



# Me and my Verve



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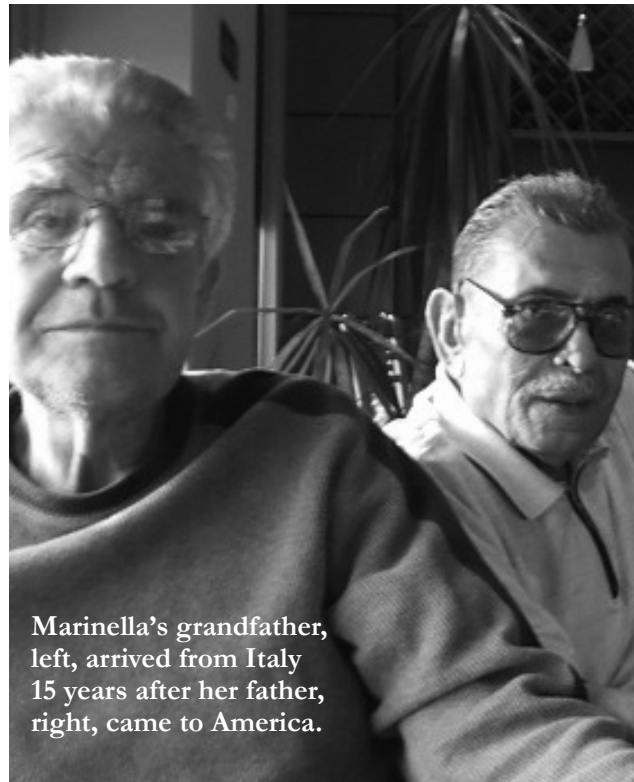
*Naturally, Marinella Della Vecchia has a spirit unlike many others. But it is her family that has helped give her this energy. Marinella's Italian family are literally her verve and provide the spirit within her. She explains her journey that has brought her a new realization of her delightful and unique family.*

All my life, I've lived surrounded by arches, naked white statues, a pond in my foyer, a red tiled roof and scents of tomato sauce made from scratch cooking in large vats on the stove. Perfectly fitting if I had grown up in Italy, but I grew up in America, in a tiny Italian bubble.

My parents are immigrants from Italy. They came here separately, my father in the 1950s and my mother at the end of the 1960s, from two different small towns located on opposite sides of a mountain. In Italy, each town has its own variation on the language or slang, which is called a dialect. Both of my parents share the same Italian dialect because they are from such a close area. But the odds of both of them coming to America separately, years apart, and meeting another Italian with the same dialect is nearly impossible, and yet, they met in Philadelphia, in my mother's Italian restaurant, Ma Conchetta's. And then had their four children together (I was No. three).

Growing up with my parents was not easy. I would have done anything to

Marinella, left, pictured with her sister, right, now realizes that family is an important factor in who she is.



Marinella's grandfather, left, arrived from Italy 15 years after her father, right, came to America.

to keep it spotless, with my mother's voice ringing in my ears, "It doesn't matter if no one is going to see it. You'll know it's messy!"

She is as old-fashioned as they come. As she pointed out to me, nearly every day, 10 times a day, for about 21 years so far, no matter what year it was, morals and the right thing to do have never changed. This included not wearing anything that showed cleavage, or skirts above the knee, or god forbid, bikinis. And no hanging out with boys alone, EVER, or friends for longer than two hours, because god forbid someone thought I was doing something unlady-like, or I came off as rude and overstayed my welcome.

She doesn't believe in sleepovers and she doesn't believe in going away with anyone outside your family, and there is never any reason to stay out or awake past 9 p.m.

My father would look like a typical workaholic to anyone who met him, but he's more than that. He loves to work. He absolutely loves his job. He came to America at age 15 in the 1950s with an arranged marriage to his first wife, an Italian girl who had just moved here. She and one of his two daughters with her died of cancer, and then he met my mother.

As he loves to remind me and the rest of his children, he came to this country with nothing in his pockets and worked hard to fill them. But in doing so, my father lost what would be considered an actual life. He doesn't have hobbies, he never went on vacation before, and he loves to work. At age 71, he now owns multiple businesses and properties and doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. My father has had a heart attack before, a triple bypass, several heart surgeries, a recent pacemaker, and more. But absolutely every single time, the very

day after surgery, he has asked, "So can I go back to work tomorrow?" as we all stand around his hospital bed shaking our heads. In the more than 50 years that he has worked, he has only missed one day of work.

Coming from a background of immigrant parents who came to America for a better life, I have felt fear and anxiety about my place and career in life. My parents were poor Italians from tiny towns that didn't have running water or real schools. They walked miles to the next town each day in rain and snow to carry back water or visit the minuscule library. They came to America with hopes of more possibilities and better lives. But for me, all of this was almost wasted.

Growing up was nothing I would repeat. Not only was I the weird girl who ate spaghetti for lunch while everyone else ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on white bread, but I was the girl whose mother would never let her go to slumber parties. I'll never forget the day a classmate told me that my parents talked funny. I was in shock. My parents talk funny? Since when? And it wasn't just the other children, but their parents as well. On the rare occasion I was over at a schoolmate's house, their parents would ask me questions like, "Do your parents speak English?" "Does your Dad make pizza for a living?" And this was right after my mother had just dropped me off and in perfect English, said, "Hello."

With day after day of this kind of treatment, I grew ashamed. I was ashamed and embarrassed by my parents, my culture, my looks, everything. I wanted to be anything but Italian. I began my new-found obsession of being anti-Italian in my appearance. With my naturally dark, thick,



Marinella's mother.

have had "normal" American parents. I wanted my biggest embarrassment to be my mother dropping me off at school in the morning and kissing me goodbye. Instead, I was mortified when my mother ran to third base, rather than first, during our Girl Scout baseball game because she had no clue how the American sport worked.

My mother is the model Italian mother. She practically lives in the kitchen, and thanks to her, our house is permanently scented with Italian spices and cooking. She doesn't believe in anything that isn't made from scratch. And she nearly cried the one time she found out I ate Chef Boyardee in the middle of the night in my dorm room, out of sheer desperation for food.

Growing up with my mother was stressful and harsh. She is strict, as all old-school Italians are, and she is a pro at Italian guilt tactics. To this day, I can't leave a towel unhung or a shirt unfolded without hearing her voice in my mind nagging, "Is it so hard to just hang it up or fold it? Doing it now saves time later." Even when I lived away for a year and a half in Italy and had no one to impress with my apartment, I felt compelled

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Marinella's parents have brought Italy to America by re-creating an Italian villa for their family home.

brunette hair I begged and cried to my mother to let me have highlights. At one point I spent every waking minute hating my dark, black Italian eyebrows. Surrounded by Irish and blond fair-skinned classmates, I was overcome with horror of how much my eyebrows stood out on my face. I prayed each night that I'd wake up with light eyebrows and pale skin. I spent years shielding my body from the sun, hating my naturally dark and easily tanned complexion. When people commented on how tanned I looked throughout the year, I cringed. I spent far too many days deliberating whether I'd change my name to "Jen" or "Alexis" if I had the chance. I just wanted to be normal and fit in. I was sick of hearing "Mozzarella" or "Marinara"

instead of my name, Marinella. I couldn't even relate to Italian-Americans because there are so many differences that exist between true Italians from Italy and Italian-Americans who had been in America for many generations.

Soon I began to refuse to eat my mother's cooking. I feigned disgust so often at her food that she just stopped offering dinner to me. I wanted tacos and Chi-

nese food and chicken and all the normal things that normal American people ate. I wanted to take out my peanut butter and jelly sandwich at lunch instead of my prosciutto or mortadella sandwiches or spaghetti-with-meat-sauce lunches. In fact, it was only when I was 16 that I ever tried a taco or Chinese food!

At times, when my parents went on their tangents, lecturing us on how things used to be for them, and how easy we kids had it here in America, but how we just took it all for granted, and they didn't understand why we did the things we did, I would blurt out spiteful words. "Well this isn't Italy, is it?" I fumed. "This is America. And if you don't like that, you should go back to Italy!"

Then came high school. It was salvation. From the moment I set foot inside Upper Dublin High School, I knew I was

free. People of all colors and shapes wandered by wearing all styles and outfits of their choice. I felt for once like I might be able to blend in.

Of course, in high school the subject of my parents always came up. But for once in my life, I was surrounded with bubbles of kind, curious questions that I didn't mind answering. "When did they come over?" "Do you speak Italian?"

"Have you ever been to Italy before?" Everyone was so genuinely interested.

Girls gushed over how gorgeous and perfect my eyebrows were, Irish girls moaned in their envy of my olive skin, and girls begged me to tell them how to make their hair as thick as mine. I had no idea what was going on, but I liked it! And I loved even more that I could answer back with a simple, "I guess I have parents to thank for that." Boys called me ridiculous things like "exotic" and asked me to speak Italian to them, while people begged me to admit my father was really like the Italians from *The Sopranos*, and friends encouraged me to invite them over for dinner to eat some authentic Italian food. In Latin class, the teacher pointed to me as a real-life descendant of the great Romans. Everyone wanted to meet my parents to learn about what it was like to live and grow up in Italy. And, thanks to many events at our school where I brought her food as snacks, everyone wanted my mother to cook for them.

While all this really began to add up and build up my self-esteem for the first time ever, one particular moment stood out above all the rest. One regular Friday night, I sat with my friends in a Friendly's restaurant after a school football game. We took turns around the table playing the whose-parents-are-the-craziest game, and I was eager to talk. Taking a deep breath, I had told everyone to prepare themselves for my story. But as I went through my story of my mother

being a crazy Italian woman and my father being more like the guy who just worked all the time rather than a throw-baseballs-around-with-the-kids-type, the looks on people's faces were not what I expected. Suddenly, I was surrounded by envy. "I wish my Mom knew how to cook! My Mom doesn't even know how to make a TV dinner," "My Dad hardly ever works," "Your parents are so cool!" and "I wish my parents were like yours! My parents are just boring and normal."

**S**uddenly it felt good to be different. How lucky I was that my parents worked their hands to the bone to provide me with the life I had and the freedom to have an option of what I wanted to do with my life. I felt incredibly guilty as I began to understand how much trouble my mother went to each and every day cooking and cleaning for all of us, and all the work they must have done to even get to America. All the hardships and stress, prejudices, language barriers, and more that they had to overcome really hit me hard. I began to finally see them as heroes and role models. I began to see their feelings when I had hurt them in my attempts to destroy who I was.

I started feeling pride slowly. Instead of going out of my way to meet friends anywhere but my house, I took pleasure in bringing them to my house. Their jaws dropped at the sight of my parents' near-replica Italian villa home, and I eagerly rushed them inside to see all our antique statues and pond. I started realizing that having something so different was a plus and an advantage. I began inviting everyone over for dinner, gloating that my mother had once owned a very popular Italian restaurant in Philadelphia. I started speaking Italian when I was given the opportunity and teaching friends fun words, which they all seemed excited to learn. I became known as "Little Italy" due to my height and obvious Italianness.

When people commented on how Italian I was in my appearance, I thanked them for the compliment. And now, looking back, I feel shame for what I

once felt about my family and my heritage, and more importantly, how I must have made my parents feel. I feel stupid, even, for having ever acted so ridiculously. Now, I embrace everything that makes me the spicy Italian number that I am, from talking with my hands to my recognizably loud voice.

And only now that I'm older, I realize the benefits and gifts that my heritage has instilled in me from growing up with immigrant parents. My mother, an avid reader, was amazed the minute she saw the Philadelphia Public Library. The sheer volume and numbers of the books were amazing compared to the library in her small town in Italy. She craved material to read so strongly that she took an Italian-English dictionary and a book she wanted to read in English, and sat with them side-by-side next to one another, picking apart every single sentence and every single word, determined to learn English just so she could read. Because of my mother, I not only learned to read way before kindergarten, but I learned that looking up a word you even slightly wondered about or were not sure of is the only way to truly understand something. To learn something, it isn't enough for someone to tell you or explain it, but you have to experience and learn and research it for yourself. And, of course, my love of reading and languages can only be due to my mother.

My father, the workaholic, has taught me as well that I don't have to work all the time like him, but that I must always work hard. I can't expect anything to just be handed to me. From my father, I have learned that nothing is impossible, no task too big, no possibility too daunting or impossible. I have learned the value of a dollar, the merits of saving, and to know when to spend. Work hard and the rest will come to you.

From my life growing up as a child of immigrant parents, I have experienced things most American children will never even hear of or understand, and I would never change a thing. Everything that I have gone through has made me the person I am today, and the proud Italian that I will always be. ●



## Italian Facts



- About 16 million Italian Americans are currently in the United States.
- Italian Americans make up about 6 percent of the U.S. population.
- The Olive Garden is the most popular Italian restaurant in the United States.
- Wine is the most-consumed alcohol people drink each year.
- The average American eats 20 lbs. of pasta each year.

