

Carla Missano on cooking and the joys of getting messy

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ROME — Inside a former bookshop bistro just steps from the working-class neighbourhood of Garbatella, Carla Missano has spent the past six months turning strangers into friends over pasta dough, artichokes, and the occasional song. Her cooking school, Carlotta, takes its name from a neighbourhood legend. Carlotta was a warm-hearted young innkeeper who fed everyone who passed through, and after whom Garbatella itself is said to be named. By sheer coincidence, Carla tells us that her mother has called her Carlotta for 52 years. The name, she says, fits like a glove. Born in Agropoli, in Cilento, the region where the Mediterranean diet was essentially invented, Carla spent years organizing trade fairs for a family business before a friend told her she had the gift of the gab and could cook. Eight years of cooking courses later, she and her Romanian business partner Denisa Georghe spotted a vacant space 30 metres from her front door and opened Carlotta, part cooking school, part supper club, part home. Groups of six to 14 people book the space for an evening, cook an entire meal from scratch, then eat, talk, and sing together. Some guests have come back five times. One, she notes, is practically family.

Q. Tell us the story behind Carlotta. Where does the name come from?

“Carlotta was born in a neighbourhood near Garbatella. Garbatella owes its name – or so the legend goes – to a gracious young innkeeper, “una garbata ostella”, who fed and watered everyone in the neighbourhood. And her name was Carlotta. My name is Carla. And even though my mother chose

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my name herself, without consulting anyone, for 52 years she has called me Carlotta – in the moments when she wanted to be kind, when she wanted to be sweeter than usual. So being born near Garbatella, the name fitted me perfectly. I feel very much a Carlotta. People here call me Carlotta, and I now want to present myself to the rest of the world as Carlotta, because I like it. It feels mine".

Q. And your business partner – who is she?

"Denisa Georghe. She is Romanian by origin, she has lived in Rome for 20 years. And opening Carlotta was really more her idea than mine. She said, 'Carla, this space is coming free – let's open'. I said yes, though I was also scared. Right up to the last moment I was waking up in the morning asking myself whether I had done the right thing. Now I can say with a full voice: it was the most fantastic choice. The satisfaction we have had in just six months – it already feels like two years".



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Artichoke class at Carlotta *(Credits: Italy Now)*

Q. How did the cooking courses begin, and what does Carlotta actually do?

“I have been running cooking courses for more than eight years now. A friend suggested it – he said I was never short of something to say and that I could cook, so why not combine the two. Carlotta is a series of things. I always say to everyone that it is a bit of a stretch to call it a cooking school, because it is not really a cooking school. It is a place where people cook. The idea is to share an experience. We do Italian regional cooking, but also Japanese, and we plan to add Chinese, Argentine, more. And then we have created a format we love very much, which we call ‘dinner with friends’. A group of six to 14 people decides to spend an evening together. They come here, we plan the menu together, we prepare everything from scratch, and then we eat together. People celebrate birthdays here. Graduation parties. And there is always singing”.

Q. What is the spirit of the place?

“The spirit is always one of joy, of being in good company, of leaving your problems outside the door and sharing something. We see it in the people who come – even the atmosphere here. It is a home. There is nothing professional about it, apart from the kitchen equipment we are required to have. We are not the Gambero Rosso. There is no chef in a hat. But we have doctors, we will have grandmothers. My mother is Calabrian. Even more southern. There is a lot of south here, a lot of warmth, a lot of emotion, a lot of beauty”.

Additional reporting by Alina Trabattoni

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