



Pizza Capricciosa

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by C.Flisi

Because the following is about real people, names and some unimportant details have been changed to protect their privacy.

Every pizzeria in Italy offers a pizza called “*capricciosa*,” meaning that the ingredients are at the whim of the chef. So

you would expect to find wide variation from one capricciosa to another, especially in a country as individualistic as Italy. But, surprisingly, the ingredients tend to vary little: mozzarella and tomato, prosciutto and mushrooms, artichokes, and sometimes olives.

Far less capricious than other fare concocted in Italian ovens.

The four of them were roommates in graduate school three decades ago. They were all Americans with good academic records spending a year of study in a beautiful Italian university town. Sally had graduated from a large Midwestern university. Tall and athletic, she was nationally recognized for her feats in women's basketball. Sabrina was short and exotic-looking and had attended an elite East Coast women's college. She and Sally linked up to share an apartment.

So did Hank and Eddie. Hank was from the Midwest and had attended a state school, performing superbly in their honors program. He was solid and well-built with an engaging smile. Eddie had gone to a well-known Catholic college and already knew he wanted to be a college professor. He had the Irish gift of gab and an equally Gaelic taste for beer.

Sally and Hank clicked and began hanging out together, joined by their mutual love of sports and an offbeat sense of humor. Eddie was sweet on Sabrina for a while, but she began dating an Italian businessman and became less and less visible at school events.

The following year the four of them were again roommates in Washington, D.C. By now Sally and Hank were an item, but she still roomed with Sabrina, who had — with difficulty — pulled herself away from her Italian to complete the second year of the program. Eddie, meanwhile, had met another student in the course, Lauren, who had also gone to an elite New England women's college.

When the five of them finished the second year, the world was presumably their oyster. They all had newly-minted masters' degrees from a recognized graduate school — one upon which Washington's power structure looked favorably. Job opportunities beckoned from every angle.

Eddie and Lauren got married and opted to continue on for their Ph.Ds in the capital. Sally and Hank got married and found promising entry-level jobs in the government. Sabrina's Italian emigrated to the U.S. and “made an honest woman of her,” she liked to joke. She moved with him to another region of the U.S.

And then what happened?

Careerwise, Sally and Hank found the kind of storybook success that the alumni network of their school likes to brag about. Sally's was more immediate: she went to work for a rising star in the Commerce Department, followed her mentor to the State Department, followed her mentor's mentor to the White House. Then she set up her own consultancy, leading two dozen employees and a fistful of deep-pocketed clients from

around the world.

Hank's career path was rockier. He didn't luck into a mentor relationship in his first job, and without that, carving an upward path through the Washington bureaucracy is next-to-impossible. So he went back to school supported by Sally and added a prestigious M.B.A. to his resume. This snared a well-paid job with a top management consulting firm, but it meant the lifestyle that goes along with the territory: 18-hour days except on Sunday when you only have to put in 12. Hank valued his independence as much as his income, so he put out feelers again, and this time found an excellent spot with a high-profile trade association. The money was good, and his weekends were free. This made it easier for him to watch their two children while Sally was globetrotting.

On a personal level, they are still married, still in harmony, jointly proud of their two athletic, well-educated offspring.

Life has been very good to Sally and Hank.

Sabrina had no career track to speak of. She would land a blue-chip job with a company, then her husband would be transferred or she would get pregnant or something else would come along that seemed more promising, and she would change. She had career fits and fizzles in Miami, San Francisco, and New York, and then, when her children were small, her husband decided to move back to Europe. They have since lived in Paris and Rome — not hardship posts by any means — and she fills her time with consulting work for former employers

and others. Glamorous assignments and an enviable lifestyle, but no continuity, no career ascension, and no steady personal income.

On a personal level, she is still married to her Italian in a relationship that others describe as “volatile” but she defends as “not boring.”

Their sons attended university in the US and found jobs in Hollywood.

Life has been benignly inconsistent to Sabrina.

As for Eddie and Lauren, Eddie found a tenure-track teaching position in D.C. right away. With his charm and drive and wit at cocktail parties, he became a rising star in the academic sphere. Lauren also started teaching but later followed Sally into the government. Mentored first by her friend, then by others, she wound as a White House advisor, trusted by Republicans and Democrats alike.

But life decided to be less kind to Eddie and Lauren. In spite of their successes and a marriage blessed by two healthy children, Eddie became an alcoholic. His work suffered, his star dimmed. No physical violence but plenty of verbal abuse. Finally, Lauren kicked him out of their house.

A few months later Eddie wrapped himself around a telephone pole while traveling in a car at high speed. He was in a coma for four months, in hospital for almost a year. Finally, he pulled

through and went back to teaching, but he was slower now, hesitant gait, speech slurred. He would never again be king of the D.C. cocktail party circuit in any way.

Lauren still refused to let him back in the house. Not long after, she felt sick enough to begin what became a yearlong ordeal of hospitalizations and tests to determine the cause of her malaise. Cancer was suspected, but it couldn't be identified so no treatment was undertaken. During this period her mother died of a stroke. Her sister, who was helping to care for their mother and Lauren's still-young children while Lauren was in the hospital, was herself diagnosed with cancer and had a double mastectomy.

Finally, Lauren was released from the hospital. Soon after, her cancer was located, but at this point, it was too late to do anything but wait for the end.

The week before she died, Lauren allowed Eddie back into the house. He lives there now alone, his children long gone, pursuing professions after their university degrees.

Two rewarding occupations, one equivocal job track, one pseudo-profession, and one brilliant career not allowed to run its natural course. And all baked from the same Italian oven, with the same basic ingredients. This chef seems far more capricious than your average *pizzaiolo* (pizza maker).

And we've got to take what he dishes out, even though it's not at all what we ordered.

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