

Stone Soup

Written by John Marshall
Tuesday, 27 August 2013 11:06



Scents & Sensibility

On a crisp January morning in Vicenza I pulled the door open to the tiny Trattoria, arriving early for my first day of work, as is my custom. Through the empty, pale yellow dining room I followed the aroma of baking bread to the kitchen door.

It was there that I first saw her. She stood next to a stainless steel sink in the rear of the kitchen, and pre-occupied, she didn't hear me enter. The sink sat under the only window in the kitchen, and in the early morning light I watched her slight figure at work as she gazed out the window. Not wanting to frighten her, I called out, "Buon Giorno," her head turned towards me, and with an ethereal look on her handsome face, she simply smiled and turned back to her work.

The spell was broken when the door that connected the kitchen and the bakery opened and the lights clicked on. The staff seemed to arrive in mass, and the rituals of the restaurant began. Fires to light, Gnocchi to roll, Ravioli to fill, glasses to polish. As in most restaurants, the prep was barely finished before the first guests arrived. Lunch service was a blur of activity, and by the time lunch was over, the woman by the sinks was gone.

The staff sat down for a "family meal" after service and I was offered a bowl of "Bacala Vicentina," a regional specialty prepared with dried cod that must be painstakingly soaked and rinsed to remove the salt. It occurred to me that this was what the woman by the sink was doing, and I asked Paolo, the cook in charge of my training, about it. "Caterina makes the Bacala," he told me, and with a smirk and raised eyebrows went on, " It brings her love back

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from the sea." Noting the puzzled look on my face he continued, " Giovanni, her husband is a pescatore, a gente di mare, a fisherman." I took a moment to get it, but then I understood; each day the preparation of the Bacala created the scent of the sea and with it the memory of her husband and the feelings of love so very present on her face. Later that week I would see him sneak up from behind and wrap his arms around her. Eyes closed, she leaned back into him and inhaled as joy spread across her face.

The sense of smell creates the most powerful, and evocative memories. The physiological link between scent and emotion lies in the fact that the nose is hard wired to the part of the brain that creates emotion, and when that memory is evoked by a certain scent, so too are the emotions and feelings that are connected to it. So often when I take in the scent of something familiar, I tilt my head back, close my eyes and find myself transported.

If somewhere I catch the scent of the perfume my mother used to wear, I suddenly see her, young, dressed to go out for the night, and so beautiful that I am proud.

When I smell apples it puts me in my Great Grandmother's kitchen, her applesauce cooking on top of the stove, cookies in the oven, and I feel her love.

With the scent of orange blossoms I am standing in the souks of Marakech, besieged by bustling shoppers and boisterous vendors, and I feel it in the pit of my stomach.

Now, if I catch the scent of a river breeze through confederate jasmine, I'll feel home.

John Marshall owns the Old Bull Tavern at 205 West Street in downtown Beaufort. You can reach him at chefjohnmarshall@gmail.com

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