about 20 years. I think it'll always be a bit undiscovered, which is great.

Katy

Just the way you like it. I mean, yeah, it's one of those regions that's got all the you know, it's got the mountains and the sea, so you've got that/those beautiful contrast between the two different types of cuisine. I haven't been there yet, but I will be going there soon.

Vicky

Oh, well, come and stay.

Katy

Oh, I'd love to Vicky! You shouldn't say that because I am one of those people that does actually turn up. Yeah, we love to showcase some of the lesser-known regions on our podcast. And we have got some friends that live in Ascoli Piceno, actually.

Vicky

Oh, beautiful.

Katy

Yeah, they've been on the show a few times, so we do like to let people know about your beautiful region. Now, Vicky, you've done such a wonderful job documenting the recipes and the women behind them. Are you hopeful about the future of these pasta dishes?

Vicky

Yes, very much so. I mean, it's a tradition that is in the form that it has been is dying away. I mean, you know, women no longer have to pass it down to their daughters. Their daughters go out to work. The good news is their grandchildren and great grandchildren have realized that they can do both things, go out to work and continue traditions, both boys and girls. It may not be to the level that their grandmothers did - it will be weekend projects and stuff. And of course, we all know that if there's a shop on the corner that produces really good pasta, then you're going to go and buy it. So that's the other development is the professionalization of pasta. So if you're keen on making pasta, then you're going to make a living out of it and have a little shop and that kind of thing, which is great. You should be paid for that kind of labor. You see that in Cingoli, where I live. There are two pasta shops and they keep going, you know, they thrive. So that's great.

Katy

That's wonderful. And I think it's so great that Italians release respect for their food traditions like that. So there is that possibility that they will continue. But, you know, I for one am so grateful that you've managed to document so many of these delicious dishes for the benefit of future generations. It's just it's an amazing body of work. And Vicky, I know everyone who's not already following you or who are aware of your work is really itching to find out how they can connect with you in the Pasta Grannies and find your book.

Vicky

How can they do that at @pastagrannies? That will get you to Instagram and Facebook and then on YouTube. It's youtube.com/pastagrannies, so it's pastagrannies everywhere.

Katy

Just look for the pasta. Grazie, listeners. This is such a beautiful project that I know you will love. If you don't already follow along on YouTube, set aside a few hours because I know you're going to love hearing the local Italian stories all about the food and pasta and just the first family connections. I think you're going to find Vicky's work delightful. And Vicky, it's been an absolute pleasure chatting with you today. Congratulations on the new book.

Vicky

Thank you very much.

Katy

Oh, Grazie Mille Vicky thank you for coming on Untold Italy today.

Vicky

Absolute pleasure. Thank you very much indeed.

Katy

Both Vicky's books about the Pasta Grannies are so beautifully designed and laid out with stunning photography of Italy and the wonderful pasta making women. I love the mix of personal stories and photos which bring the recipes shared to life. It's a mouthwatering read and one I've been pouring over for weeks. The porcini and prosciutto lasagna is a definite winner - it's so rich and decadent and a dish deserving of special occasions like Christmas. I've also got the maccheroni with green olives from Calabria bookmarked to try very soon.

The book is beautifully bound and in hard cover so it would make a brilliant gift for any pasta loving cook or eater. If you get the book I'd love to hear what recipes you tried and what memories of your trips to Italy it evoked. Drop me a line at ciao@untolditaly.com and let me know. I love hearing from you all. It makes my day .

We've put the details of the book and a link on how to buy it from Amazon as well as how to find the Pasta Grannies online into the post show notes at untolditaly.com/149 for episode 149.

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That's all for today, on next week's episode we're talking about what to wear when you visit Italy - it's a hot topic didn't you know?! But until then it's "ciao for now".

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