

Alexander Theroux

## Scugnizzo's Pasta Co.

I AM A WOMAN. I stand for no nonsense, never have, haven't the time for it. I edit the gourmet magazine, *Hotcupboard*. You recognise? Doubtless—the not overwhelmingly specific requirement here being, probably, (a) that you aren't a man and (b) that you know the galley-ship the kitchen once was (though, our whole tack, needn't be), having felt like we and others the depressing simplex—but for the “liberation” at hand, otherwise tragic—of brasspots, soiled egg-cups, marmite spoons, and filthy cylindrical moulds.

Agreed, sisters? I hear you.

*Hotcupboard* is our magazine. No less is its role as forum, catch-all, voice-box of the harangued. We think of it, frankly, as not only tunelessly current with but frightfully aware of the needs of the American woman, any cross-section of whom, of those on any day flashing through magazines, could be spied with a copy of H.C.B. at the ready and scissoring out one of our scrumptious recipes; boxing a household hint; recording the new versatility of an herb; or simply, time permitting—because ours in America, but for the periodic lift magazines of this type give, is hardly a life of leisureful or spoon-licking la-de-da—pausing rapturously over our mouth-watering ektachromes (by which we monthly enrich our issues) of, well, crisp buttered broccolis, smoking barmbrack, skewered pieces of charcoaled steak, and hot bowls of conch gumbo. It's a woman's magazine, theoretically not to exclude the male, but there is to be found upon closer inspection an undelineated though paradoxically observable line drawn around us, our work, and our thought over which, for my money, men in general need never step.

We have one male with us in the New York offices. He's a janitor.

One needn't suppose I mention men idly. I will momentarily introduce and (gain-saying a discreet resolve I made some years ago) even discuss an Italian person named Scugnizzo, archetypal male the mere memory of whom gives me the fantods and who has more than once forced me angrily to abrupt cold showers and salving ice-packs. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's to the airport and a crossed ocean.

PISTICCI, Italy. Who knows of it? Few, I'll wager.

Thither, however, had I come—you can't believe the risk, by the way, of a busride alone at night out of slatternly Naples and its blanket of stale sudiferous air—to research an article for an Italian number we were doing. My focus was to have been in the area of *pasta*. Its A, its Z. How often, it one day occurred to us sitting around the offices in New York, had our patient readers, female predominantly (exclusively, no, we can't be certain) been shunted hither and yon during the process—ignorant of what it quintessentially was—of ritually preparing *pasta*: cooking it, straining it, folding it, twisting it, crumbing it, be-saucing it, and, say, shoving minced cheeses and/or meats through it? Or even, bless such who do, making it from scratch? Well, *Hotcupboard* got on the subject right away. American women would soon have the full dope on it, if I had my way. May I add I usually do?

The reader—may we a minute pause?—will perhaps recall the biennial “special numbers” of our magazine, over which for

just about every copy, rumoured near-priceless the very day of printing, people fought each other right in the open? For instance, there was our first special, on Bombes (as of a month ago a collector's item); there was our number on Winged Game, seminally crucial, that one, to the basic knowledge of it. There was the one on The Gourd Family, and the photographs alone from that issue have since become legend. The special on Frostings brought letters from as far away as Lapland, as did the devilish little one we ran on Meals To Be Eaten Only By Hand, a big hit, that one, in the South. Let's see now, we ran them—I hope this list is complete—on Chowders; Asian *Hors D'oeuvres*; Biscuits (everything from pull-aparts to bran); and, our most remarkable I guess, the special we did entirely on the Camel, whose hump, feet, and stomach by the way are very much appreciated by connoisseurs. A strictly fruitarian issue people are begging us for. Someday, maybe.

But *pasta*? Well, hell, this was something we knew everything about but what it was!

PASTA FACTORIES, though history credits the invention of macaroni, spaghetti, and similar “pastes” to the Chinese, are best found in Southern Italy and in Sicily, especially in areas of hard wheat cultivation. As I said, I stand for no nonsense, never have. I wear hard brown shoes. Well, let me tell you about it. I secured for *Hotcupboard* and her subscribers the perfect “paste” factory imaginable, set up high in the small sienna-coloured hills outside rude and rural Pisticci, demanded a tour and a few days' inspection, and then—my wet nails drying in the warm breezes that blew far inland across the fabled Bay—I efficiently telegraphed New York from my pensione: HOLD FOR DUCKY PIECE ON FARINACEOUS. SEND PHOTOGRAPHER. PISTICCI WOPPISH AND SWELTERING. MUST RUN.

IT WAS MORNING at Scugnizzo's Pasta Factory.

“Semolina,” yelled the proprietor.

I wrinkled my nose against the dust and noise, and nodded.

“You like?” he howled again and his grinning mouth widened and opened like a nutcracker under that gigantic beak of a nose, like Punch. He was cross-eyed and all hands. He wore a pigskin hat, which made him look like the “bedlam” in a medieval English play.

“Rather,” said I. You don't want to give yourself away. “Rather.” I scooped up and weighed several handfuls from only one of the fat wooden barrels filled with this hard glutinous wheat (known, generally, as durum or macaroni in the States), and the barrels surrounded us in a phalanx, in the middle of which, it had just then come to me, we alone were standing—an occasion Scugnizzo found propitious enough for a sudden inquiry: had I a *fidanzato*? I was flabbergasted. He stood there, smiling, stroking the huge length of his nose with two fingers. I ignored him and exaggeratedly smelled a fistful of semolina. I felt the nap of it—and made a note. More questions obtruded: had I a car, my hotel a bed, my heart a void, and the sky a moon? Irked I suddenly just stood against him put my hands to my hips, and hissed. He mooded and sidled off, crestfallen. I could tell by the back of his head when he took off his hat. It tightened.

At the far end of the company's one long room stood about four or five weirdly angular and unrecognisable machines, chuffing away. I peered at them for about five minutes, trying as best I could to divert my attention from romantic Cagliostro who, not ten feet from me, I suddenly noticed, was micturating through the doorway on to some tomato plants and whistling snatches of “*Mamma, quel vino è generoso*” from—I thought it suitable—*Cavalleria Rusticana*. He finished dramatically, how shall I say?—with, well, gestures. I had a real one on my hands.

“Gum.” He flicked his head.

I frankly couldn't tell if he was looking at me or not.

Asked to come (he was looking at me, O joy), I followed—the alternative, in point of fact, not really mine in that, my fretfully unwilling hand in Scugnizzo's effortful grip, I had been haled along at an enjoyable skip over the floured planks to a guillotine-type machine (a large round drum instead of a blade), roaring, whistling steam, and spitting out droplets of hot water from around its moonscape of pressure gauges and meters.

"*Il nostro bambino!*" exclaimed Scugnizzo, poised and beaming before the machine, the plate of his face a mere inch from mine and showing that maniacal sense of pep and proximity we associate with the excited but simultaneously troubled in eye. He tapped the metal sides of the machine lovingly, then reached down and—I swear to God—he goosed it! He winked and cacked at me with inner-drawn snorts, indicative, one perhaps rashly assumed, of his having done something witty. And indeed this was probably wit for the Italian. And the male. The combination is disastrous. Then Scugnizzo began fondling some pipes, brainlessly assuming the American woman incapable of seeing—and immediately—linked analogies, the damned fool. I sought a displacement activity.

"What is—" I reached up high and tapped the drum, "—that?"

"Ah yes, Mrs.," he pronounced. "This is called the '*trafila*.'" Scugnizzo turned me to him (and to those juggernaut eyes) by the wrist and, jaw extended, he tried to be helpful by tripping out for my educational benefit the demonstrationally overstressed dental/labial/dental: "*Tra, Fi, La*."

I repeated it aloud, accurately I might add.

He shook his head, the prig. "*Traaa. Feeeee. Laaaa*," repeated Scugnizzo and moved closer. I repeated it quickly to avoid, I said to myself, the nearness of you.

Well, anyway, it was then explained—and my article fleshed out—that boiling water in very small amounts moistened the semolina, which was then worked up into a powerful machine kneader. The finished dough goes into the drum of a press, where the *pasta*—compressed tremendously by revolving screws—is squeezed slowly out of the base of the drum through the small holes of the perforated plate called, I more than knew, the *trafila*. It exudes like beautiful golden hair. The pot was already gravid with fattening dough, and Scugnizzo, while ostentatiously singing "*La Donna è Nubile*" (a joke, preempting his, he rather stupidly wasn't aware my three years of Italian also afforded me), shoved into the bottom of the drum one of the many *trafila*-forms, which, by the way, fix the shape of whatever variety of macaroni or any pasta one wishes.

SEMOLINAS ARE MULTIFORM. For instance, there were "pipes," "solids," and "ribbons." There was in each hole a steel pin which give the macaronis their hollow, tubular form; the "solids," using smaller holes and no pin, yield spaghettis; and for flat, noodle-like ribbon varieties a flat opening takes the place of a round hole. The roar was incredible. Scugnizzo killed the machine, nipped a piece from the oozing *zitoni* there, closed his eyes, and smacked his lips, saying, "*Troppo dolce*."

Then he burped.

He gave me none of the snip to taste, such is the Italian cavalier and, I suspect, most men. So I myself then yanked out of one of the holes a little wet wad and dropped it into my mouth. But Italian manners? There's a topic.

"This you like, Mrs.?"

He was looking at the machine. No, he was looking at *me*.

"It seems very efficient," said I, lying. What the whole thing was, you see, was only some queer frugalistic noodle-house in someone's backyard looping out comic little *pastas* as slow as a wet week only to be over-seasoned and twisted around in local and surely indiscriminate platters. But, what the deuce, it had colour and was magazine-worthy. And if in fact the dough here was humming with mites and animalcules, well, that was more Pisticci's business than mine, thank you very much.

"Is peautiful, yes?"

God, the Italian was such a—! "Yes, Mr Scugnizzo," said I, rolling eyeballs skyward and sighing, "it's beautiful. All right?"

"*Romantico*."

Romantic was hardly my word, as you could perhaps imagine, for the machine.

"Eh?"

"*Romantico*," repeated Scugnizzo.

"Why I—"

But he had his cap slipped off and was with his hand nervously combing back thick pomaded shocks of hair. He raised his eyebrows and looked at me (I surmised) puppy-like. His throatball bounced. He grabbed my arm.

"You give me boogie-woogie?"

My God, I thought, he hadn't been pointing to or talking about the machine or the factory. He had been talking all along

about *himself*. Well, I stand for no nonsense, believe thee me. I marched away, notebook in hand—along with, should I have pointed this out to him, a *sharpened* pencil?—to the drying rooms. I watched him further humiliate himself by clutching his hands at a semi-squat and blubbering things like, “*Far l’amore?*” and “I am good, beautiful, yes, no?” Funny, down on 42nd St. I’d have viced somebody like that in the privates without a qualm. As it was, I simply pitied the poor thing.

IT WAS PATHETIC, really, wasn’t it? Here I was in the last outpost of Pisticci on a sweltering day and there finding myself being bargained for like some market sow by a swivel-eyed noodlemaker and his uncomplicatedly common face. Naples proper would have been no different, of course. I know the score. I knew what in Naples one could expect in the way of male Italian promenaders: of being trailed into caves on the *Herculaneum/Pompeii* circuit; of being sized-up and pinched blue in the (I think) intentionally less-than-well-lit *Galleria Umberto Primo*; of being sent into abrupt shock by fat, jaunty middle-aged tenors who come suddenly bulging out of dark Neapolitan alleys in silk open shirts singing through their wet lips, “*Maria, Mari.*” But, I mean, in rustic Pisticci?

I stayed on briefly, the time it took the recently arrived photographer to take a suitable number of pictures. He summarily departed, with me to follow in a day.

MY FINAL DAY became a *rite de passage*, one hellish. Scugnizzo tried to sugar his sourness that morning (following a night in which he had tried to blunder into my bedroom with a cracked mandolin and an incredibly presumptuous estimate of what he thought was to happen there) by gallantly opening the factory door and accompanying this with a low, non-ironic bow from the waist, this last a *bella figura* I beautifully snubbed, walking past him, as I did, breezily—and with one arched eyebrow. We went, that morning, to the company yards. I

finally got the information I wanted on the drying process, which, in sunny Italy, it turns out, is done by simple outdoor exposure. The *pastas*, I saw, looking out at what seemed an orchard of looms, were draped over canes or frames and there dried, sorted, inspected, weighed, and packed.

“*E bellissima, no?*” asked full-of-himself Scugnizzo, surveying in a martial walk as if through his camp, the row upon row of limp *pastas*—crackable if too cool, souring if too hot, mildewed if too moist—drying under the warm Italianate sun: short flat *lasagnes*; thinly threaded *fidellini*; healthily ribbed *rigatonis*; curled *vermicellis*; exotically cut *bombollotis*; and all the *foratinis*, *linguines*, *mezzanellis*, and on and on past a hundred and more. It sounded like the roll-call of good Roman society during the Silver Age. I scratched away at my notebook. I looked around for Scugnizzo who had suddenly disappeared.

Once again inside, I blinked at the cool darkness of the shed, relaxed until Scugnizzo (with his infantile humour) pivoted from behind the back of the door and—urgent, perspiring—lickerishly whispered:

“I want to make you habby, Mrs.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Blease, I am young and good. I have dirty years old.”

Catching me just on the brink of my indignant run to higher authority, Scugnizzo, crushed, generously but nervously began quickly bagging me some samples of tinted *pastas* right there under my nose, a coloured medley of greens, yellows, and reds (respectively from spinach juice, eggs, and beets) and then he parcelled out some of the more artistically cut and styled variety: alphabets, stars, dots, crescents. I saw, thanks to his eyes, he spilled scoopfuls.

I saw, further, that I more or less had what I needed to do my piece and wanted to be off. (Actually, I had been packed for two days.) Scugnizzo’s lengthily pondered farewell *auguri* he thievishly tried to transmogrify into a kiss, but, lurching at me—close enough at least to reaffirm, I grimaced, the one absolute in the world: the Italian abuse of garlic—he found himself quickly fumbled, if that shriek wasn’t faked, by guarded me and a handbag swung more or less successfully at the extremities. I can’t stand nonsense.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, *Hotcupboard* ran its already-by-now-coveted Italian number, snapped up by girls all across the country and certainly fulfilling all our own expectations, not only in the tantalising wine and food area but also with its *complément formidable* of the lush colour shots of Naples and environs, its wheatfields, the Praxiteles' Knido Venus, the fountains, nets with their seacatch—the *only* exception, alas, a photo-

graph printed in the “pasta” section, sad only because so beautifully written, of a machine, me, and a man with dislocated eyes in a pigskin cap at my right. The man appears to be looking and earnestly gesturing towards the machine. No, I mean, the man—anybody'd vouch for it—is *definitely* looking and earnestly gesturing towards the machine. A damfool janitor here, until I fired him, disagreed.

## Telling the Bees

*The woman bee-keeper, probably photographed around 1900 or a little earlier, is “telling the bees”; that is to say, she is engaged in the long-accepted practice of keeping her bees informed of her domestic affairs. She is holding a key in her right hand, as part of the ritual.*

(Gordon Winter: A COUNTRY CAMERA)

1

She sets each jar  
in place for counting;

mellow sunlight  
presses on the glass.

A swarm collects  
and bristles, then

its fearsome beard  
is gathered in her skep.

2

Hived, the bees  
are dutiful.

Her simple patterns  
regulate their day

or not so simple—  
“Do I love him?”

Let the bright key  
glitter in her hand.

3

Their wings dismiss  
the buzz of gossip—

that's for flies  
and little birds—

to bunch together  
intimate with sweetness,

keeping secrets  
in a drowsy hive.

4

At last, her honey  
is apportioned;

one by one  
the golden jars return.

Soon, like them,  
she'll lie contented

full and glowing  
quietly in the dusk.

*John Mole*