

## Arak and Holy Bread by Russell Sacks

Paola had baked focaccia al rosmarino. Almond-eyed Nahida spreads traditional Druze labaneh onto it.

We devour the mezza. We savour the aftertaste. We look into each other's eyes with gratitude and joy. Meeting up for the three of us is never taken for granted, it's not a given. Rather, it's treated as a wonderful privilege and we feel the need to acknowledge the moment, to be grateful and to be a little smug too.

Nahida's breath often carries a tang of arak. Sweet and everlasting it is. Neither the rosemary nor the labaneh diminishes the heavenly fumes she exhales.

I take her warm coat and see in the pocket her familiar pewter and glass hip flask. And the lockback folding knife too. They were gifts from her great grandmother given to her on the day she left the Chouf mountains as a young girl. And yes, both have been well used ever since.

I place the coat on the wooden counter, minus the hip flask. I tip the clear syrupy arak into three small glasses with ice. I add some water to each. A third of each was Nahida's rule. To reduce the potency. The liquid gently turns cloudy. As always, the magic works.

We toast Paola's guardian, Matteo, for teaching her to bake the best focaccia al rosmarino.

Matteo had found Paola sleeping in the woodshed next to his bakery in Lecce, in the province of Apulia. One afternoon, as he went into the shed to fetch dry aged wood for his stone oven, amongst the stacked logs, he saw two hands covered in magnificent henna tattoos.

Matteo was well known in Apulia for his wonderful Pugliese bread. The loaves always had large holes in a cream-coloured crumb with a very chewy crust.

So we slowly sip this magical drink, called colloquially "the lion's milk", eyeing one another with love, looking beyond clothes and skin, trying to see into each other's souls. We shed tears - of joy, not of sorrow.

We care deeply for each other, real, tender concern - without fear.

The unseen is what connects us. Loyalty and honesty are the pillars of our friendship.

Paola is often able to clarify the unseen for us. She is very eloquent and by far the wisest one among us. For us, she is an archangel and shines like a brilliant diamond.

I recall the day in Brindisi, when she was humiliated in public by a priest who refused her Holy Communion at Mass.

He refused her, a baker, as well as the adopted daughter of a great baker, the consecrated bread.

When she calmly informed Matteo about the incident, he opened a bottle of grappa and sipped it in silence until the owls hooted. Then, ignoring his baking responsibilities, he set off with a loaf of his Pugliese bread, to Vlora across the Adriatic Sea to visit his youngest sister, Liridona. She had married an older foreign man, to escape the authorities and to seek freedom away from home. Apt, as her name in Albanian means "Longing for Freedom".

Liridona accepted the bread as if it were a baby. She listened solemnly to Matteo while she fed her brother grilled sardines and boiled cabbage.

Liridona invited Mateo to wait till her fisherman husband returned home and to spend the night as their guest. But Matteo's sourdough was calling his soul back to the bakery and his mission had been accomplished, so he hugged Liridona and left.

The following morning, during the last bake, a nun, wearing a blue habit with a purple sash arrived at Matteo's bakery asking for Paola.

She handed Paola a pouch which contained a holy rosary made up of large diamonds. She said it was atonement, just as Christ's sacrifice was.

Liridona had sent her.

She then described how the arrogant priest from Brindisi would be treated - until his last breath. At the stroke of midnight, a pipe would be rammed down his throat so as to gavage feed him with stale holy bread, as ducks are treated in the production of foie gras.

Paola slid the rosary into the water jug that served as a vase in the bakery, the vase which Matteo insisted always be kept full of flowers by his apprentices.

Matteo, Paola and Nahida accompanied the nun to her taxi and placed a number of huge loaves on the back seat between two armed soldiers.

On their return to the bakery, a very thin focaccia al rosmarino was prepared by Paola while Nahida set out the labaneh, zaatar and some vegetables. Matteo stared into the hot, dark oven, uttered thanks to his gods and cursed the evil people of the world.

I held Nahida's hip flask to my lips and let the arak in, my eyes shut, my heart bursting with the feeling of privilege of knowing such people.

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**Written within the last 5 years**

### **A Word About Me:**

Born in 1965 in Johannesburg. I left South Africa in 1983. I opened my bread bakery 14 years ago in Jerusalem.

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