

Taste, by Stanley Tucci

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Taste, Stanley Tucci's delectable memoir, is aptly subtitled "My Life Through Food." The award-winning actor's celebration of Italian cuisine and culture is a veritable feast.

A Westchester native, Tucci, along with his two younger sisters, grew up in Katonah. Both sets of his grandparents, who had immigrated from Calabria, lived nearby. "Food, its preparation, serving, and ingesting," he notes, "was the primary activity and the main topic of conversation in my household growing up."

Tucci's parents had worked at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, where his father Stanley Sr. was head of the art department, and his mother Joan was the school's office secretary. Tucci maintains that his mother's cooking, "like that of any great cook or chef, is proof that culinary creativity may be the most perfect art form." While his classmates' lunch boxes likely contained a peanut butter sandwich, his often included an eggplant parmigiana wedge or a chicken cutlet on homemade bread.

When Tucci was 12, the family moved to Italy for a year as his father took a sabbatical leave to study at the renowned Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. Tucci was enrolled in an Italian school where he learned to speak the language fluently. His opportunity to live in Italy further cemented his interest in Italian culture and cookery.

Interspersed in the narrative of Taste is a bounty of recipes from a simple Frittata to the hearty Ragù Tucci. (Reader beware: If you weren't hungry at the beginning of Taste, you will be at its conclusion.) The most elaborate recipe in the book is Timpano, the over-the-top concoction Tucci had made famous in his breakout film Big Night. Not for the fainthearted, Timpano – "a baked drum of pastry-like dough filled with pasta, ragù, salami, various cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, and meatballs" – is a Tucci family favorite served for Christmas dinner.

In Taste, Tucci describes his gastronomic experiences around the globe from Iceland and France and now to London where he lives with his second wife and young family. He expresses how his culinary interest has sustained him through turbulent times, including the untimely passing of his first wife.

Without self-pity, Tucci succinctly relates his battle five years ago with an oral cancer that had rendered him unable to eat for several months. Now fully healed, Tucci has embarked on a new chapter in his culinary journey. The second season of his acclaimed CNN documentary series Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy is slated to air this spring.

(Note: Taste is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 12.)