

Lorenza de' Medici, Who Elevated Italian Cooking, Is Dead at 97

A descendant of a storied family, she was an author, TV host and cooking school director who showed that Italian cuisine was about more than tomatoes, pizza and pasta.



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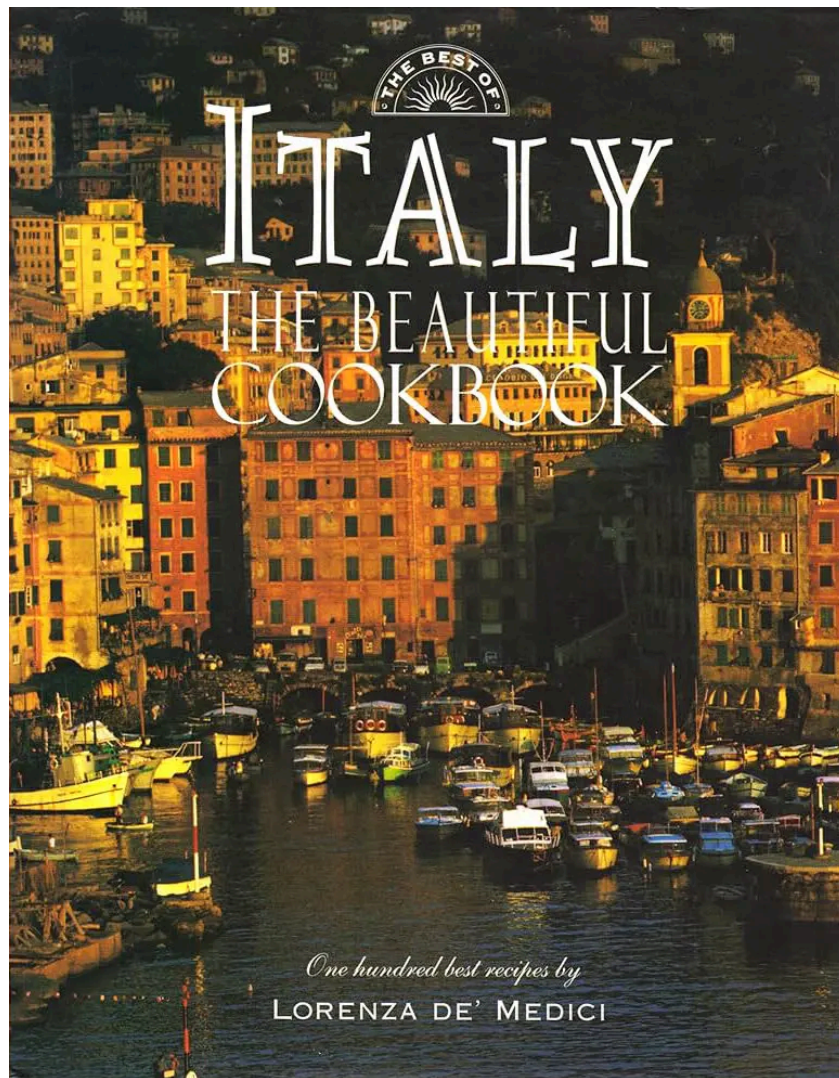
By Clay Risen

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Before Lorenza de' Medici began publishing her cookbooks in the late 1980s, Italian cuisine outside of Italy was often considered unremarkable fare: red sauce, white sauce, pizza and pasta, all of which could be whipped up in haste from frozen, processed ingredients.

But in books like “Italy the Beautiful Cookbook” (1988) and “The Renaissance of Italian Cooking” (1989), and later in her 13-part PBS show, “The de' Medici Kitchen,” Ms. de' Medici showed that Italian cooking could be something else entirely: light salads and soups, elegant preparations and, above all, fresh ingredients, ideally bought that morning from a local farmer.

For those with enough money, she offered intimate one-day to one-week cooking courses at her family's winery outside Florence, Badia a Coltibuono. Her students stayed in the estate's thousand-year old complex, originally an abbey, in between lessons on things like how to pick the right vegetables, properly stuff potatoes and separate eggs by hand.



In books like “Italy the Beautiful Cookbook,” Ms. de’ Medici showed that Italian cooking could include light salads and soups, elegant preparations and, above all, fresh ingredients. Collins Publishers

“One of my cooking students asked if she could use frozen artichokes in one recipe, and I said, ‘If that’s all you have, then don’t do that dish,’” she told The Chicago Tribune in 1985. “It does make a difference. In Italy we don’t do out-of-season dishes.”

A direct descendant of the storied Medici clan that ruled Florence during the Italian Renaissance, Ms. de’ Medici, who died at 97 on June 23 at her home in Milan, brought more than recipes to the table.

Her cooking was explicitly upper class. She called her food “the villa table,” a blend of regional influences favored by wealthier Italian families, in contrast to the “cucina povera,” or “peasant food,” which became popular with working-class Italian immigrants around the world in the 20th century.

“I love spaghetti, tomato, garlic and pizza,” she told The Globe and Mail newspaper in 1990, “but that is not Italian cooking.”

Her books were lavishly illustrated with sumptuous photographs of Badia a Coltibuono and other estates, most of them owned by her friends, and accompanied by tantalizing narratives of languorous meals shared during her tours of the country.

In other words, she was offering a lifestyle — and in the 1990s, those who remodeled their kitchens with terra-cotta, sandy marble and floral tiles in the so-called Tuscan style, or ate at one of the countless upscale trattorias that opened that decade, were experiencing a part of her expansive influence.

Many of her fans were surprised to learn that she had no formal training as a chef, and had come to her cooking career relatively late in life.

Lorenza de’ Medici di Ottajano was born on July 17, 1926, in Milan to Fanny (Custer) de’ Medici di Ottajano, who came from a wealthy Swiss banking family, and Paolo de’ Medici di Ottajano, who supplied luxury tanned leather to the city’s fashion houses.



Lorenza de' Medici was Vogue Italia's food editor before retiring in the mid-2000s.
Guido Stucchi Prinetti, via Badia a Coltibuono

Ms. de' Medici liked to say that like many Italian women of a certain age and class, she learned her way around the kitchen from the cooks and servants who came from around the country to prepare food for her family.

She gained even more experience during the German occupation of Northern Italy during World War II, when strict rations forced cooks to innovate wildly with whatever ingredients they had at hand.

Ms. de' Medici studied architecture at a polytechnical college in Milan but left before graduating to become a journalist. She was an editor at *Novità*, a fashion magazine that later became part of Vogue Italia. Later, she was Vogue Italia's food editor.

In 1953, she married Piero Stucchi Prinetti, a Milanese businessman whose family had owned Badia a Coltibuono, one of Italy's oldest wineries, since 1846. (Its name, in the Tuscan dialect, means Abbey of the Good Harvest.)

Along with making world-renowned Chianti, Badia a Coltibuono was among the first wineries to branch out into luxury olive oil production, and Ms. de' Medici would travel throughout Europe and North America introducing consumers to the wonder of extra-virgin oil.

Mr. Stucchi Prinetti died in 2002. Ms. de' Medici is survived by their daughter, Emanuela de' Medici, who confirmed the death; their sons, Roberto, Paolo and Guido; 11 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

During the 1960s, with four young children at home, Ms. de' Medici switched to writing books, beginning with a series for children, including a cookbook, "Giochiamo alla Cucina," or "Let's Play at Cooking."

At the time, cookbooks were almost unheard-of in Italy. Women did most of the cooking, and they had learned their recipes from their mothers and grandmothers. But the country was modernizing, with more women working outside the home and unable to undertake the lengthy preparations taught by their elders.



Ms. de' Medici in 1987 preparing bruschetta with a peppery green olive oil. Her family's winery was among the first to branch out into luxury olive oil production. Fred Seidman

Ms. de' Medici saw an opportunity. She created a series of 365 recipes for a Milanese women's magazine that modified traditional Italian cuisine to a modern family's needs. And she began to think more broadly about how to bring the cuisine she loved as a child to the world.

“How could the precious culinary heritage of the past be adapted so that it would be practical for the 20th century without losing any of its essential character, either in substance or in style?” she asked in the introduction to “The Renaissance of Italian Cooking.”

She also took notice of the cooking schools popping up at wineries and estates around southern Europe and realized that she could offer something similar at Badia a Coltibuono.

Within a few years her school was among the most popular in the continent, with the 14 weekly spots booked months in advance, despite their hefty price tag (about \$8,000 for five days, in 2024 dollars, not including transportation). The waiting list grew even longer in 1992, after she hosted her TV show on PBS.

Ms. de’ Medici largely retired in the mid-2000s. With time on her hands, she indulged in other passions, in particular opera.

The day before her death, she had been to La Scala, Milan’s storied opera house, to watch a dress rehearsal of one of her favorite works, Puccini’s “Turandot.”

A correction was made on Aug. 6, 2024: An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the surname of Ms. de’ Medici’s husband. He was Piero Stucchi Prinetti, not Piero Stucci Prinetti.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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