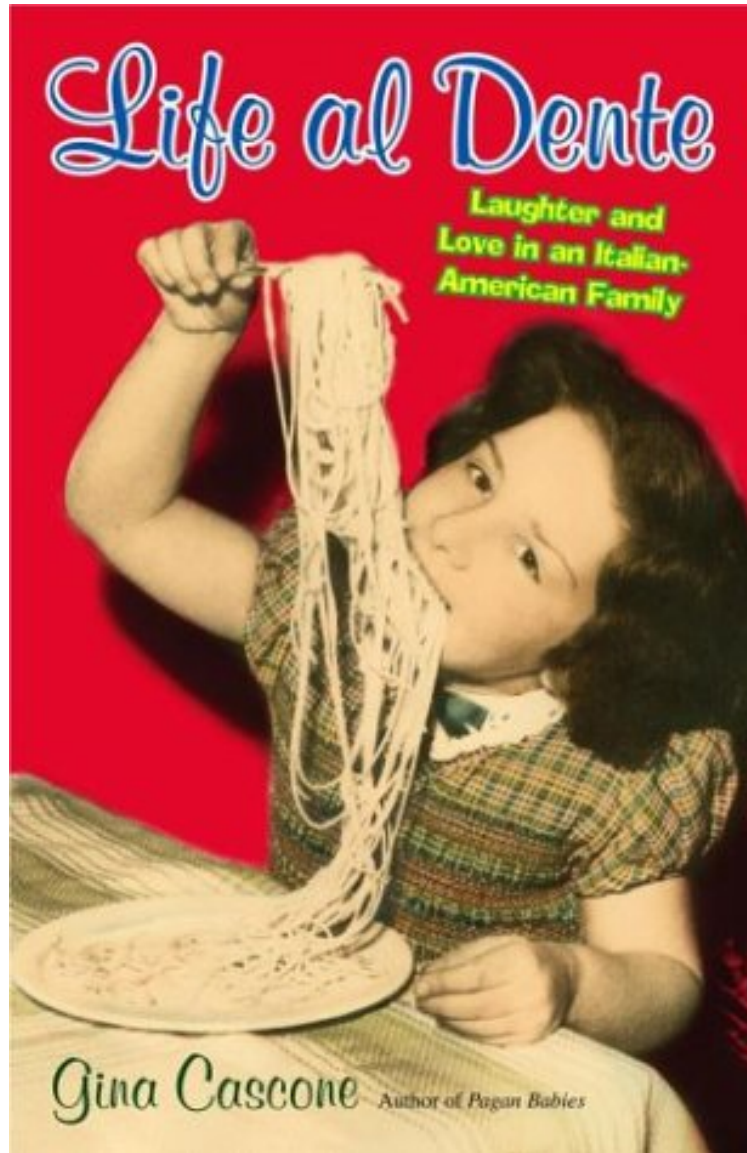


(Mobile book) Life Al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian-American Family

## Life Al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian-American Family

*Gina Cascone*

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**Gina Cascone : Life Al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian-American Family** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Life Al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian-American Family:

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reading this, made her very, very, happy. So, glad I found this for her. Will definitely, keep this Author, on my list of books to get for her. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I LOVED IT ITS HILARIOUS, SO CUTE ABOUT ITALIAAN AMERICAN FAMILY OF LITTLE GIRLS. I LOVED IT I LOVED IT. By VALERE TOWNSEND I LOVED LIFE AL DENTE ITS ONE OF THE CUTEST FUNNIEST SWEETEST BEST HILARIOUS BOOKS I HAVE READ IN A VERY LONG LONG TIME. THE MEAN PERSON WHO SAID POOR WRITTING SYTLE AND NOT MUCH HUMOR DOESN'T LIKE BOOKS, AND THEY SHOULD SHUT UP AND GO AWAY WE DON'T NEED THEM TO SHOOT DOWN ALL BOOKS. I LOVE BOOKS I LOVE THIS BOOK ALOT. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Funny book. By Rochelle Donnino Everything went well. Funny book.

With the irreverence, gutsy spirit, and warmhearted hilarity that made *Pagan Babies* a classic, here is the Italian-American experience served up by the author who has been crowned the Patron Saint of Humor. Before the Sopranos, there were the Cascones....*Life al Dente*, the new memoir from the author of *Pagan Babies*, brings the same wit and wonder to the telling of Gina Cascone's Italian-American girlhood...well, boyhood actually. In an Italian family, few things are a greater handicap than being born female, but Gina's Dad generously decided to overlook this shortcoming and raise Gina as a boy -- the son he always wanted. As lawyer to numerous "alleged" mobsters, Dad had some colorful clients who would regularly gather around the basement pool table to talk business, drink, and be hustled by junior high Gina. There was no way Gina was going to turn into one of the big hair girls of Italian-American stereotype, but her journey would have all the bumps that come with that cherished immigrant ambition of moving from steerage to the suburbs in three generations. That sense of dislocation came early for Gina as her family moved from the kind of neighborhood where old men play bocce and the pet frogs are named Nunzio to one where Barbies and frozen food prevail. And though Gina's brains got her into the top high school, she quickly made the lonely discovery that she was the only one there whose name ended in a vowel. In our overly pasteurized and homogenized world, there's a real hunger to find and celebrate our connection to old world roots and traditions. *Life al Dente* abounds in hilarious stories, but also rewards readers with a genuine and poignant contemplation of cultural identity.

.com Gina Cascone's *Life al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian-American Family* is an enjoyable, emotional roller coaster of a memoir. With the kind of sensitivity you get only from someone who's lived the experiences, Cascone's story is laugh-out-loud funny, heart-wrenchingly sad, and everything in between. The first-born in a tightly knit Italian Catholic family cursed with only girls, Cascone (the author of *Pagan Babies*) shares sweet memories of hilarious hiccups she experienced growing up, first in an overcrowded semi-detached house in a heavily Italian enclave in New Jersey, and then as the only ethnic variation in the suburbia of the "American Dream." You don't have to have been the only anything growing up to relate--as Cascone wisely acknowledges, we've all felt that way. Teenage angst is universal, as are the growing pains we experience from birth to death. So what sets Cascone's story apart is her intelligent sense of humor and the passionate love she feels for her family. She recognizes their quirks, and treasures every one of them. And just like in life, it's easier to laugh at just about anything in retrospect. An easy read that's impossible to put down, *Life al Dente* is the kind of memoir that makes us all wish we were taking notes growing up. -- Leora Y. Bloom About the Author Gina Cascone grew up in central New Jersey and is the author of *Pagan Babies*, *Mother's Little Helper*, and co-author of twenty-six books for children. Gina and her husband raised their two children in New Jersey and now live in Manhattan. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1: One of the Boys I was the firstborn, the son my father always wanted. And so he started almost immediately to mold me into his own image and likeness. For the most part, his efforts were successful. Unfortunately, there was one obstacle, which he could neither overcome nor accept. I was a girl. My father's first words to my mother after visiting the nursery shortly after my birth were, "It looks like a monkey." Who was he kidding? If I'd had a blue blanket wrapped around me, I could have been a monkey and he would have been too delirious with joy to have noticed. Still, son or not, I was his kid. "I guess we'll keep it," he nobly announced to my mother after the next visit. Having thus committed himself, my father tried as hard as he could to protect me from the ugly truth of my genetic makeup for as long as he could. Maybe he even managed to convince himself that it wasn't so. Parents do tend to be blind to their children's shortcomings. And in an Italian family, few things are a greater handicap than being born female. In the early years, I didn't suffer from it at all. My father worked double-time to turn me into a real man. He taught me not to cry "like a girl"; throw a ball underhand, "like a sissy"; or slap -- "if you're going to hit somebody, you punch him." I learned that the secret of winning an argument was turning up the volume of your voice and gesticulating furiously. And I learned to say *vaffanculo* when I was angry. My mother stood by and let my father have his way as far as my upbringing was concerned. There were two reasons for this. First of all, my mother always let my father have his way. He was her most spoiled child. And secondly, she agreed with him. She wanted me to be strong, quick, and competitive -- not the son she'd always wanted but the daughter she'd always wanted. But sooner or later the horrible truth had to catch up with me and have a real impact on my life. Neither of my parents prepared me for that day. I suppose they meant to and just kept putting it off until it was too late. It certainly would have been easier hearing it from them than from Little Nicky Santucci. Little Nicky ran the neighborhood -- insofar as all activities regarding us kids were concerned.

He was, for all intents and purposes, the self-proclaimed mayor of Melrose Avenue. It was a tight little street. The houses and their inhabitants were packed close together. There were maybe half a dozen single-family homes on our block. Most of us lived in semidetached or row houses. Nicky lived in what was by far the biggest house on the corner of the block. It was white stucco with a walled-in patio and garden. A flower shop occupied the front half of the ground floor. Nicky's father, Big Nick, ran the flower shop. He owned it actually. Big Nick did not look like the kind of guy who would be much interested in flowers; but then, Michelangelo didn't look like the kind of guy whose soul drove him to create such great beauty. So who knew? The difference was that I'd never actually seen Big Nick touch a flower, except to snap off its stem and stick the bud into the lapel of his jacket. And while it was pretty clear that everybody thought that being a florist was kind of a sissy job, I never heard anybody tease Big Nick about it, or about anything else for that matter. So I never did either. Besides, Big Nick was always real nice to us kids. He liked to pass out candy and, on special occasions, even dollar bills. Little Nicky, on the other hand, did not seem to have inherited his father's magnanimous nature. Little Nicky was a loose cannon with a short fuse. You never knew what he was going to do next. Half the time he didn't know either. So being able to play with Nicky was a real test of one's mettle. One of his favorite gags was dropping his frog, Nunzio, down someone's shirt. Carla Moretti was really the only one who panicked more than neurotic, little Nunzio. Then there was the time that Nicky ate a night crawler and Crazy Carla threw up. I have to admit, it took real intestinal fortitude on my part to keep my dinner down through that one. I just kept smiling and swallowing. I would not give Nicky the satisfaction of seeing me crack. That was his game after all. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than knowing that he'd found someone's breaking point. But it was one day when he wasn't even trying that he finally found mine. It was a perfect summer day right after fourth grade. I'd decided I was in the mood for a baseball game. So I got my glove and headed for Nicky's house. All baseball games, like everything else that went on in the neighborhood, were organized through Nicky. I went through the garden gate, around back to the family entrance, and rang the bell. Nicky opened the door, took one look at me, and practically slammed the door in my face. "Hey!" I pushed back. "Go away," he told me. I stuck my foot in the door like an unwanted salesman. "What's wrong with you?" "I can't play with you anymore," he told me through the crack in the doorway. I snickered. "What did you do now?" I prodded, thinking that his mother had grounded him again. "Nothing," he said defensively. "Then why can't you play?" "I just can't, okay?" "No, it's not okay," I told him. "I'm not going away until you tell me why." "Because the guys are here." I didn't see the problem. "Great! Let's go to the empty lot and play ball." "That's what we were going to do." "Well then, let's go," I insisted. "You're not invited." "Says who?" "Everybody." "Why?" "Because you're a girl. You have cooties." "You're a human cootie and we all play with you." "Good thing you're a girl, or I'd beat you up." "Why don't you come out here and try it." I put up my fists, left one high to protect my face. "I don't hit girls," he said, condescendingly. "Since when?" He'd rid me of a "baby" molar two weeks earlier when I'd dropped my left. The tooth fairy brought me a dollar and a quarter for that tooth. A quarter from my mother, who told me that the tooth fairy really wouldn't think that I deserved anything for losing a tooth in a fight. And a buck from the old man, who was glowing with pride. "I don't hit girls," he reiterated, even more solicitously. "And I don't play with them. Face it, you're a girl and you have cooties." I stood there dumbfounded. What else could I do? I wasn't allowed to cry. And Nicky wouldn't come out into the open where I could get a good shot at him. When I finally turned to leave, Nicky slammed the door behind me. I walked away from the house, fighting to maintain my composure. When I got around to the front of the house, out on the pavement where I was pretty sure Nicky wouldn't be able to see me, I started to run for home. I heard myself panting as I ran and I heard a few whimpers escape. Rejected by Little Nicky Santucci! What worse indignities could one be forced to suffer in this life? When I got home, my mother was in the kitchen so I managed to sneak past her. I went upstairs where I could be alone in my misery. All the frustration and rage I felt came pouring out. In no time at all, I was climbing the walls. I was literally climbing the walls. I did that to relieve pressure. There was a section of hallway upstairs that was long and narrow, and when I braced myself with one hand and one foot against each wall, I could shimmy up. Then I could pace the hallway up near the ceiling. The trick was turning around. It was best to do that at the end of the hallway so that there was the third wall -- over the door, of course -- to use for balance. One small slip and I'd fall to the floor. I wasn't afraid of the distance of the fall. But I didn't like to fall in the hallway because it made a huge thud that my mother could hear downstairs, and she would know what I was doing. Not that the footprints I left on the walls weren't a dead giveaway. I was careful as I walked back and forth and up and down the walls thinking about what Nicky had said. "Face it, you're a girl." So what? I thought. Why did that matter? I was one of the best baseball players in the neighborhood and now they weren't going to let me play because I was a girl! Why did being a girl make a difference all of a sudden? It had never mattered before. The more I thought about it, the more it came clear to me that it had always mattered. I should have seen it. But I didn't. Or maybe I wouldn't. It was always there though. When my father would come in when I was playing with Nicky, he'd say, "Hey, Butch, how's it going?" to Nicky. "Butch!" He always called Nicky "Butch." He called me "Chicken." My parents' friends and relatives were always squeezing me and pinching my cheeks and telling me how cute I was. Nobody ever gushed all over Nicky, telling him how cute he was. Understandably. Still, you would think that just to be polite, somebody could lie. But Nicky wasn't expected to be cute. Not just because he was Nicky, but also because he was a boy. Boys weren't expected to be much of anything. And

they got away with murder because of it. "Boys will be boys." That's what they all said when Nicky got kicked out of Catholic school. That's what they said the time he got stuck in the sewer when he'd jumped in after Nunzio. That's what they said when he got dirty or tore his clothes or broke something. One lousy smack and "boys will be boys," that was all that ever happened to Nicky. One step out of line and I got lectured and plunked in a chair for an hour to "think about it." Well I was sure thinking about it now. "Hey." A voice from behind startled me. I hadn't heard anybody come up the stairs. Instinctively, I jumped to the floor and turned around, only to see my father smiling. "You'd better not let your mother catch you doing that," he warned. "Let me see how you get up there." "Nah, I'm not in the mood anymore. Besides, Mommy will probably come up and catch me." "No she won't. I'll look out for her." My father loved to be my partner in crime. "I don't feel like it," I moped. "Come on," he cajoled. "Give you a buck if you show me how you do it." That was another thing my father taught me -- never pass up an opportunity to make a buck. I braced myself and went straight up to the ceiling. When I got there, I reached out my hand. My father dug into his pocket and peeled a bill off the roll he always carried and handed it to me. I took it and put it in my own pocket. "That's great!" He laughed. "How did you figure out you could do that?" I shrugged. He finally caught on to my mood. "What's the matter, Chicken?" "Nothin'." "Come on, tell Daddy what's wrong." "I hate boys," I said adamantly, looking down at him. His face dropped. "Why would you hate boys?" The disappointment in his voice put me on the defensive. "They won't let me play ball with them. Nicky says it's because I'm a girl." There, I said it! The horrible truth was out. My father looked more hurt by what happened to me than I was. "Okay," he started calmly. "So you're a girl," he admitted as easily as one might admit to murder. "What else did he say to hurt your feelings?" "Cooties. He said I have cooties." "Little Nicky's got a hell of a nerve calling anybody a cootie." "Yeah. I know. I told him that he was a human cootie." My father laughed. "Good one," he said, congratulating me for standing up to Nicky. "What did he say to that?" "Nothing. He still said that nobody wanted to play with me because I'm a girl." We were back to the main problem, and my father's face reflected the seriousness of it. "Come to Daddy," he said, reaching out his arms to get me down from the ceiling. I jumped and he caught me and carried me into his room. He sat on the bed, cradling me on his lap. Tears were running down my cheeks and dripping off my chin before I let any sound escape. It was all right to cry now. That was one of the rules. You could cry in front of your parents. That was not a show of weakness, but one of love and trust. "Poor baby," he said, wiping the tears. My father's voice was very deep, and when he used it to comfort, the words weren't important; it was the sound that was soothing, almost hypnotic. "I don't want to be a girl," I sobbed. "I know," he said, comforting me, stroking my hair. "I hate myself for being a girl." "Oh stop that. Don't say stupid things like that. You just remember that you're smarter and tougher than all of them. You're my baby, so you've got to be. And you're prettier too." "Being pretty is dumb," I said in a monotone, my head resting on his shoulder. "No it's not. You're pretty. You're my pretty baby." "I'm not a baby." "Yes you are." He laughed. "You are my baby. And you always will be. Even when you're forty years old, you'll still be my baby." I didn't say anything. "Don't you want to be my baby?" "Yeah." I told him what he wanted to hear. "Promise?" "I promise." "And promise me you'll never grow up to be one of those silly ladies." "What?" "Don't grow up to be one of those silly ladies, okay?" he repeated. "Silly ladies like who?" "Like all of them," he said with authority, sounding frighteningly like Nicky. "Promise me," he said with urgency, looking me right in the eye, his hand holding my chin. "Okay, Daddy." I nodded. "I promise." And so began a lifetime of confusion. Copyright © 2003 by Gina Cascone