



La Cucina

By Lily Prior
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Introduction

"La cucina is the heart of the fattoria, and has formed the backdrop to the lives of our family, the Fiorese, as far back as, and further than, anyone can remember. This kitchen has witnessed our joys, griefs, births, deaths, nuptials, and fornications for hundreds of years.

Even now the ghosts of our forebears gather in the kitchen, sitting around like old friends, participating in discussions and passing judgment on the activities of the living.

La cucina bears the scents of its past, and every moment in its history is recorded with an olfactory memorandum. Here vanilla, coffee, nutmeg, and confidences; there the milky-sweet smell of babies, old leather, sheep's cheese, and violets. In the corner by the larder hangs the stale tobacco smell of old age and death, while the salty scent of lust and satiation clings to the air by the cellar steps along with the aroma of soap, garlic, beeswax, lavender, jealousy, and disappointment."

For Rosa Fiore, the kitchen in her family's farmhouse in the Alcantara valley on the island of Sicily has been a haven since childhood. It was in the *cucina* that she found solace, cooked and captured bittersweet memories of her overpowering mother, hapless father, six older brothers, and younger Siamese twin siblings. When her first lover, Bartolomeo, was murdered, Rosa retreated into her *cucina*, and later to the city of Palermo. She remained there for twenty-five years, working as a librarian at the Biblioteca Nazionale by day and cooking sumptuous meals alone in her small apartment at night. But her solitude ended when a mysterious Englishman, known only as L'Inglese, arrived at the Biblioteca claiming to be a scholar researching the history of Sicilian cuisine. L'Inglese beseeches Rosa to instruct him in the ways of Sicilian cooking, and they embark on a journey of exquisite sensual and sexual awakening in the heat of a glorious summer. Their passion for the culinary arts is rivaled only by their hunger for each other, and L'Inglese brings out the essence of Rosa's beauty in a way she never imagined. "We had both learned our lessons." Rosa says, "L'Inglese had become skilled in the arts of the Sicilian kitchen, and I, the librarian, had learned what it is to love and be loved by a man. What a banquet of the senses it had been." When L'Inglese suddenly disappears, Rosa returns to Castiglione to mend her broken heart in the cocoon of her beloved *cucina*. There she makes new discoveries about her loved ones and herself. Lily Prior spins a bewitching tale about the mysteries of love and the joy and sorrow of family. A tribute to culinary delights and the countryside of Italy, *La Cucina* celebrates romance and passion in an unexpected and unforgettable way. **Questions for Discussion**

1. During the twenty-five years she is in Palermo, Rosa receives only two letters from her mother. How would you describe their relationship, both before Rosa journeys to Palermo and after she returns home?
2. After Bartolomeo's death, Rosa retreats into the *cucina* for solace and then leaves for Palermo. Why do you think she chose to leave Castiglione and her family? Why does she not return for such a long period of time?
3. Rosa and L'Inglese are instantly attracted to one another. What is it that L'Inglese sees in Rosa that she does not see in herself?
4. Compare Rosa's love for and relationship with Bartolomeo to that of L'Inglese. How does each relationship alter Rosa's life and what does she learn from each one?
5. Rosa knows next to nothing about L'Inglese's background or his personal life. What exactly is their relationship based on? In one instance she replies to L'Inglese, "'Yes, I trust you,' I said, although I was not entirely convinced that I did" (pg. 165). What do you think this means?
6. Shortly before L'Inglese disappears, Rosa says, "For the first time in my life I was completely happy. I had the feeling that if I were to die tomorrow I would be satisfied with my life; I had known what it was to experience life and to experience love" (pg. 167). Does she still believe this after L'Inglese disappears?
7. "I mourned for L'Inglese, for the time we had had together, and for myself: for my true self, which I had become with him, quite suddenly, in a blaze of color like a butterfly, and which I would never be again (pg. 186)." Do you think Rosa is selling herself short by believing that she could only be her "true self" when she was with L'Inglese? When she returns home, Rosa learns some surprising things about her loved ones, but what does she learn about herself?
8. How does the Sicilian setting contribute to the story? Can you imagine the novel having been set in another location, even another part of Italy?
9. Discuss *la cucina* and how it plays out in the story. What is your favorite moment in the story that you think best reflects the essence of *la cucina*?
10. Discuss the ending of the novel. Does L'Inglese indeed return, or is Rosa having a daydream? What, in your opinion, is the novel really about?

About the Author: Lily Prior lives in London, England. An ardent admirer of Italian cuisine and culture, she has traveled extensively in Sicily, where she found the inspiration for *La Cucina*, her first novel. She is currently at work on a new novel, *Nectar*, which will be published in 2002 by Ecco.