

still life WITH FLAVOR

American artist Wendy Artin's gift for capturing the unique beauty of her adopted city extends right into her kitchen, where she transforms its raw materials into straightforward yet elegant meals

By JOSHUA DAVID PHOTOGRAPHS by PAOLO NOBILE RECIPES by WENDY ARTIN

tHE NUNS squeeze the peaches inappropriately," says the painter Wendy Artin, sounding half annoyed and half amused. "They leave finger marks! They break the skin!"

We dash down the Via Giulia, toward the Campo de' Fiori. We are shopping in a rush because our tiramisu must be assembled before we go to the beach. Wendy pushes a stroller that bounces over the cobblestones. It holds Lily, her astonished eight-month-old daughter. Other babies might protest the bumps, but Lily loves an adventure. And, like her mother, she is famous in the Via Giulia neighborhood. Cries of "Leeee-lee, Leeee-lee" follow us from doorways as we gallop past.

"I'm usually not in such a hurry," says Wendy. "I like to look around the market and chat with the vendors, and they give me recipes. But since Lily was born, there are days I must race. So I often go to a stall run by a young woman. She understands what it's like to be a parent and doesn't automatically serve the old ladies first, the way the longtime vendors do. I have to get Lily's lunch! I have to get outside to paint before I lose the light! I can't wait behind all the nuns of Rome, watching them squeeze the peaches."

I know Wendy from college. We took a painting class together and were part of an off-campus crowd that threw artsy parties in the decaying Victorian mansions of West



Have stool, will travel: Wendy Artin packs up her brushes and watercolors (leaving room for fresh market finds) and hits the cobblestones daily in pursuit of a place to work. Here, she captures the late-afternoon light on the ruins beyond the Circus Maximus.





Philadelphia. Back then everyone in our circle posed as if they might someday run away to Europe to be a poet, a filmmaker, or a painter. But Wendy was the one who did. She kept painting, and eventually she moved to Rome and married Bruno Boschin, the owner of a lovingly run travel bookstore on the Via del Pellegrino. They live in a small apartment in a 17th-century palazzo at the Piazza dell'Oro, complete with resident *marchese* and *marchesa*. Wendy's luminous nudes and watercolors of Roman landscapes hang on the walls of movie stars and princesses. Beneath their delicate surface, these paintings have a robust physicality. Heaps of ancient brick and towers of marble take shape from soft brown washes. Wendy captures moments of light on flesh and stone, evoking memory and revelation, the secrets of time.

The hands that do this are also those of a gifted cook. I have other friends who take cooking seriously, but Wendy is the one I emulate. Her simple way of making delicious food is devoid of pretension. "There are excellent ingredients in

Rome," she says. "That encourages you to cook as Italians do, in a very straightforward way."

We push into the Campo de' Fiori, which, as always, looks like an opera set, with its market umbrellas and displays of produce and flowers. We're looking for cherry tomatoes, basil, and *mâche* (or lamb's lettuce).

"This is the most expensive market in Rome," says Wendy. "I go to the cheapest stalls that are any good. Most of the vendors here know me from when I was painting *apette*, the three-wheeled trucks they use for deliveries. Now I'm bourgeois and use a stool, but back then I'd sit on a piece of newspaper or some cardboard and start painting. And if they had to make a delivery, I would be robbed of my subject!"

"Then, for a period, I painted still lifes. For these I needed the most beautiful vegetables. I would come to the market and dig through every bunch of radishes in the box to make sure I had the best ones."

We approach a vendor to examine his tomatoes. He regards

Wendy with the respect due a customer known for rummaging to the bottom of boxes.

The butcher is next, at the market's periphery. It is a meticulously tended temple to meat, the red flesh cleaved and trimmed on slabs of white marble.

"*La bocca* is the mouth," says Wendy, "So *bocconcini* are little bites. I like them smaller than veal *bocconcini* are generally made in Rome. This butcher remembers and cuts them just the right size." She laughs, and the butcher raises an eyebrow. "He remembers because once I made him go through all the *bocconcini* and cut each one in half."

Knowing the correct size of the meat, getting the right tomatoes—these things matter in Rome, according to Wendy, because there are rules. "Romans are traditionalists. Dishes are supposed to be a certain way. *Cacio e pepe*, for instance. It's a simple pasta with Pecorino and black pepper. But to do it correctly, the pasta water needs to be salted just so. The pasta must be properly cooked. The other ingredients must be in the right proportion. In Rome, you learn how to perfect a thing."

Back at the apartment, we assemble the tiramisu. "This is a dish young Italians make when they are first entertaining." Wendy rigorously whips the egg whites. "My goal here is to have the most fluff possible."

With the tiramisu resting in the fridge, we head out to meet Bruno at the Libreria del Viaggiatore. Back in 1994, three weeks after Wendy's arrival in Rome, she walked into this store. She hadn't yet found her niche in Rome and was planning to pack up and move on.

She asked the bookshop's handsome, dark-haired owner, "What are the most important, most beautiful things I should see before I leave Rome?"

He told her there was a lovely lake outside of town. And he offered to take her there.

WE ZOOM OUT OF ROME in their tiny car. Wendy and Bruno often bring Lily to a beach in Ostia favored by transgender Brazilians, but the parking lot at that beach is filled. So we take the first parking space we can find. This turns out to be at the gay beach. We spread our towels in a mass of slick-haired, caramel-skinned Roman men. They stand, hips canted, in groups of three or five at the water's edge, as scrupulously groomed in their Speedos and purple-tinted sunglasses as they would be strutting the Via Condotti in full Gucci. We bob in the shallow water, drinking Peroni and watching them be exquisite. Wendy claims that the beach with the transgender Brazilians is more fun. I find that difficult to believe.

Buzzed from the sun and the slinky mood of the afternoon, we settle back at Wendy and Bruno's for a languid evening of cooking and eating.



Artin (opposite, with husband, Bruno, and daughter, Lily) returns to favored vendors at the Campo de' Fiori market. The beauty of painting in Rome, she says, is that you never run out of subjects.

"I just chop as I go," Wendy says, cutting directly into hot pans with a pair of kitchen shears. "This gives us nice rustic chunks. I don't do highly decorative food. I expend that energy on painting. The paintings have to be beautiful. The food just has to taste good."

We set the table by the window that looks out onto the garden. The walls are covered with Wendy's most recent work—sepia water-

colors of the Forum, the Baths of Caracalla, and the Circus Maximus—which she is gathering for an upcoming exhibition. One of the larger paintings is of a scene we drove past today: the arches of the Palatine as viewed from the Aventine Hill. It is a sensuous depiction of light on stone, of the majesty of ruined splendor that Rome puts before the world to admire. I'm struck again by Wendy's gift, that her hands are capable of bringing forth this heat, light, and dust, these cool, cavernous shadows—that she conjures onto the page the air of Rome itself.

"You teach yourself how to put the pieces together the right way to create an effect," she says. "Making food or making paintings—it's really the same thing."

For information on the work of Wendy Artin, contact Gurari Collections (617-367-9800; gurari.com) or the Galerie du Passage, in Paris (011-33-1-42-36-01-13).

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