

Once Upon a Tuscan Table

Tales and Recipes from Trattoria Garga

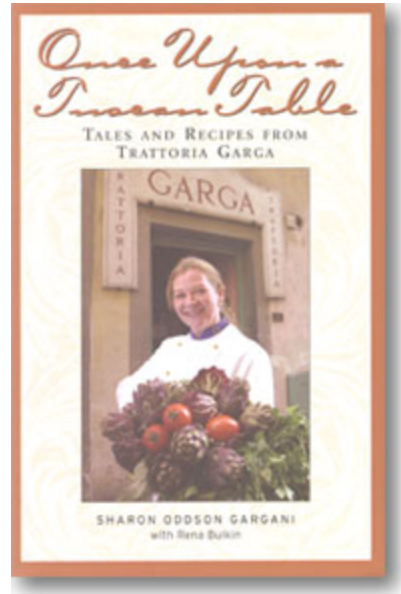
Sharon Oddson Gargani with Rena Bulkin

From Chapter 1, "The Girl from the Frozen North"

My twin sister, Karen, and I entered the world on a thirty-below January day in Barrie, Ontario, where the winters are long and brutal. My mother was a first-generation Canadian of Danish parentage; my father's family, in northern Iceland, was descended from Vikings. As far back as my ancestors can be traced on either side, we've always lived amid howling winds and raging storms.

Early on, I was aware that my parents' marriage was as chilly as their climatic ancestry. In 1954, when Karen and I were four, Mummy took us on a trip to Denmark, where we stayed with various relatives for six months. She thought a little time away from home would provide some perspective on her marital problems, and she hoped my father would miss his family. Evidently, he didn't. They divorced a few years later, and we moved to Winnipeg to share a home with my mother's parents and her younger brother Brian, then eleven. I seldom saw my father again. In 1982, he won half-a-million dollars in the Canadian lottery and took all his brothers and sisters on a trip back to Iceland.

By the time we moved to Winnipeg, Karen and I were seasoned travelers. In addition to our flight to Denmark, my father, an aeronautical engineer in the Royal Canadian Air Force, had been relocated three times since we were born. Every time he was assigned a new post, we all packed up our belongings and went along with him—to Air Force bases in Ottawa, Calgary, and Alberta. Already strongly bonded as twins, Karen and I became



especially close as we banded together to confront ever-changing environments. Unlike most siblings, we never fought.

Though, like many twins, we were dressed alike, we weren't identical and had markedly different personalities. Karen was gentle and timid, very pretty, with long blond ringlets. I was a rambunctious redhead, something of a ham, avid for adventure. With my stick-straight hair, I coveted Karen's fat curls. Mummy and Grandma Gerda would tightly tie my hair around rags (low-tech curlers) to achieve the desired effect, but, alas, my short-lived waves would soon wave goodbye.

In 1959, our extended family moved, yet again, to a house on the Red River, where we kept a rowboat and a canoe. Poor Karen was terrified of the water, sure she was going to drown. Grandpa would tie ropes, secured from the dock, around our waists and toss us—me ecstatic, Karen apprehensive but resigned to life's exigencies—into the river, then sit on the dock reading the paper while we frolicked. In addition to the rope, Karen always insisted on an air float. Finally, exasperated by her fearfulness, Grandpa surreptitiously opened the valve one day. As he expected, Karen didn't notice her deflated float until we were out of the water, and she was finally shamed into giving it up.

Winters, when cross-country skiing replaced water sports, provided no respite for Karen. She always lagged behind everyone else, sinking down into the slush and calling out plaintively for help. She would so much have preferred to stay peacefully at home by the fireplace, her nose buried in a book.

At school, Karen and I always felt like outsiders, not only because our parents were divorced—a rarity in the 1950s—but also because of the exotic food we ate. Mummy's only concession to Canadian food was her fervor for breakfast porridge, a steaming bowl of which was forced upon us daily during the winter months. The first two bites, with the milk poured on top still cold and the brown sugar still crunchy, were palatable. Choking

down the rest took sheer willpower. But after the morning meal, Mummy and Grandma Gerda returned to their Danish culinary roots.

Our classmates, whose white-bread lunches daily ran the gamut from Velveeta to peanut butter and jelly, gazed on in histrionic horror as we unpacked sandwiches on homemade rye stuffed with pickled herring, pungent Danish blue cheese, or liver sausage and red beets. Every noon, we ate to a taunting chorus of "yecchs!" and exaggerated gagging noises. Throughout our school years, the joke of the Oddson twins' lunches never paled.

We shrugged it off, taking refuge in feelings of superiority. In our minds, and only ours, we comprised a culinary elite of two. While other kids' after-church Sunday meals centered on prosaic roast beef, ours was a bountiful smorgasbord, with four or five kinds of anchovies in different sauces, Black Forest and smoked hams, smoked and pickled herring, sweet-and-sour squash pickles, hard-boiled eggs, an array of cheeses and cold cuts, and, of course, Grandma Gerda's fresh-baked rye. The grown-ups washed it all down with shots of schnapps and beer chasers.

At Christmas, in lieu of the traditional Canadian turkey or ham, we dined on crisp-skinned roast goose stuffed with apples, onions, and prunes. It was followed by a delicious rice pudding, one portion of which contained an almond. The lucky recipient of the almond got a special present, usually a marzipan pig.

These lavish meals sparked—or perhaps I should say nurtured—my lifelong love affair with food; a passion for food is something you're born with. By the time I was three, Grandma Gerda had already nicknamed me the gryde licker, Danish for "pot licker," because I always begged to lick clean (well, not actually lick; I'd be given a spoon) her cooking pots and bowls. On our trip to Denmark, at the home of my Tante Johanna, I devised my first actual recipe, mixing salty Danish licorice and water over a Bunsen burner. This experiment ended in disaster when, in my haste to sample the "soup," I

burned my mouth and upset the pot, spilling its inky contents all over her fine Persian rug! Kindly Tante Johanna showed only loving concern. I wasn't even scolded.

My other great love, for as long as I can remember, has been art. Mummy, quite a talented painter in her own right (her watercolors of local landscapes were coveted Christmas gifts), had purchased a series of big soft-cover books filled with prints by famous artists, and I spent many hours of my childhood sprawled on the floor in front of a blazing fire, entranced by their contents. Picasso's effeminate harlequins; Gauguin's serene, semiclad Tahitian women; Van Gogh's besmirched, potato-eating coal miners; Degas's ballet dancers; and Toulouse-Lautrec's prostitutes, chorus girls, and demimondaines—all of them as real to me as the flesh-and-blood people who inhabited my life—provided my first foray into a world beyond Winnipeg.

Drawing and painting were my favorite childhood activities, and I covered hundreds of sheets of big white butcher paper with my creations. Pictures of trees were my specialty, developed on blissful outings alone with my mother. We'd sit on rocks and paint watercolors of the lake and forest. She'd exclaim enthusiastically over my masterpieces, frame them herself, and display them proudly to friends and family. I felt immensely important and talented when one of my watercolors, of birch trees in winter, was sent around the world to be exhibited in a collection of schoolchildren's art. When I was taken to a Van Gogh exhibition at the age of twelve, I was so moved—overwhelmed really—that I decided I'd be an artist when I grew up.