

THE SIGH PRESS

AMPERSAND INTERVIEW 1

We are delighted to inaugurate the Ampersand Interview Series with best-selling author Laura Fraser in conversation with Sigh Press Contributing Editor Jalina Mhyana. The Sigh Press hopes to bring you interviews several times a year and, with each, an excerpt of the author's work. This time you'll find a passage from Laura's humorous and insightful book, *The Risotto Guru: Adventures in eating Italian*.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris, Editors

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*TSP: Your first memoir *An Italian Affair* came out in 2001 and became a New York Times bestseller. Your second memoir *All over the Map* was released in 2010 to critical acclaim. Your connection to Italy has outlived the affair that first brought you here almost two decades ago. How would you describe your relationship with this incredible country?*

LF: I always feel that everything is "tutto a posto" when I'm in Italy. Life has the pace, flavors, and grace that it should have. I love Italian food, architecture, shoes, film, authors (I read Ferrante in Italian long before others discovered her here in the US), and scenery. I also love the Italian language, and am pleased that Italians can't tell where I'm from because my accent is pretty good.

TSP: You teach classes with other San Francisco writers and filmmakers in a collective called The Grotto (<https://www.sfgrotto.org>). You also teach a memoir writing workshop called 'Eat-Write-Travel' (<http://www.eat-write->

travel.com) in Italy, Mexico, and Guatemala. You've just won the IACP (International Association of Culinary Professionals) award for essay writing. People might assume that a *New York Times* bestselling debut would pave the way to an easy and prolific writing career. However, this isn't always the case. After the wild success of *An Italian Affair*, your agent and publisher advised you not to write another book unless it would be as popular as your first. You spoke of the crippling effect this had on you as a writer—the inevitable performance anxiety and writers' block you struggled with. How did you manage to write under such pressure? What coping strategies did you utilize?

LF: "Crippling" is probably a strong word for a few years of not publishing a new book. It's true that I heard a lot of people tell me I had to follow up *An Italian Affair* with another bestseller or my career was finished. So when I didn't have another great idea for a book, I just didn't write a new one at all. I was lucky to have the great writing teacher William Zinsser as a mentor (and relative), and when I went to see him and told him I wasn't writing because I was afraid it wouldn't be as successful as my last book, he said, "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You're a writer—so write." And so I did. My next book wasn't as successful commercially, but it's a good book, and in the big scheme of things, it was just my next book. During that whole period I was writing plenty of magazine articles, though. It's not like I was doing nothing. I always have to work.

TSP: The word "privilege" comes up quite a bit in the goodreads comments for your latest memoir. The comments, by and large extremely positive, are nonetheless suffused with a subtle resentment of your perceived privileges—hopping from country to country, having exotic affairs, eating gourmet food—as if your cosmopolitan lifestyle just fell into your lap. How would you describe your relationship to "privilege"?

LF: Well, I think anyone who is born Caucasian to well-educated upper-middle-class parents at this point in human history has to have an awareness of their privilege, and of the responsibilities that go along with that privilege. I'm tremendously lucky to have had an excellent education and supportive, smart parents (who insisted we live in Mexico for a summer when I was ten to understand something of another culture and language). I was able to graduate from an expensive college without debt and become a freelance writer, which is not a choice a lot of people with insecure backgrounds can make. While I didn't need it, I always knew I had a safety net, which is different from someone who doesn't have one.

That said, I have supported myself solely with my writing since I graduated from college, with no other source of income. Like everyone, I've made choices about how I spend my money. I live in a small apartment and am lucky to have rent control, which has made travel possible, especially since I've done a lot of home-swapping. I've always preferred experiences over material things. I remember when my grandmother died and left each of my sisters and me \$1500, my sisters put their money toward a down payment on a house or car. I spent it traveling for nine months in the Mediterranean. Instead of letting that money grow in a bank account I made the choice to visit Greece, work on a kibbutz, ride camels with Bedouins in the Sinai, and visit Europe for the first time—spending every penny of that inheritance. I figure Grandma would've been happy. I've also been able to travel over the years because as a writer I've had assignments to go to different countries for stories, and I've been able to sell stories I've come across when I travel. It's not like I'm riding in First Class and booking five star hotels (which is where you never meet any

interesting people anyway). So, yes, I'm privileged, and I've also worked hard to fulfill my desires to have rich experiences meeting people and tasting food all over the world instead of owning a house or expensive toys. All this may come to bite me in the ass when I retire and don't have a lot of savings or a house. But then I guess I will just go find the cheapest place to live out my last days where I can speak Spanish or Italian and drink cheap wine.

TSP: You co-founded Shebooks, a publisher of short e-books written by women. Would you say that Shebooks is a feminist response to the stereotyping or dumbing down of women's literature as chick lit?

LF: Shebooks has published high-quality short e-books by women. There haven't been a lot of places for women to publish at that length—about 15,000 words. If you look at the VIDA count, you can see that magazines and literary journals that publish long stories overwhelmingly publish men—the statistics are shocking in some cases. So Shebooks.net is a venue for women writers where they can be taken seriously. So yes, it is in part a feminist response to the characterization of women's writing as "chick lit." Women are not taken as seriously as the purveyors of "dick lit," as I like to call it.

TSP: You've recently authored the e-book *The Risotto Guru* through Shebooks, and *Losing It*, a book that takes the diet industry to task. I ordered the poet Alice Luterman's *Feral City* from the Shebooks website (for three dollars!) and in less than a minute I was reading it on Kindle Cloud. I was impressed not only by the ease of purchase but also by the reading group questions on the *Feral City* page, beneath the generous excerpt. The Shebooks website also hosts an online community where

aspiring writers can share their work. Would you tell us a bit about this community?

LF: Shebooks is in the first stages of a new project called PaperQuilt, where women can share their microstories with each other. Stay tuned, it's early days. Meantime, we have over 70 books you can find on Amazon, Apple, Kobo, or Smashwords.

TSP: You write about your lifelong love of reading, as well as your love of journaling. What role do your journals play, if any, in the writing of your memoirs?

LF: I was an obsessive journal-keeper as a kid. Writing in journals made me a writer. Now, I keep a journal when I travel, but not so much every day. Maybe I should. But journals are essential for remembering places, conversations, observations, and emotions—and so are photographs. Sometimes I fret that the time I spend on Facebook is robbing me of my deeper emotional life by taking me away from my journal.

TSP: Instead of a predictable happy ending—a happy ending that you thought you wanted—*All Over the Map* brings the reader on a journey that culminates in your newfound self-fulfillment. Being as memoirs don't utilize the same meticulous plot scaffolding as novels do, would you say that memoirs rely more on personal growth (character arc) to fuel the story? Is personal growth the new happy ending?

LF: In a memoir, you are the protagonist, and the protagonist has to change or the book is going to be boring. A memoir is a journey of self-discovery, and the writer has to have something to say for the reader to want to take that journey with her. That means that the writer has to be vulnerable, and show her flaws. Nothing's worse than a self-satisfied

memoirist. I always say the two biggest sins of memoir are narcissism and whining. Instead, a writer needs to be able to dig down into uncomfortable truths to come to some sort of realization that will resonate with the reader. Or why waste their time?

Every good memoir has to have as strong a narrative arc as a novel. Annie Dillard called writing a memoir “fashioning a text.” Writing a memoir is an art—you’re not just writing down stuff as it happened to you. And above all, a memoir is not about the writer. It’s about the reader, and the story.

But I am happy to say that the actual story of my life after *All Over the Map* had a happy ending. At the age of 48, I re-met a wonderful man I knew in college, and we’ve been delighted to be together ever since. I didn’t put that in the end of the book, though. Partly I didn’t want to jinx it, and partly it just wasn’t as good an ending to the story.

RISOTTO GURU

Every once in awhile, a guru crosses your path, one who can reveal meaning and mystery. We have to be ready for these moments of grace that can stir the soul—or in my case, the risotto.

Gurus don't usually announce themselves. You wouldn't expect, for example, that the driver who picked you up at your hotel on the way to visit a winery in Piedmont, Italy, would be a guru. But life is short, and you never know just who is driving your car, so you might as well ask a few questions.

Angelo Fornara, a friendly and outgoing man, was surprised I speak Italian, and for the first moments of our 45-minute drive, we exchanged pleasantries. Then I asked him where he is from.

“Vercelli.”

Vercelli may mean nothing to you. If you are not a devotee, like me, on a quest, the most you may know about Vercelli is that it is a handsome city in the Piedmont's Po River Valley. But to one who is searching to understand the mysteries, “Vercelli” means much more. It means carnaroli. It means, to a lesser extent, arborio. It means, in short, risotto. The best rice and the best risotti in the world come from Vercelli. People there have been stirring risotto since medieval times, when the Arabs brought rice north and some enterprising Italian flooded the Po River Valley and planted a few hectares.

For over 10 years, I have been trying to make the perfect risotto. It sounds easy, and a lot of Italians make it look easy: You sauté some onions

in a little butter or olive oil, toss in some rice, glaze it, add a splash of wine, then broth, one ladle at a time, stirring all the while, until the rice absorbs or your arm gives out. When it's almost ready, you throw in a few condiments (mushrooms, shrimp, asparagus, fresh peas, pancetta, whatever), and grate a little cheese on top at the end. Voilà. Risotto.

But risotto can go terribly wrong. You could use brown rice, for instance, and end up with a dish that not even the hippies in your college communal house would eat when they were stoned. You could use bouillon cubes instead of real stock and produce gruel that tastes thin and metallic. You could cook it too long and make glop. You could add the condiments at the wrong time, making them tough and over-cooked, or raw and crunchy. You could use old wine that had turned bad and wind up with risotto that tasted like old wine that had turned bad. You could, as most restaurants do, cook it halfway, then fire it up before serving it, ruining its consistency.

Risotto is all about learning from failure.

Risotto is a practice, one that requires patience, letting go of regrets about past attempts and expectations of the future. To make risotto, you have to be in the moment. You have to be alive to the ingredients, honor and understand them, and wait while their true natures are revealed. Risotto is egoless. To the degree that you have mastered risotto—and there is no perfection, only striving—you have mastered yourself.

That's why I had long been searching for a risotto guru. I don't want to brag here, but I already make the best risotto in San Francisco, at least among people with no Italian blood, so there was no one to take me to that next level of transcendence. Now that I'd met someone from

Vercelli—my culinary Mecca—I could barely contain my excitement.

“So,” I asked Angelo, nonchalantly. “I guess you must eat risotto if you are from Vercelli.”

He took his hands off the wheel for a moment to give me one of those fond Italian gestures that means, Of course, you idiot. The car swerved and he righted our direction just in time to avoid an oncoming car.

“So I suppose you make a pretty good risotto yourself,” I ventured.

Angelo shrugged, with a little beatific smile on his face. Then he couldn't resist. “There are very few things in this world that I can say I am competent at,” he said. “Risotto is one of them.” He went on to add that his friends considered him perhaps the best risottoist of their acquaintance, but he could take no credit for it—that was all due to his grandmother, who learned to make risotto from his great-grandmother, and etc., back to whoever in the Po Valley first had the wits to stir the rice and let the broth absorb slowly, releasing the creamy starch, instead of just putting the pot lid on and letting it cook.

I told Angelo that I like to make risotto. I'm no expert, like someone from Vercelli, but I like a nice asparagus version in the spring, maybe a butternut squash in the winter.

“Zucca e gorgonzola,” he said. Winter squash and gorgonzola. This was getting interesting.

For the next half hour, I peppered him with questions about the whole process. Do you use butter or oil in the soffritto (the sauté with the onions)? Alas, he never had an easy answer to my questions; they were always more like a riddle. Butter is better for some risotti—the heartier

ones—and olive oil for the lighter, summer ones; often, however, he uses a mix (the proportions of which depend on the type of risotto). You just have to know your risotto.

Okay. Red onions, white onions, or leeks? Again, it depends—but he tends to use scallions. Scallions? I had never used scallions. Really? Then I wracked the Italian side of my brain and realized: scalogni. Not scallions. Shallots. My next risotto nearly destroyed by one of those linguistic *falsi amici*, or “false friends.”

So after the soffritto is nice and golden and the shallots are transparent, you add the rice. Angelo uses only carnaroli rice, which is a short-grain rice that is more absorptive even than arborio, which is acceptable, and more commonly used. (Carnaroli rice is not cheap. You will think you are buying the truffles for your risotto, not the rice.) Using any other kind of rice, Angelo said, is barbaric. Call it Chinese or Indian food if you want to use some other kind of rice, but don’t call it risotto.

Then comes the wine, to *sfumare* the rice. This is the first time I have heard this term, a verb particular to risotto, and I am delighted. There is a whole verb that means infusing the rice with wine. I would run around for weeks afterward singing (to the tune of “Volare”) “*Sfumare*, oh-oh-oh-oh.”

But which wine? Angelo, it turns out, works at Piedmont winery famous for its Barolos, Spumantes, and Barberas, so there is no using up old bad wine for Angelo. Wine is an essential ingredient in risotto, like anything else, and all the ingredients have to be excellent. It’s all about the “*materia prima*,” the prime materials.

So...red or white?

He shakes his head. Have I learned nothing? It depends. If you are making a delicate risotto with zucchini flowers, would you use red? Of course not. A nice frog's leg risotto? White! Quail risotto? Barbera. White beans and sausage? Red.

Okay, now we have sfumated the rice. It is time to add broth. The broth, of course, must be hot. If you have cold broth, it will shock the rice or something. It will not absorb properly. It will make glue.

"Che schifo," I said. How disgusting. He nodded. I was catching on.

But, I wondered, what kind of broth? Chicken? Beef? "I suppose it depends," I said.

He nodded. In general, he said, he uses veal broth. They have very good veal in Piedmont, so naturally, the veal broth is very good.

"Pollo?"

With a lighter risotto, yes, he might use chicken – but actually no. He would only use capons for his broth.

Capons.

Yes. Capons, he explained, are roosters with no palle, so they develop without sex hormones, which give the meat a vaguely nasty taste. Capons are more flavorful than hens, also because the flesh is a little more fatty, which makes it more tender.

I do not know where to get capons. It was becoming clear that my risotto broth was going to cost as much as flying to Italy. I asked if I could get away with putting a chicken carcass in water with some celery, carrot, and a bay leaf, boil it up, call it stock, and use that for risotto. When I tell people in the States that I make my own stock, instead of pouring it from

the cardboard box, they are impressed. Angelo gave me a look that said, You poor Americans.

I asked him about contorni, the stuff you put into risotto. "There are so many risotti that this discussion could go on for the rest of our lives," he said. He pointed to a hill in the distance. "We're almost there."

I had only a few more minutes to get answers to some essential questions.

Al dente or creamy? Definitely al dente, chewy in the center of the rice. Texture is everything with risotto.

Cheese? A good Parmigiano-Reggiano, or even better, a salty sheep's cheese, a Sardinian pecorino.

Do you add a little cream at the end? Angelo gave a look of disgust. "Anyone who adds cream to risotto doesn't know how to make risotto. Risotto is creamy if you make it right."

We came in view of the hotel. I only wished that I could actually watch my guru make risotto, and taste his risotto, but I knew that was unlikely. I did actually hint about that, in case he wanted to invite me over for dinner. Then I thanked him and said, "ciao, ciao."

The next day I was invited to eat with the owner of the winery and hotel and some friends at Batasiolo's Bofani vineyard. A table for 20 was set outside a villa, underneath some trellises overlooking hillsides covered with the best Barolo grapes anywhere. The owner, Fiorenzo Dogliani, invited me into the kitchen to meet the chef.

To my surprise, there was Angelo, sfumando the risotto. He had braised some pancetta with the shallots, reserving other pancetta to add at

the end, for some difference in texture. He showed me his big pan, then shooed me out of the kitchen. I wanted to stay, but he insisted I go drink some spumante instead. I begged. But he was not about to give up all his secrets to any American who walked into his kitchen—or for that matter, to anyone.

In about 20 minutes, Angelo appeared with a beautiful ceramic platter filled with golden risotto. This risotto was his nod to spaghetti carbonara—a risotto carbonara, with egg yolks, parmesan, pancetta and pepper. The risotto was perfectly creamy and al dente at the same time, with both crunchy and soft pieces of pancetta. “Non è male,” I told Angelo. It’s not bad. His face fell a bit. “It’s the best,” I said.

“There is one secret ingredient,” Angelo told me.

I raised my eyebrows. I knew better than to ask outright.

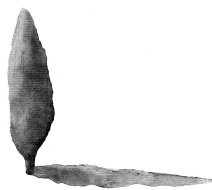
“Passion,” he said.

For everything I had learned from Angelo about risotto, what remained, after the last grains of the second plate of risotto were gone, was that all I knew about risotto was how little I really knew.

LAURA FRASER is a San Francisco-based freelance writer who is the author of the NYT-bestselling memoir *An Italian Affair*, as well as the memoir *All Over the Map*, along with hundreds of national magazine articles, some of which you may have read when you had your highlights done. She did a house trade with an Italian in the 90s, and then more friends of that Italian crashed in her Haight Ashbury flat, which meant she had plenty of places to stay when she finally went to visit Italy. She fell in love with the country and the language, and became obsessed with speaking, reading, and cooking Italian. Although she's never pulled up stakes and moved to Italy (hate to give up that rent-controlled SF flat), she visits as often as she can. She also spends time in a little house she built in San Miguel de Allende, and is now practicing her Spanish. She is the co-founder of Shebooks.net, which publishes e-books by and for women. Her latest book, *The Risotto Guru*, is available at shebooks.net. Laura also teaches writing workshops in Italy and Mexico, which you can find out about at laurafraser.com.



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