



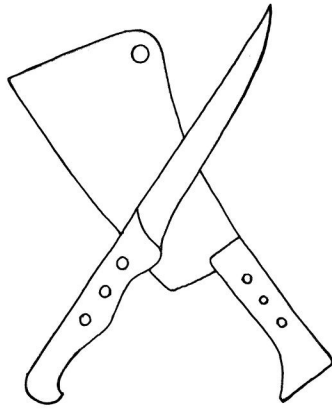
**The
Revenge
of the
Milanese
Butcher**



«A delicious comedy»



The Revenge of the Milanese Butcher



**Gertrude Wine
&
the Food Murder Mystery Series**

by Anthinula Tori

ItalianNotebook Press

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, dialogue and incidents are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, altered food products or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

DISCLAIMER

...that said, besides the fictitious characters, a fictitious corpse also turns up - a wee bit at a time - in gruesome ways. We hereby decline all accountability for any newfound aversions that you might develop to *carpaccio* or prosciutto or any other foodstuffs if you mistakenly take this story too seriously.

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www.ItalianNotebook.com

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**For my parents, who keep the food stories
of our families fresh.**

A Note on the Author & Publisher...

Anthinula Tori is half Italian and half English. She grew up in South Korea and Hong Kong, spending every summer back in Europe making lasagna and tortellini with her Italian grandmother, and watching her English grandparents, both butchers, make sausages and carve pork chops. Her English grandmother always used to say, “Two things in life are essential: sharp knives and a sense of humour.” After three years in Milan setting up her design company (www.kimonorabbit.com) and researching Gertrude Wine’s first abode, Anthinula now lives between Oxford and Umbria in the family’s medieval hamlet (www.caiporri7.com) where she is collaborating on a collection of children’s books with her mother, the artist Jean Tori (www.jeantori.com). Anthinula continues to write and cook although still lacks any serious meat-carving skills.

ItalianNotebook.com sends a free, brief, daily email about the places, traditions, food and daily life that make Italy so special. A small multimedia project founded by GB Bernardini (dual US/Italian citizen), it has now grown into a strong online community of many expert regional contributors who share their inside knowledge and passione with tens of thousands of subscribers who love Italy. ItalianNotebook Press is the latest endeavor, established to publish books and stories about the food, culture, art and people of Italy.

FREE MILAN TRAVEL DIRECTORY - Numerous places that the author discovered while living in Milan simply had to be shared! Download your free copy of [Gertrude Wine’s Milan Travel Directory](#) which contains descriptions, links and other useful information about special places in Milan... many of which appear in the book!

Whether planning a trip to Lombardia’s capital or taking a virtual tour from the comfort of your couch, this special guide offers a glimpse of some of the treasures that Milan has to offer.

Acknowledgements

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Delicious!

STEFANIA BARONCINI * OWNER, IL TINELLO RESTAURANT, BOLOGNA



A superb comedy!

ANGELA ROBSON * BBC JOURNALIST, LONDON



**Like opening your
favourite jar of jam!**

GIAMPIERO BEA * PAOLO BEA VIGNAILO, MONTEFALCO



A gastronomic mystery!

PETER PIAZZA * COMMANDING OFFICER (RETIRED) ILLINOIS POLICE DEPT, CHICAGO



What a dish!

PATRIK ATTENHOFFER * FILM DIRECTOR, MINDWORK LTD, ZURICH

CHAPTER 1

The Chef Investigates - Sharp Knives Know No Boundaries

The body had been hung out as slices of *carpaccio* - raw beef cut thinly - over a laundry hanger, in between the chef aprons. There was no blood on the starched white cotton, just tiny puddles on the floor resembling condensed prune juice.

“Do you think it’s a message?” inquired Gertrude Wine, the American head chef of the Milanese restaurant where the so-called body had been found.

Her irony was not lost on Vincenzo Valenti, the fiftyish and, to some, handsome Chief Inspector of Police of Milan, who returned her look.

It was a statement that, although ironic, was also an honest observation since it did appear as though someone was taunting the chef. Besides, Gertrude’s taste had been offended because the whole scene lacked any respect towards the human ingredients. The combination of what looked like raw beef and prune juice was not what she would have considered the ultimate mix. Then again, there were chefs making garlic ice cream nowadays, so what did she know? Well, she thought, after four years as the head chef in one of Milan’s most well-known restaurants, she knew quite a lot.

“How do we know this is a body and not just beef *carpaccio*?” asked Vincenzo Valenti.

“*Carpaccio* doesn’t bleed,” replied Gertrude, looking at the floor, “and taking into account there are only about eight kilos of meat here, I have a feeling that certain body parts were not carved up.”

Inspector Valenti interrupted Gertrude. “Please, let us not call it meat, Ms. Wine...”

“Wine,” replied Gertrude.

“You think the body was marinated in wine?” he asked, confused.

“No, my surname is Wine, not Vine, Inspector. It’s an easy mistake, since the grapes on the ‘vine’ do make the ‘wine’.”

“Fine, Wine, Ms. Wine,” stammered Valenti, who, usually exquisitely composed, had become flustered, not expecting to have been reprimanded because of his reprimand. He tried to focus on the meat-like corpse and not on vines and Ms. Wine.

“When do you think we might speak with the restaurant owner?” He checked his notepad. “Noah Balthazar.”

Gertrude studied the highly symbolic scene and wondered if Noah Balthazar, the owner of L’Oca Buona (Delicious Goose), would now have a good reason to close the restaurant after such a gruesome event.

Noah had left for New York and Gertrude had not heard from him in two weeks. He had told her he had a financial matter of some urgency that had to be resolved quickly and had not said when he would be back. Gertrude gave Valenti Noah’s contact numbers.

After his mad rush to New York, Gertrude suspected that Noah might be having financial problems and she wondered if he might have to sell L’Oca Buona, which was his ‘fat cow’, so to speak, in order to pay off a debt. If her suppositions were correct, she doubted very much that she would ever be able to work for anyone else in Milan, let alone find another job in the city. It was bad enough that she was a woman in a country with fewer women in Parliament than even Japan, but to be an American chef in Italy was like adding soya sauce to chocolate mousse.

Noah, however, with his forward thinking, and especially after a slew of spoilt chefs, had heard about Gertrude and sought her out in Boulder, Colorado, where she was working in her restaurant named Wild and Wine.

Gertrude Wine was renowned for being a talented chef, but eccentric in the food circles that congregated in that small mountain city with the highest rate of top chefs per square foot. For Noah it had been like gastronomic serendipity: he was an outsider among the Milan restaurateurs and Gertrude had dollops of unconventional food ideas.

She had tried to start a culinary movement of ‘back to basic’ ingredients in order to make the diner’s experience all about local, simple and delicious food, and not about experimental, obscure taste-bud teasers. One didn’t need shiitake mushrooms from the hills of Japan, or the rare *Bitto* cheese from Val Gerola, or the exclusive Indian Alfonso mango in order to create a masterpiece. Colorado trout fried in a nearby brewery’s beer could be just as full of flavor as imported Thai shrimps marinated in hard-to-find pomegranate concentrate from Israel.

The combination of Gertrude being somewhat of a kitchen pariah, ahead of her time, plus her publicly humiliating break up with a local food critic compelled her to accept Noah’s offer instantly. L’Oca Buona had turned into a haven for Gertrude, even if it was six thousand miles from home. The same could have been said for Noah, whose dream had always been to buy back his grandfather’s restaurant in Milan, rather than work for the family’s construction company in New York. Not only did Noah have the restaurant business in his DNA, his grandfather had instilled in him a philosophy of food that included a fascinating mix of tradition and innovation.

Four years had passed since Noah had convinced Gertrude to take the risk of a lifetime and prove the negative Milanese tongues wrong – that an American chef with talent could be a hit in this gastronomically snobby city. His bet had paid off and Gertrude’s genius and Noah’s vision had created a winning formula for the restaurant. They had united her belief in local and seasonal quality food with his theory that recipes could be evolved within the confines of tradition. Noah was convinced that certain American dishes could appeal to the Italian palate by including traditional Italian ingredients. Gertrude had, therefore, reinvented such staples as Thanksgiving turkey stuffing by adding truffles to her original sausage, bread and chestnut recipe.

Noah and Gertrude had gone one step further and had replaced conventional ingredients in established Italian recipes, such as using various *pecorino* (sheep) cheeses in lasagna instead of Parmesan and *mozzarella*. Another example was the use of goat ricotta instead of *mascarpone* in the *tiramisu*.

An added bonus was that Gertrude understood what it meant for Noah to be back in the kitchen where his grandfather had started and where he hoped to re-create his family food empire.

Through this creative and successful collaboration, L’Oca Buona became a world-renowned restaurant. Its element of distinction was what Gertrude called ‘cross-food’ instead of fusion. She didn’t believe in the overused concept of fusion whereby chefs tended to mix pretty much anything together. In the name of fusion she had been served strawberry risotto at a newly opened restaurant when she had first arrived in Milan and had wanted to cut off her tongue. For Gertrude there was an art in finding the right ingredients to exchange in traditional dishes.

Thinking about gourmet home cooking, Gertrude snapped back from her reveries. On a hunch she went to open the industrial-sized freezer situated at the other end of the kitchen. There in plain view were two frozen hands. One was holding a fork and the other a knife. Again, it was as if the murderer were enjoying a personal joke, this time with his victim.

“*I eat me(at)*,” popped into Gertrude’s mind. Ironically, “Bite me” suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

Valenti rolled his eyes at Gertrude. “Nobody is to touch anything, because everything is now evidence.”

Gertrude realized she had crossed a line and attempted to be more helpful. “These hands weren’t in the freezer when we closed the restaurant last night, were they, Leo?”

Leo Mangiarotti, her sous-chef, had just regained consciousness after fainting upon hearing that the *carpaccio* was human. In general, Leo had no problem with raw meat. Upon seeing the frozen hands, he slipped back into oblivion.

Gertrude observed the scene. Aware of Leo’s dating history, she knew he appealed to a very large number of women. If he had seen himself lying on the floor with two male policemen fanning him with napkins, he would not have been pleased at all.

While the Crime Scene Unit checked for fingerprints and scoured the kitchen for clues, and the police officers took statements, Gertrude returned to her kitchen musings. It was the only thing keeping her grounded.

Not only didn't Leo mind working for a woman, it was of no shock to him that he was working for an American chef in Italy. Leo had also been hired solely on merit and not just because of whom he knew, unlike many of his predecessors, who had got the job through a type of food nepotism. Before coming to Italy, Gertrude had no idea how much sway some of the food distributors had in hiring kitchen staff. Once in Italy, she had heard of a sought-after seafood supplier who had boycotted a very upscale fish restaurant that had refused to hire his son as the *sauté* chef.

Luckily word got out that Gertrude Wine believed that necessity was the mother of invention, so when a certain food was mysteriously absent from an order, she would make do with something else. The suppliers soon realized that product blackmail was not an efficient way to communicate with her. The only way to procure favors was to impress her, and occasionally Gertrude hired someone they suggested. She had been particularly lucky with Maria, a most amazing pastry chef, who was the daughter of the goat cheese wholesale dealer.

Gertrude snapped back to reality while they took her fingerprints.

"If we find any prints that aren't related to the staff, we might get a clue as to who did this," explained Inspector Valenti.

"I think I need a drink," was her response.

Gertrude poured herself a large glass of *Amarone* wine. She was surprised how calm and rational she was, but deduced that, after years of working in a stressful environment she had learned to remain composed. The occasional glass of wine helped. The greater the chaos, the more necessary it was to be efficient. Gertrude noticed that this was the same for Maria.

Understanding she was not to touch anything in the kitchen, Maria had asked for permission to go to a nearby bar to bring back espressos for everyone. She had also been allowed to remove the baked goods from the oven, so as not to burn down the restaurant. Maria calmly served dessert to all the police officers. There was nothing like relieving tension with white chocolate chip cookies.

As he munched on 'taste-bud paradise', Inspector Valenti realized he had only seen a few gruesome murders in his time, but at least those victims had been recognizable and not reduced to apparent ingredients.

Inspector Valenti sipped his espresso while watching the medical examiner proceed with the unhappy job of placing each slice of *carpaccio* into a plastic bag. He gulped down the caffeine, hoping to counterbalance the shock with a shot of adrenaline. It was too horrible to contemplate that such a depraved mind could be walking the streets of Milan, ready to go on a kitchen knife carving spree. Valenti imagined having to investigate sliced bodies everywhere, hanging to dry in cellars.

For a moment, Valenti doubted he would ever be able to eat a fillet of beef again unless he witnessed the butcher carve it from the carcass of the steer itself.

Gertrude observed Inspector Valenti travelling along his silent mental trip and she imagined he would soon become a vegetarian. Gertrude loved raw fish, but *carpaccio*, right alongside steak tartare and roast beef, were her worst nightmares.

She noticed that Leo, a great fan of raw meat in any form, had regained color from his second meltdown. She handed him a glass of wine and eventually he was able to ask meekly, and anxiously, what kind of a person could have entered their kitchen, killed someone, sliced the person up, and hung up the pieces.

Standing next to a note-taking Inspector Valenti, Gertrude wondered out loud, "Maybe the murderer only entered the kitchen in order to hang the meat... excuse me, hang the mutilated body. Maybe the actual killing and slicing was done in another place. After all, cut meat - I mean, a cut corpse - would be easier to transport and less noticeable."

"But think of the cost effectiveness of doing it all here," intervened Valenti.

He realized he too had said out loud what he was thinking and was sounding very much like he was entering into the thought pattern of the murderer. He shuddered at how fast he had gone from contemplating a vegetarian lifestyle to expounding sociopathic logistics.

“But how did he or she get into the restaurant?” asked Gertrude. “Only Noah, Maria, Leo, Paola the *maitre d’*, and I have the keys.”

Valenti continued his reasoning, “Anybody could have made a copy of the keys.”

“But somebody would have noticed a dead body being dragged into the kitchen. We’re right next to every bar and nightclub in central Milan. There are always people outside, even in winter, having an *aperitivo* or smoking a cigarette. Many act aloof and uninterested, but somebody always knows what’s going on.”

“You have a point, Ms. Wine.”

Having taken into account that it was probably impossible for the killer to have brought a dead body into the restaurant, Inspector Valenti suggested a third option. “Could the victim have already been in the kitchen and then murdered?”

An officer from the Crime Scene Unit appeared and handed Valenti a piece of paper.

He shook his head quickly discarding this possibility. “Apparently, there is no trace of blood anywhere else in the kitchen, so we can exclude both options. The body was cut up somewhere else.”

Valenti paused for a moment, taking into consideration that he was debating the case as if with other police detectives. This wasn’t the most straightforward case, so he would have to be flexible. He would have to be careful what he divulged, but he also needed all the help he could get. After all, he still did not know who the victim was because the fingerprints on the frozen hands had been sliced off.

“I would like you to know that usually not all information pertaining to a murder investigation is shared with the public, but I’m going to need as much information as you can give me,” announced Valenti. “I would also request that you do not speak with the media or anyone else, for that matter.”

Gertrude, Leo and Maria nodded, obediently.

A young policeman came over and interrupted them with news that the freezer was covered with the fingerprints of the entire kitchen staff. He stared at them as though he had located the murderers.

Inspector Valenti, trying to impress upon the young officer a lesson in investigative common sense, reminded him that it had been a working kitchen until the night before and the staff had obviously not been expecting frozen body parts in their freezer. Just as he was saying this, Valenti gave a sideways glance to Gertrude, Leo and Maria, who, although looking innocent, could still not be discarded as potential suspects.

He made a mental note to interview each of them separately even though he suspected they could easily be each other’s alibi. Come to think of it, they might have even helped each other. They had the keys, the time, and the know-how to slice anything, including, most probably, a human being.

Once again Gertrude could see the wheels turning in Inspector Valenti’s mind and realized that they were fast becoming suspects.

“You are more than welcome to check our knives,” interjected Gertrude. “But, if I were you, I’d also study what kind of cuts were used on the meat – classic *carpaccio* or the Piedmont style of cutting against the muscle? The way meat is sliced is an entire world of its own and is almost like a fingerprint depending on the knife, the cut and the section. The murderer definitely knew what he or she was doing.”

Valenti looked curiously at Gertrude. “Did you cut any meat here in the restaurant yesterday?”

It was a simple question, but a look of horror rushed across Gertrude’s face as she realized that they might have mistook a human body for a pork chop or a leg of lamb.

Gertrude Wine suddenly lost her calm. “Are you suggesting that we may have inadvertently cooked... and served...OTHER PARTS OF THE BODY?”

Leo hit the floor for the third time.

CHAPTER 2

You Are What You Eat

It was the day after the restaurant had been closed due to the ongoing investigation. Gertrude Wine spent it visiting her friends. This was a miracle for them because they rarely saw her out of the kitchen.

After four years in Milan, Gertrude had only a few close friends. Most of them had something to do with the Culinary Establishment and had wanted to meet Gertrude because they were intrigued by her practice of the cross exchange of ingredients.

Another thing her friends had in common was that they could not understand why an agreeable-looking woman, in her early forties, talented in the kitchen, flavored with a charming disposition, even if with an unconventional sense of humor, was still single. Maybe it had something to do with the pervasive Italian psyche that women, even with a career, should be married.

When it came to matters of the heart, Gertrude had reined in her usual openness and had avoided conveying to her friends that she was secretly in love with Noah Balthazar. Not sharing these emotions with her friends had something to do with her injured pride, because Noah obviously did not have the same feelings for her. Gertrude had also remained silent on this matter because she did not want to have to admit that Noah preferred younger and much more glamorous women.

Fortunately, Gertrude, for the most part, was not insecure. If asked to describe herself physically, she would have said she had the same inquisitive eyes as Sigourney Weaver in the movie “The Year of Living Dangerously” and the same mischievous smile as Diane Keaton in “Play it Again, Sam”. Sometimes, Gertrude’s friends said she reminded them of Katharine Hepburn in “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”, minus a couple of decades.

Later on in the day, Gertrude sat in the home of her best friend, Amelia Mantegna del Monte, drinking afternoon tea.

“How interesting that it has taken a murder to remove you from the premises of L’Oca Buona,” observed Amelia.

Amelia was a real Milanese, born, bred and fed on every Lombard recipe from *ossobuco* and *brasato* (braised beef) to *Torta Rovesciata di Pere* (Upside Down Pear Cake). Whether because of nurture or nature, the result was that Amelia wrote cookbooks about traditional Milanese cuisine. Most of her recipes had been handed down to her from the family’s various cooks. Amelia knew her way around a saffron *risotto* like a pro and could throw one together even when she did not have all the necessary ingredients that most other mere mortals required.

Their friendship had started many years ago with Gertrude supplying Amelia with tales from the kitchen and American recipes, and Amelia providing Gertrude knowledge of Italian cultural and social behavior.

Amelia belonged to an important Milanese family that had always had their home full of artists, writers and musicians, from Toscanini to Visconti. Anybody with a good story was welcome, and no matter what their political views or social status, they all shared the love of an exceptional meal.

True to form, Amelia still loved a good story and listened intently to Gertrude’s awful experience from the day before, while buttering a maple syrup scone – a Gertrude specialty.

Gertrude took a sip of tea. “I’ve been ordered not to talk about the details of the murder. However, I’m sure the police are going to have to say something soon. There were photographers waiting outside the restaurant and they’re already asking how an entire body could have fit in the small black bag that was on top of the stretcher.”

Amelia arched her eyebrows. “I can assure you that I am much more interested in whose body it was, and why that person was disposed of, as opposed to how. Do you think someone wanted to teach you and Noah a lesson and ruin the restaurant?”

“Like a message from the Mafia for not paying protection money or an impatient debt collector?”

questioned Gertrude.

“Or bitter chefs,” interjected Amelia. “Goodness knows, Noah fired enough of them before he hired you. Or a snubbed food critic?”

Gertrude shook her head. “I find it very hard to believe that someone would sacrifice another human being just to leave a dead body in our kitchen to ruin our reputation.”

“Why not?” countered Amelia. “I can just imagine a food critic, enraged at Noah’s legendary disrespect of Italian food critics, going home to his mother, who doesn’t respect his culinary opinions either. The food critic son complains about his *mamma*’s tomato sauce being too acidic, and, after she ignores her son for the umpteenth time, he explodes and cuts her up. Then, in another fit of rage and revenge, he decides to drag you into his drama.”

Gertrude, astonished, stared at her friend. “When did you get such a vivid imagination?”

“Too much raw meat, do you think?” chuckled Amelia.

Amelia went to request more tea from the staff in the kitchen and Gertrude contemplated that, even though this was not a spontaneous crime of passion, it was still overly passionate in a zealous murdering kind of way. Of course, a dramatic murder scene in a kitchen wasn’t all that surprising. This was a business where sharp knives, boiling water and burning flames killed things and transformed them on a daily basis.

Cooking was definitely a passionate vocation and filled with emotion, as it focused on the ecstasy of the senses – taste, smell and sight. Hearing could be added to the list too, since to some the sound of sautéing onions was a delight. Even touch could be included, because there was nothing more satisfying than the feeling of licking one’s fingers, especially after they had wiped the leftover chocolate frosting from a mixing bowl.

Amelia returned with a plate of pumpkin and nutmeg muffins.

“I was just thinking of how much immoral passion you’d need to cut a human being into fillets,” said Gertrude, pensively. “This isn’t just about punishing the restaurant. Whoever the victim was, the murderer must have hated him or her intensely.”

The fresh tea arrived and Amelia filled their cups.

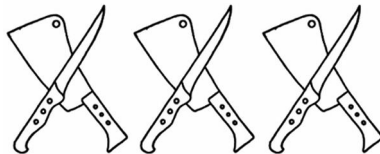
Amelia sipped her beverage and surmised, “L’Oca Buona is definitely being punished.”

“People might even think we’re responsible.” Gertrude cringed. “I can hear them saying, ‘No wonder the prices are so good; they use dead bodies for the stew.’”

Gertrude felt dread, contemplating the repercussions of the crime. Noah was going to kill her when he found out. His last words to her as he left the kitchen were, “Don’t get into any trouble.” Granted, those were always his last words whenever he left on a trip, but now the ultimate publicity hell was going to be unleashed. Noah was not going to be pleased when he returned from New York.

Suddenly, her mobile phone rang and startled her. It was Inspector Valenti.

“Ms. Wine, I’m so sorry to disturb you but we’ve discovered who the victim is.” There was a long pause. “I’m so sorry, but it’s Noah Balthazar.”



An hour later, a devastated and red-eyed Gertrude met Valenti at Noah’s apartment and opened the door with an extra set of keys.

“I’m so sorry that I had you come here before the Crime Scene Unit goes over the place, but I wanted you to see if there was anything out of place,” apologized Valenti.

As they looked around the large and beautifully furnished apartment, Valenti dared ask, “I was wondering if you might have any ideas about the culinary symbolism of the chef aprons that were hanging up with the body?”

Gertrude felt like the whole scene - walking around a dead man's apartment wearing plastic gloves - was already surreal, but Valenti's inquiry sped it into the realm of the absurd.

Suddenly, she felt like she was outside of her body, watching and listening to someone else.

"I don't know," she answered distractedly. "Maybe the murderer was trying to suggest that Noah was chopped meat compared to a real chef. Like saying, 'Who do you think you are?'"

Valenti acknowledged that if there were anything to be said about Gertrude Wine it was that she did not censor her ideas. This opened the way to an entirely different perspective for him and he was grateful for her insight.

"And the hands in the freezer?" asked Valenti.

Gertrude gave him a-you've-got-to-be-kidding-me look, but managed to continue her thought process anyway. "I think placing Noah's hands in the freezer with a knife and fork could have implied 'I'll show you, for eating your own food'."

For the first time since Valenti had met her, Gertrude seemed out of it. Maybe this had not been the best time to ask Gertrude her views on kitchen symbolism and death. You could cut the tension with a knife.

They finally reached the kitchen. Nothing, apparently, in the rest of Noah's home had been removed. Now, however, Gertrude had a terrible feeling.

They entered the large kitchen with a stainless steel island in the middle of it. She held back her tears, remembering how often they had experimented with recipes here.

Inspector Valenti opened the oven. Gertrude stood still and for a moment they both expected to see Noah's head wrapped in string with an apple in his mouth covered in bacon, ready to be roasted. As symbols went, it would have been effective. To their mutual relief there was nothing there.

Valenti opened the refrigerator and, again, there was nothing.

As he leaned over to look through a large rack of herbs and spices, Gertrude stared at him and said, "Do you really think some frustrated meat distributor got mad enough to kill Noah and grind him up as a spice?"

Valenti straightened himself up and tried to steer the conversation away from the macabre. "It's very likely that it was someone in the food industry. Do you know if he had any enemies?"

Gertrude opened various kitchen cupboards, noting that nothing appeared to be missing or moved.

"No," she answered. "Everybody seemed to love him even though they considered him slightly crazy. He unnerved people with his non-conformist attitude to everything he did, especially with food. He loved taking risks and he loved being different."

Before he could censor himself, Valenti blurted out: "Did that include his personal life?"

Gertrude felt herself go on the defensive, worried that Inspector Valenti had detected her true feelings for Noah, after such an affectionate description of him. "I don't know much about that. He never introduced me to any of his partners."

With this truth came the brutal realization that she had always been excluded from that part of his life. It was no use being hurt. Noah was dead.

The best she could do now was to be useful. "Last year he went trekking in Bhutan and then along the Silk Road, and this year he went sailing near Okinawa and then went hiking around Mount Fuji. He must have been travelling with female companions because he always had Maria make heart-shaped chocolate truffles for his trips."

Valenti looked at her curiously. "Why don't you think it was the same woman?"

Gertrude pondered why she instinctively assumed there were always different women on holiday with Noah.

Suddenly a long lost, but familiar voice came to her from somewhere in her subconscious. "*Sugar Pie,*" it said, "*however good denial tastes, you always knew when Noah had met a new woman.*"

Gertrude was painfully reminded that this was true. Nothing obvious was ever said by Noah, but his periodical, newly found joy, bubbling away with childlike enthusiasm, always resulted in a new suit

and a new aftershave, and for a week he would go home early. Gertrude also assumed that each new ingredient that Noah suggested they use in a dish had something to do with the nationality of a new girlfriend.

She looked around Noah's kitchen and recalled him asking her to cook sweet potato French fries and lemongrass *soufflé*.

It seemed useful to share this assumption with Valenti. "I think some of these women were foreign or at least travelled a lot."

"Did this happen often?" inquired Valenti.

"Every five or six months." Gertrude glanced at a suspicious looking Chief Inspector of Police. "You don't think a vindictive girlfriend killed him?"

"Why not?" he replied. "In any case, we need to track down all leads."

As Valenti said this, he looked straight up at the pots and pans hanging from a stainless steel apparatus situated above the island in the kitchen. His expression changed and Gertrude followed his gaze towards two long *prosciutto* hams covered in salt suspended among the metal cooking utensils. Unlike the usual ham hind legs that were very wide at one end and then tapered down towards the other end of the bone, these were uniform in size. They looked like two dry-cured shin segments, from knee to ankle.

Valenti felt like vomiting. "Do you think it's him?"

Gertrude looked at what might be Noah. It was both horrendous and bizarre. She couldn't stop herself from thinking: 'You are what you eat.' Noah had loved ham.

For the first time she felt light-headed. Noah had not just been the object of her affections, but her boss, her mentor and her friend. "I think I need to sit down."

Valenti accompanied her into the sitting room and Gertrude politely held back her tears, while the police, medical and forensic teams arrived immediately after to transform Noah's home into another crime scene.

She forced herself to take her mind off Noah's salt-encrusted shins and focused on the significance of 'you are what you eat'. Did that mean that if you dined on swordfish, you were agile and good at defending yourself, or if you lunched on roasted rabbit, you were skittish and speedy? And what did it mean if you ate lentils and mashed potatoes? Did it just boil down to the common conception that meat eaters were predators even though the animals they ate were usually herbivores and acorn feeders? Could the murderer have been an angry environmentalist?

Inspector Valenti interrupted her thoughts. "I'm so sorry to bother you, but do you know if Noah Balthazar had any dealings with any businesses that cured meat for the restaurant?"

"We used to buy *prosciutto* and *salami* from different suppliers. I will ask Leo to get you the list," she answered.

Valenti left Gertrude to continue her mental-whodunit-flowchart. Whoever had done this knew about food. Slicing *carpaccio* and curing meat, especially if it belonged to a human being, were both difficult endeavors. This was a form of culinary revenge.

After a while, Valenti came and sat down next to Gertrude with what appeared to be even worse news. "There was no forced entry anywhere in the house. Apparently the murderer had the keys to his apartment."

Gertrude knew she had a set of keys and no alibi. Too exhausted emotionally to be considered a suspect, she put Noah's keys on the table.

"Do you really think I'm guilty?" She was verging on polite belligerence.

"No," he answered, "but do you know how many people had an extra set of keys?" Valenti's tone took on a less professional manner, because he realized she must be in shock after seeing Balthazar's cured ham-style legs.

"Just me and the cleaning lady, I think, but I can't be sure. Why don't you think I'm a suspect?" She was relieved, but curious.

“Because the lab tests came back from your knives from the kitchen and your home and they didn’t match the metal traces we found in the remnants of the slices of the body. Apparently you only use ceramic knives,” replied Valenti.

“I could have gotten rid of them and then bought new knives,” suggested Gertrude.

Inspector Valenti smiled to himself. Gertrude was a strange human being. Most people didn’t offer themselves up as suspects.

“As you probably know, cutting knives are made of martensitic steel, a hard stainless steel. Even though this means they have durable cutting edges, they’re not as resistant to corrosion over time. We found traces of rust, chlorine and alkali cleaners. Since it takes awhile to corrode stainless steel, the knife in question had been left to soak over a long period of time in detergent.”

Gertrude smiled at Vincenzo Valenti. He was not just a pretty face with the capacity to be kind; he also knew how to interpret clues. Stubbornly, however, she insisted, “I could have borrowed a rusty knife.”

As though reading her mind, the Inspector continued: “Most importantly, I considered motivation, your relationship with the victim and your propensity for cruelty.”

Gertrude preferred to ignore her dark side. Not being a vegetarian was bad enough.

Valenti explained, “Even though this was a crime of passion, it was obviously premeditated and took a great amount of planning. In my experience it is very difficult for people to plot this type of murder without causing a large amount of suspicion. As for motive, we’ve seen the will, and the death of Mr. Balthazar was definitely not in your best economic interest. As far as potential cruelty goes, I’ve been told that you feel guilty when you cook seafood and you have been overheard, on occasion, imparting kind words to the clams before sautéing them.”

“I’m not guilty because I talk to my clams?” snorted Gertrude.

“No, because you have an alibi. Apparently your doorman suffers from a bad case of insomnia and he knows everything that goes on in your apartment building, including the fact that he never saw you leave after you returned home a little after midnight, which was soon after you all closed the restaurant together.”

“Thank you. I’m relieved that you think you can trust me.” Gertrude finally looked calmer.

Valenti had not been expecting such a response and was slightly flustered, “My pleasure, I mean, you’re welcome.”

He regained control quickly, albeit not tactfully: “We still have to ascertain where the rest of the body is. Fortunately, the forensic results came back negative for human remains on the cooking utensils and pots and pans in the restaurant kitchen, so you can rest assured you didn’t cook any parts of Mr. Balthazar by accident.”

Gertrude was relieved, but still overwhelmed. Valenti, however, was an Inspector with a mission and kept on going. She realized that they had something in common. They were both stubborn.

“Do you have a wine cellar?”

She shook her head. “Just the glass room in the middle of the restaurant that holds all the wine.”

“Can you think of any other storage areas the restaurant uses, or that Mr. Balthazar might have mentioned?” asked Valenti.

“No, just the walk-in refrigerator in the kitchen and the pantry room. We get most of our ingredients delivered daily,” confirmed Gertrude.

Valenti nodded his thanks. It was great having a food consultant on the case. It was also harder, because he didn’t want to upset her, but he knew he was going to have to tell her that it was likely that certain parts of Noah Balthazar would be delivered to the restaurant in the form of ingredients.

As if by magical-mind-reading, Gertrude asked, “You think we’ll have to check everything that gets delivered, don’t you?”

Her intuitive skills were greatly aided by her ability to read people’s faces, and Inspector Valenti’s face hid far less than he imagined. She was also gifted with a contorted imagination.

Valenti clarified his own thoughts on the matter. "I'm afraid so. With this amount of preparation, the murderer is not only patient, but also very angry, and I have a feeling he or she wants us to know just how much."

It was true that this much effort and violence signified someone with a bone to pick, or cut into small pieces. The prolonged retrieval of the entire cadaver might be part of the murderer's need to satisfy his or her taste for revenge. Even though the victim was no longer around to witness it, the murderer could be savoring these horrific images of contempt: cutting, curing, and hanging. Leaving a pair of shins to dry among the victim's pots and pans definitely showed contempt. Then again, murder was evil. All scraps of empathy had obviously been washed down the drain.