

# A Blissful Feast

*Published 1 November 2020, with Teresa Lust.*

A Blissful Feast is a combination memoir and cookbook, with the stories and histories behind a personal selection of Italian recipes. It is, Teresa Lust explains, the story of her journey from chef to cook, which is kind of the wrong way round for most books of this kind. Teresa Lust shifted from cooking professionally in restaurants to cooking for a family, growing their own fruit and veg and raising chickens in a large garden. Her book tells the story of how an initial visit to her mother's family village, in Rocca Canavese near Turin, triggered her to become an accomplished translator and teacher of Italian, quite apart from a cook.

**Teresa Lust:** I visited my mother's ancestral village with her and my older sister back when I didn't speak any Italian. Just sitting at the table the first meal, I was so captivated and so drawn in that I knew I just wanted to pursue their cuisine and meet them on a deeper level and discover their cuisine.

**Jeremy:** That captivation comes over. I really enjoyed reading about your meeting with your aunt, Giuseppina as a cook. I was wondering though, were you ready for that? Did your mother cook like that?

**Teresa Lust:** Yes. She didn't cook in a way that was 100% Piedmontese or even 100% Italian, but we had meals together as a family. I have three sisters in our family of six and we had an extended family, huge family, in Yakima, Washington. We grew up with meals every night that were prepared and not just heated. My other grandmother had a big garden. We grew up with fresh vegetables, which I didn't always appreciate as a child. I sometimes found it embarrassing that we didn't buy our vegetables at the store like normal people. They were funny-looking, they had dirt on them, and we had big family dinners, extended family dinners on holidays and birthdays. Those were always joyous occasions.

There was a lot of that sensibility growing up. I feel that there was a certain irony because I went to Italy looking to really develop that sensibility, that mode of eating and appreciating food. It was a little bit like *Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz* because the more I learned about it,

the more I discovered, the more I realized I already had that. I'd grown up with it all along.

**Jeremy:** It's pretty blessed to have had that growing up, I suspect, because coming to Italy was for you ... you make it sound like coming home.

**Teresa Lust:** That was so surprising to me. I was really nervous and actually bordering on afraid to meet my relatives because I didn't speak the language very well.

I think people have a mythology. I know people have a mythology about what Italy is like. My experience was very different and yet, so ultimately satisfying and more satisfying perhaps because it wasn't a mythology. It was genuine.

**Jeremy:** One of the things that you do throughout the book is you take the recipes or what your families and friends are doing. You use those as a jumping-off point to talk about culture, cookery, ingredients, and what have you. I was struck when you talk about Turin. You've got quite a great long section on grissini, on breadsticks. For most people, they're there on the table. If your food is late in arriving, well, you probably break a few open and devour them. A good breadstick is a great thing. You go into that in some length. Tell me how you discovered breadsticks.

**Teresa Lust:** Those were one of the first discoveries I made the day after my first trip to Italy. We'd arrived in the afternoon and the next day, we walked to the bakery that — I'll call her, my cousin without going into the genealogy — my cousin and her husband owned in the main piazza in this tiny village of Rocca Canavese. Cattarina is my cousin and her husband, Augusto, was in the bakery making grissini. I recount this in the book. I had no idea. I only thought grissini were those bland, dusty little things that come in a packet. The Olive Garden hadn't even come to the fore with their puffy generic breadsticks.

That's just my opinion. I didn't even know what a fake breadstick was. I only knew what those packaged industrial breadsticks were. To see these meter-long, skinny, gnarled, crispy, and delightfully fragrant breadsticks being made before my eyes ...

**Jeremy:** You saw your cousin making grissini, you learned to make grissini yourself. That would be fine, but you also go into the history

of grissini and lots of the other things you talk about. Tell me about the history of grissini.

**Teresa Lust:** They were first made for the Piedmontese Duke di Savoia, Vittorio Amedeo. As a child, he was sickly. His father had died and he had taken over the position as duke, but his mother was acting as the regent in his stead. At any rate, he was a sickly boy and they tried everything to get him stronger and to heal. The court doctors decided that what he needed to fortify himself was a bread that was mostly crust, because in those days it was thought that the crust was the most healthy part of the bread. I even relay in the book, my mother still thinks that and she used to say, “Eat your crusts. They’re good for you,” when I was a child.

The court baker created this bread that was increasingly longer and skinnier so that it would bake up to be crispier and crustier. They also made it out of white flour as opposed to the whole grain flour that was more readily available to the poor people, which, of course, now we know whole wheat bread is more healthy, contains more nutrients than white flour, but in those days it was thought that the pure white flour was the healthiest.

It was rare in that day, that to make a white bread that was all crust. The result finally was this bread that was as long as your outstretched arms and as thin as your finger and essentially all crust. For whatever miraculous reason, Vittorio Amedeo grew strong, healed, and assumed the Regency, and it went on to become his heirs, to become the first kings of Italy. The tradition, the lore, is that it was all thanks to grissini that he acquired that strength to have the duke become the kingdom of Italy eventually. Who knows? I’m fine with that. Why not?

**Jeremy:** Yes, why not? It makes perfect sense. I confess I haven’t yet tried your recipe for grissini. In fact, I’ve never really made grissini. The closest I’ve come is a kind of cheese straw of a more English variety.

One of the nice things that you’ve done in the book is to translate these recipes of family and friends and you’ve given weights, measures, and what I would call proper methods for doing it. Was that difficult? Because family recipes, friends’ recipes are notoriously ... Oh, well, I was going to say imprecise, but they’re not so much

imprecise, but the person doing it knows how to do it, but to learn from them must be very difficult.

**Teresa Lust:** Exactly. I think that part of my background, cooking in restaurants, really helped with that because I think with practice, you do acquire a feel for what is the right amount. I could translate those from my own experience pretty readily. The only problem was trying to put them on paper because even though I think that the stories and the chapters themselves are really the essence of the book, I wanted to put the recipes in for people who were inspired to try them at home.

I knew I needed to put amounts, baking times, temperatures, and things like that. I had to do a lot of work in my own kitchen, making something and then extrapolating, “Well, what is it that I just did? How much was this?” I fortunately could do things like one medium onion. I think for most cooks, that is precise enough rather than saying, I don’t know, 100 grams of minced onion or something.

I think that that slows us down too much in the kitchen when we’re so hung up on the exact measurements, but at the other hand, we are a little bit insecure as cooks and we need in America, I’m imagining in most English-speaking places, we need a little bit more advice and precision than just a grandmother saying, “Well, you take this and you cook it a bit.” That’s how old cookbooks talked. You’d put it in a hot oven, which is an oven that ... Not really, you couldn’t hold your hand in only for an instant before you have to draw it out. That’s how you know it was hot enough. If you could hold it in there for the amount of time to say a Hail Mary, that was the slow oven.

**Jeremy:** It’s interesting. You said 100 grams of minced onion and, of course, Americans, by and large, don’t even like that. They want to be told two tablespoons or half a cup or whatever it might be. I think I should have made a note, but there’s a part in your book where you say, “For heaven’s sake, just get a scale. If we all work with scales, things would be much better.” Is there any hope of that?

**Teresa Lust:** I’m so glad you asked that question. I feel like I’m on a crusade and I let that crusade kind of come forth in the chapter about making a cake, torta del tre, cake of threes, because it’s all measured out in hundred gram increments or 300 gram increments of flour, ricotta, three eggs, and sugar. It’s such an easy, beautiful way

to be able to especially bake, because baking does depend more on precision. It does depend on measured amounts.

We are so resistant as Americans to take on ... I would even be happy if we were weighing our ingredients in pounds and ounces because for things like baking, it would be much more precise. I don't know. We Americans drag our feet and I don't know if it's going to happen soon. I think that it's a personal crusade to get people to use the scale when they're trying to cook and bake, and if other people take it on, maybe we'll get there, but I'm a little dubious.

**Jeremy:** How about taking on rabbit? I mean, that's another thing. You enjoy your rabbit here in Italy and get back to America, not so easy to find a rabbit.

**Teresa Lust:** No, not only is it difficult to find here, it is very expensive and it's not the poor man's food that it is still in Italy, although I think even there, that's rather changing. I think though, that the expenses, that's the least of it. It's still for us ... It's a very cultural thing that we just can't bring ourselves to eat poor Little Peter Rabbit or Thumper or whatever charming character we think that that rabbit might be. I think we're missing out. Rabbit is very healthy meat, very lean. It's good for you.

I'm not a vegetarian, I'm an omnivore, but I do try to eat meats that are humanely raised. A rabbit, just by the very nature of what it requires to thrive, can't be raised like a chicken in industrial battery conditions.

**Jeremy:** Another of the things you go into in mouthwatering detail is the bagna cauda. First of all, explain for people who haven't had a bagna cauda or don't know what it is, what is a bagna cauda, and then we'll talk a little bit about how that came about.

**Teresa Lust:** Sure. Bagna cauda, in the dialect of the Piedmont, means hot sauce or hot bath. It's a dipping sauce made from olive oil, garlic, and anchovies. Those are simmered together very gently until everything dissolves into this amalgamation and then it's served warm in like a little hot pot over a flame, like a fondue pot. Into that, traditionally, are dipped vegetables of the season.

It's a dish served in late August into the early winter and traditionally, it was the meal shared by the vineyard workers when they were out after the harvest, pruning the vines, you're thinking in late October,

November when it's cold out there and they needed something to warm themselves over fire; these are poor field hands. The vegetables of the season, cardoons, cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, savoy cabbage, they come on a platter and they're dipped in this garlicky, anchovy rich sauce and eaten. That's the origin.

It really is another one of those parts of the *cucina povera*, the cuisine of the poor, but I will say that it is enjoyed and has historically been enjoyed by people throughout the Piedmont, from peasants to dukes and king. It also became a family ... It's just a family meal.

Still, to this day, it's more an experience or an event that even a recipe, because people talk about it as *una bagna cauda*. They're going to get together to have a *bagna cauda*, which means simply a group of people, family, friends at someone's house or in someone's barn traditionally, or in a neighborhood *trattoria*, because by the time you assemble all of the ingredients, all of the vegetables that you need, you really are cooking for a crowd. There's this essence of a festive occasion to eat this meal together.

Elizabeth David, in her book on *Italian Food*, describes *bagna cauda*, because it is one of the signature dishes of the Piedmont. She gives essentially that history and she says, "Of course, it's full of garlic and anchovies and not everybody can stomach it, but if you can take all that garlic, it's a blissful feast." I sort of turned that around. It was a little bit of a backhanded compliment that she gave. It is a blissful feast and that's really through the book that I'm hoping to encourage people to make out of whatever it is that they prepare for their table.

**Jeremy:** I have to say, it's a useful book because you've got the stories, you've got some history, and you've got some recipes, but I wonder to what extent, how much of this for you is about food per se, recipes for making food to eat, and how much of it is about setting down this, not just family history, but cultural history, and establishing your own ties with your mother's country?

**Teresa Lust:** That's beautifully put. I think it's ... a great part of it is about that. I feel like for me, this realization of how special it is to have a family connection to food, to make time to appreciate a meal — and by that, I don't mean spend all day in the kitchen. None of us has time to do that. But just to make cooking and sitting together with people, or even by yourself, and being more a part of the experience instead of just doing it to fuel yourself.

I feel very fortunate to have that experience and I want to share that with other people. I'm hoping that my stories and my research ... It's about little things, little kind of unimportant things in the grand scheme of it all, but that they'll make other people realize, "Oh, I actually have memories like this. They're not her memories, but I had memories of my own. I've had experiences that have generated these thoughts in myself. My food is important. My meals are important."

I wanted this communal extension for other people, as well as just for myself to pay tribute to something that I realized has played such an important role in my life.