



Italian  
Spices: a  
memoir

Cynthia Herbert-Bruschi  
Adams

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By  
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*Cover:* Robert Craig

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*A Yankee in Roma*



Sgt. & Mrs. Robert W. Herbert, wedding day, October 11, 1945,  
*Roma.*

My parents were introduced through my *Zia* (aunt) Wanda (pronounced Vonda). *Zia* Wanda was dating an American G.I. whose friend, Sergeant Robert Herbert, wanted to meet an Italian girl, so Wanda asked her slightly older sister, Gina, to join them. If I write that Gina and Robert met, instantly fell in love and were married to live happily ever after, it would be a shortcut but, at least from Dad's point of view, pretty close to accurate. Because these were war times, the normal rules of meeting were not in play. Although Dad did meet his prospective in-laws in Rome, his parents back in New Hampshire heard that Bob was in love from a letter that would arrive shortly after the young couple wed.

Dad had to get permission from his commanding officer to marry a foreign civilian, but this permission was granted. Dad then met with a priest to see what steps Mother's church would require for him to marry a Catholic girl. When he was told that he was required to sign a document stipulating that any children must be raised Catholic, he balked. He would not allow his children to follow their mother's religion, so she stepped out of grace with the Church and married him on October 11, 1945 in the only Protestant church in Rome. This proved to be the end of Catholicism for my mother, who never complained that she gave up her religion. But there was a cultural loss and sacrifice beyond that, necessitated by her move to America.

All this meeting, falling in love and negotiating with the Church, parents and military happened in a period of three weeks. With neither speaking the other's language, I can only imagine that they relied on braille (their sense of touch) and that those must have been a very passionate 21 days. Their wedding photograph shows them standing on a sidewalk in Rome- Dad in his uniform and Mother in a trim suit, which she made for the occasion. She appears sweet and shy with her long, wavy dark hair. Dad looks timid as well and they are both nearly gaunt. Army food did not keep weight on Dad the way his mother's home cooking had and, because of wartime

shortages, Gina had been sharing rationed food with her parents and siblings for several years.

Here is a photo of Mother and Dad taken ten months later in New Hampshire. Mother is wearing the same suit from her wedding but they both look healthier and happier.



Gina and Bob well-fed and post-war in Herbert's backyard at 347 East High St., Manchester, NH.

When Dad first returned home, he would request his favorites- meat hash, American chop suey and New England boiled dinner- while waiting for Mother to join him. When she arrived, she learned to enjoy the hash and appreciated how it stretched food, but she substituted the improved flavor of spaghetti with meat sauce for chop suey and learned to tolerate the boiled dinner. She used the dinner's leftover broth, vegetables and corned beef as the base of her minestrone soup.

### **GINA'S MINISTRONE SOUP**

**For stock and base ingredients:**

**3-4 quarts broth from a boiled brisket as below**  
**3-4 lbs cooked corned beef**  
**3 TBS. peppercorns**  
**2 TBS. dill seeds**  
**1 large carrot chopped followed by 12 chopped carrots**  
**1 large onion quartered followed by 4 medium onions**  
**2 stalks celery with leaves, chopped**  
**Dash garlic powder**  
**1 medium head cabbage**  
**6 potatoes cut into cubes**

**Day before: more than cover meat with water in large pan; sprinkle with peppercorns and dill seed; add a dash of garlic powder, carrot, celery and onion. These are to flavor the stock. Cook gently (no hard boil) for 3+ hours. Then add the remaining carrots, the onions and a medium head of cabbage cut into small pieces. Cook 15 minutes and then add potatoes cut into cubes, cooking all vegetables until tender. Cool.**

**For completed soup:**

**28 oz. can diced tomatoes in Italian herbs**  
**1/3-1/2 of 1 lb. box macaroni noodles prepared**  
**1 16 oz. can of kidney beans with juice poured off**  
**Grated parmesan cheese**

**Day needed: cut corned beef into bite-sized pieces and do the same with all vegetables (onions are biggest challenge). Add diced tomatoes, cooked noodles and kidney beans. Simmer at least 30 minutes to mingle flavors. Salt and pepper to taste. If salt is needed (corned beef varies), I add a bouillon cube. Serve with grated parmesan cheese (feeds 20).**

There was a long wait to get Mother 'home' once the war had ended. Dad had returned several months earlier with the troops and it appears from the documents he saved that he was processed to depart Italy about November 17, 1945, just one month after the wedding day.

Once he was home, the delay in Mother's arrival must have been excruciating, so much so that it prompted his

politically active dad, Ralph, to write a letter requesting help from his friend, Congressman Chester Merrow. Congressman Merrow sent Ralph a letter explaining how all possible was being done to get Bob's wife here but he would have to be patient. The shipment of Italian brides to this country was to commence in 60 days' time. Dad would have to content himself with writing romantic letters to her in English. If she ever read these letters it is difficult to say, for she would have needed an interpreter who not only read English but was sensitive to the passion between newlyweds. I can imagine his words being translated by a third party might have made her blush, but she cherished the letters enough to bring them with her to America and to save them until they were passed on to me.

Among clippings with the Merrow letter is a May 3, 1946 *Manchester Union Leader* account of Mother's introduction to the States titled *First Italian War Bride Arrives Here*. The caption on the photograph, which shows Dad on one side of his mother, Sadie Benner Herbert, and my mother on the other reads that Dad greeted his wife in New York that Monday. It seems Congressman Merrow delivered on his promise in much less than 60 days!

While Dad finished college on the GI Bill, Mother learned English with my grandparents and with the community at large. She also learned to make American specialties like Sadie Herbert's apple pie and began creating the wardrobe she would need in her new country. As she was a beauty and Dad had many friends- he had been class secretary at Manchester Central High School and had spent his non-war years in Manchester- they enjoyed a very active social life. The war was over, there was an end to sacrifice and the post-war spirit was one of jubilation. They attended formal balls and dinner parties. Mother delighted in having silk stockings again and in wearing broad-brimmed hats.



Bob, Sadie and Gina upon her arrival.

### **SADIE'S APPLE PIE**

**6 medium sized apples peeled, cored and sliced small**  
**Dash lemon juice**  
**2 TBS. flour**  
**1.5 TBS. cinnamon**  
**Dash nutmeg**  
**1 tsp. caraway seeds (optional)**  
**1 TBS. heavy cream**

**If in season, use Macintosh apples; if out of season, find crisp apples and add lemon juice to coat each apple lightly after slicing. This adds tartness to the flavor. Add flour, cinnamon, a dash of nutmeg and caraway seeds. Place in the crust and dampen the edges (recipe follows). Cover with a second crust. Pinch the edge closed. Prick the top with a fork and rub a small amount of cream into the top crust to ensure golden brown appearance. Cook approximately 35–40 minutes at 425°.**

### **PASTRY CRUST**

**2 cups flour + 2 TBS. butter for roll-out**  
**½ teaspoon salt**  
**Dash baking powder**  
**2/3 cup solid shortening**



1/3 cup (more or less) ice water

**Sift dry ingredients together. Gradually cut in shortening until the mixture resembles peas. Sprinkle water in gradually with a fork until the flour is moist but not pasty. Shape into a smooth ball. You may refrigerate or proceed to roll it out. Sprinkle the board and rolling pin with flour or wrap the pin in cheese cloth. The trick is to keep the dough from sticking without adding too much flour, as this will decrease the flakiness of the crust. Roll with quick, light strokes to 1/8<sup>th</sup> inch thickness. Water and extra dough easily repair any tears. Cut to size of pie plate and fill as above.**

During the war, Mother and her sisters had learned to mend stockings because silk was diverted for use in parachutes. It was close to a decade before she would give up this tedious and eye-straining task, always fearing a return of the shortage. On many nights, she sat close to the brightest light in our house with part of her hosiery pulled tautly over a cup, moving a needle in and out of the tiny mesh on the stockings. The slender needle looked like two filaments and gathered the silk strands back together so that runs would not show and would be made strong again. As a child, I remember her seeming to become overly upset whenever she had a run, but now I see that it reminded her of a previously irreplaceable loss.

Mother became acculturated, even getting better at making Sadie's apple pie than Sadie. I think it was due to a lighter touch while rolling out the dough. Her willingness to work hard and her quick grasp of concepts soon broke down many of the biases my grandparents held. Gina's accent was still strong, but she was reading English and amused the Anglo-family with her pronunciations. Two memorable misuses were her pluralization of the word 'sheep' and enunciation of 'sheets.' Both came out sounding like the same bad word. My grandfather was so charmed by her that he began to incorporate a few Italian words and phrases into his own vocabulary.

Massabesic Lake provides the drinking water for Manchester. Like his daughter-in-law, Ralphie would refer to tap water as *aqua massabesica* and would say, “*Come’ si dice* (what did she/he say)?” When he died at 93, it was in my parent’s home under Mother’s care. He had given my mother a special necklace that had been Sadie’s (he had outlived his wife by 14 years), saying he wanted her to have it “because she never asked him for anything.”

Gina also made an impact on neighbors. Our family doctor, John Wlodkoski, lived across the street from our grandparents. He and wife Helen raised five accomplished children in that home and as Polish descendants and Catholics, they were interested in my mother’s entry into New Hampshire life. One of their older children told me years later that he would watch my grandparent’s house for signs of Gina and if she came out into the front yard, he would alert the family and they would run to watch her from the windows.

When this son got to college, he returned home for a visit with a foreign-born girlfriend who had long, dark hair and spoke with a beautiful accent. Perhaps Mother influenced his seeking beyond the girl next door. In any case, he has remained interested in our family, as have his sisters. He also married his dark-haired girlfriend.

But I get ahead of myself. When Dad finished college, he and Mother moved to Montpelier, Vermont for two years, as he became employed by the insurance industry. It was here, in a January, 1948 blizzard that I was born in a hospital reminiscent of a brick cow barn. Dad had by that time attained a college diploma, he had a job, they had an apartment, a shiny American-made automobile and a baby daughter. They made friends in Vermont and all was well although Gina, left alone with an infant for much of the day, longed for her distant family.



Mother's trunk with her married name on it and the address of her new family.



Arrived from Rome on Vulcania.

CHESTER E. MERROW  
1ST DISTRICT NEW HAMPSHIRE

WILFRED W. ALDRICH  
SECRETARY

COMMITTEE:  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HOME ADDRESS:  
CENTER OBBESSE, N. H.

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

Washington, D. C.

March 20, 1946

Dear Ralph:

Thank you for your letter of March 16.

I have talked with War Department officials concerning the shipment of Italian brides to this country. They informed me that within sixty days all the Italian brides should be out of Italy and on their way to the United States. I wish that it would be possible for me to give you more encouraging information because I realize your son and you and Mrs. Herbert must be most anxious to have her in this country at the earliest possible moment.

The next time I am in Manchester I shall plan to see John P. Anthony. I do hope he will serve as chairman in Ward 3. I am sure he would be most helpful. I am enclosing an up-to-date list of the Manchester committee. I have talked with Bob and Hugo about completing the wards. If you have any suggestions about vacancies I wish you would talk it over with them or let me know.

I sincerely appreciate your kind words of commendation concerning my statement on the extension of the draft. As I have said many times I feel this country has made one of its greatest mistakes in so rapidly demobilizing its armed forces.

With kind regards,

Sincerely yours,

*Chester*

Mr. Ralph P. Herbert  
437 East High Street  
Manchester, New Hampshire

Letter from Congressman Merrow requesting information on Mother and a timeline for brides to reach the USA.