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The Umbrian Thursday Night Supper Club



Synopsis

Every week on a Thursday evening, a group of four Italian rural women gather in a stone house in the hills above Italy's Orvieto. There, along with their friend, Marlena, they cook together, sit down to a beautiful supper, drink their beloved local wines, and talk. Surrounded by candlelight, good food and friendship, Miranda, Ninucia, Paolina, and Gilda tell their life stories of loves lost and found, of ageing and abandonment, of mafia grudges and family feuds, and of cherished ingredients and recipes whose secrets have been passed down through generations. For fans of all things Italian, and the thousands of readers who loved *The Kabul Beauty School*; *Eat, Pray, Love*; and *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*; this book is a culmination of de Blasi's 20 years spent living, traveling, cooking, eating, and drinking in Italy, and of course it includes recipes for the most mouthwatering Umbrian dishes.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Random House UK; Reprint edition (August 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0099591855

ISBN-13: 978-0099591856

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (28 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #42,875 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #9 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Italy](#) #27 in [Books > History > Europe > Italy](#) #41 in [Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Italian Cooking](#)

Customer Reviews

I have long adored Marlena de Blasi's memoirs for the richly dripping prose, her ability to capture a scene (or a meal), and as a passport and ticket not simply to Italy but to the human heart. This spring, in a million to one chance, I met Marlena at a Left Bank cafe in Paris, the iconic Les Deux Magots, where she sat with Fernando at a front table. At that serendipitous meeting, where we bonded like long lost family and made a near instant connection of the heart (I too am a chef, writer, and was an expat for many years), she promised to send me a copy of *The Umbrian Thursday Night Supper Club*, soon to be released in Europe (the US release is six months behind the London printing). True to her word, a bright yellow parcel arrived from Orvieto, Italy containing the

autographed book "as well as a linen-wrapped, Italian tin that held a biscotti-like, sweet-salty confection made with cornmeal, rich with butter, rosemary, and fennel. I nearly fell over that Marlena ('Chou', she insists I call her) had baked me something with her own hands in the kitchen at Via del Duomo. Rustic yet sophisticated, the crunchy little cake is outrageously good. (La Ginuzza, she calls it, and the recipe can be found at the back of this latest book.) Eagerly I dove into The Umbrian Thursday Night Supper Club, feeling torn, as I usually am with her books, between wanting to simply devour and gobble it down, and wishing to sip it slowly like a fine wine, just a few pages at a time. As with all de Blasi's writing, I savor the deliberateness of speech and slightly old-fashioned, gilded quality of prose "vocabulary that raises the bar rather than lowers it. In a world that rushes blindly onward towards notions of 'progress', where we are rapidly losing our traditions and stories, I cherish her celebration of the older generation "the story carriers, the ones who remember. I value too that they don't drive fancy new cars and have wads of cash in their pockets but strive to live gracefully, both in abundance and in need. The 'Supper Club' is an ongoing celebration of a simpler, regional life that is gradually disappearing. It is the story of friendship forged between five women over a ritual of Thursday night suppers in a rustic building with an open fire. Cooking and eating together, it is a weaving of the histories that have shaped them, with Marlena dancing between confidant, friend, AND the outsider even after twenty-some years in Italy. It is also a tale of rustic Italian food sourced close to home or foraged wild, making do with whatever is to hand and in season "and the bonding of hearts that food can create, especially as de Blasi draws each woman forward to share her gifts, recipes and secrets. De Blasi's last couple of works have focused more on others' stories rather than her own, and I loved that there was more of Marlena in this book. With the supper club, she has once again invited readers to share a bit of her private world, and I suspect that I will not be alone in this liking. As I wrote to 'Chou' after reading the book, "Reading of roasted pancetta, of meat on rosemary skewers, freshly-dug potatoes and all manner of good things cooked in the embers of a fire, oh the deep longing it stirs in me. Years ago, I discovered the American expat Richard Olney's classic cookery book, Lulu's Provençal Table, and ever since then have dreamed of a fireplace and hearth in my kitchen, of the things I would cook in it in battered old pans and rustic, glazed tians. And here you are, sharing the exact foods that I would lay upon that fire and tuck amid the coals!" As a cook, I appreciate her style with recipes, a deliberateness without being enslaved to measurements or rigidity. Their styles are different and she thankfully lacks his snobbery, but something in de Blasi's language evokes a shade of the above mentioned Richard Olney: a firm refusal to lower standards or cut corners, the unspoken belief that good cooking is art "and that an art exists

to living "all spelled out in the most delicious, articulate prose. I suspect that what this book will stir in other readers is to say nothing of a desire to be included at such a glorious rustic meal in Umbria is the longing for a circle of good friends who gather around the hearth to cook, to share, to laugh and weep, celebrating life with its ongoing victories and losses. A hundred blessings to Marlena for what she has offered to us with The Umbrian Thursday Night Supper Club. It is a journey, this book. A glimpse into the pasts of four Italian women, and the glimmering golden thread of a weekly candlelight dinner that stitches them together under a velvet sky of twinkling stars. Immensely readable. Highly recommended. Buon appetito!

Billed as a memoir, this is an account by American food and travel writer, Marlena de Blasi, of the regular weekly gatherings at Miranda's rustic in rural Umbria where locals enjoyed extended evenings of authentic regional cooking until the candles gutter out. The privileged inner circle consists of the author (considered a newcomer, having lived in Orvieto only six years), Ninuccia, Paolina, Gilda and the aged Miranda, their guiding light and keeper of the local culinary flame, who at the beginning of the book has reached the point where she feels she must hang up her apron. Supper Club has all the ingredients of an enjoyable read: it conveys an authentic rural way of life virtually unchanged over the centuries, it expresses the intrinsic competitiveness of the Italian regions and ably demonstrates how this translates into the rigour of their recipes. It also goes some way towards showing how the love of food can often be the food of love. But as a work of non-fiction, I would take it with a generous pinch of salt. Each of the women's back stories is told in turn and Marlena de Blasi certainly makes a meal of every sentence. The tales themselves are fascinating but the various women's voices are filtered through the author's own distinctive writing style: peculiarly formal, superprecious and pretentious. It dominates so completely that it drowns the individual characters and renders them indistinguishable. Then there is the "food porn". If you're not a lover of Nigella Lawson's style of presentation, approach this book with caution. Supper Club is positively dripping with lush, sensual culinary prose. Here is Paolina: "My mother with the rosehip cheeks and the Botticelli face, a strap of her sundress slipping down over the white marble of her shoulder, little beads of sweat glossing her upper lip as she rolled the umbricelli one by one across the wooden board while Niccolò sat watching her." (Ninuccia, with her strict adherence to the Sumptuary Laws, would surely not approve!) I did, though, like the way de Blasi incorporated the Italian into her writing. The book is peppered with Italian phrases, unobtrusively translated and contributing a welcome air of "sympatico" to the

whole reading experience. However, I harbour the gravest doubts that this is a work of non-fiction. Would these four friends accept the author telling their long-held secrets to the world, things that they have not even told their closest friends? Somehow I doubt it. And what kind of friend must de Blasi be to reveal their histories? Would she have sought their "permesso"? She doesn't say. At the end of the book there is an excellent recipe section - though one can't help thinking that ingredients ripened under an Umbrian sky are never going to taste the same when assembled in the grey gloom that seeps through the window of a British kitchen.

LOVE all her books, they truly sing to my soul, she has such a magical way with words... there are only a few rules to the thursday night supper club, anyone who wants one brings their own napkin. humble or rich, always offer the best you have. when the candles are spent the evening is over. i am mourning the end of this book, i could have gladly glued my elbows to the table to keep hearing the amazing tales and recipes, traditional life is vanishing, step back into time and enjoy the harvest of umbria, it will feed you heart and soul.

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