

Facciamo la Salsa!

An Italian tradition lives on in Nonna's kitchen.

Words by Leo Graziani Photography by Nadia Graziani

Towards the end of summer, the Graziani troops gather in one of the most scarily efficient areas of the city: my grandmother's (*Nonna*, in Italian) basement kitchen. It's "Pomodoro Day," that special day when every good Italian family gathers to prepare precious jars of tomato sauce for the rest of the year. Nonna runs this operation like a drill sergeant, although it's a drill sergeant singing Italian songs from the '40s reminding me that I used to sing these songs when I was three and why don't I do that anymore? Sigh.

More than a day, this is actually a weekend event spent peeling, seeding, blanching and boiling until all 16 bushels of tomatoes are done. That's right: 16 bushels! Picture the floor of your garage completely covered with tomatoes—I'm not exaggerating.

Prepping the tomatoes is only part of a well-choreographed procedure starting with a big boil in a huge pot. They're ultimately separated into jars with basil leaves: some have strained tomatoes, and some have tomato chunks. Finally they all get loaded into the canning pot for sealing and sterilizing. Everyone has their assigned roles in the tomato production line hierarchy, but of course, according to Nonna, no one does anything to her standards.

This is traditionally a family affair, and it's rare for "outsiders" to be involved in the process, but you, dear reader... you're cool. Have a look.

Why go through all this when there's fairly inexpensive good-quality sauce readily available at the local grocery store? Because you just don't do that. You use the tomatoes from the 100 mason jars in your *cantina* that you got from Nonna's, and that's it. *Punto e basta*.



My grandfather, Franco, manning his station and happily peeling away, while my grandmother, Ada, shows the tomatoes who's boss.



Three generations (L-R): My mother, Linda; my grandmother; and my youngest sister, Amy.

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Feeling culinarily adventurous? Here are some unconventional flavour combinations I've enjoyed lately.

• **Maple Beef Bacon Donuts**

I got these from Caplansky's deli truck, the "Thunderin' Thelma." It's essentially a Timbit, but with crumbly bacon in the middle, served with maple syrup. It's like eating an entire breakfast in one bite. I'll spare you the details of my subsequent ride to the hospital.



• **Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love**

You can find this burger at The Works in Oakville, which boasts 70 burger combinations. It's named after Elvis's favourite sandwich: peanut butter, bananas and bacon—but in this case, on a beef burger. I had it with lettuce on a whole wheat bun, you know, to make it healthy.



• **Chili chocolate ice cream**

Next in our parade of unexpected flavour combinations is spicy ice cream. Chili peppers and chocolate *do* go together, but the flavours here are so counterintuitive that I kept eating it, trying figure it out. First is the creamy rich chocolate, and then bam: heat. Ice cream isn't supposed to be hot, but this works.



• **BBQ Pulled Chicken Slider**

This fantastic sandwich came from the now-defunct food truck The Toasted Tangerine. The homemade BBQ sauce was great, but the kicker is the pineapple-habanero slaw on top: smoky and sweet with a little heat.



• **The Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster**

I found this delightful beverage at Zaphod Beeblebrox in Ottawa, a bar named after the character from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. To quote the book, it's "like having your brain smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick." By my fourth or fifth of these, I was calling it a "Garble Blasher." I wonder how it'll go over at the *Spirit of the City* Christmas party this year?



—Leo Graziani