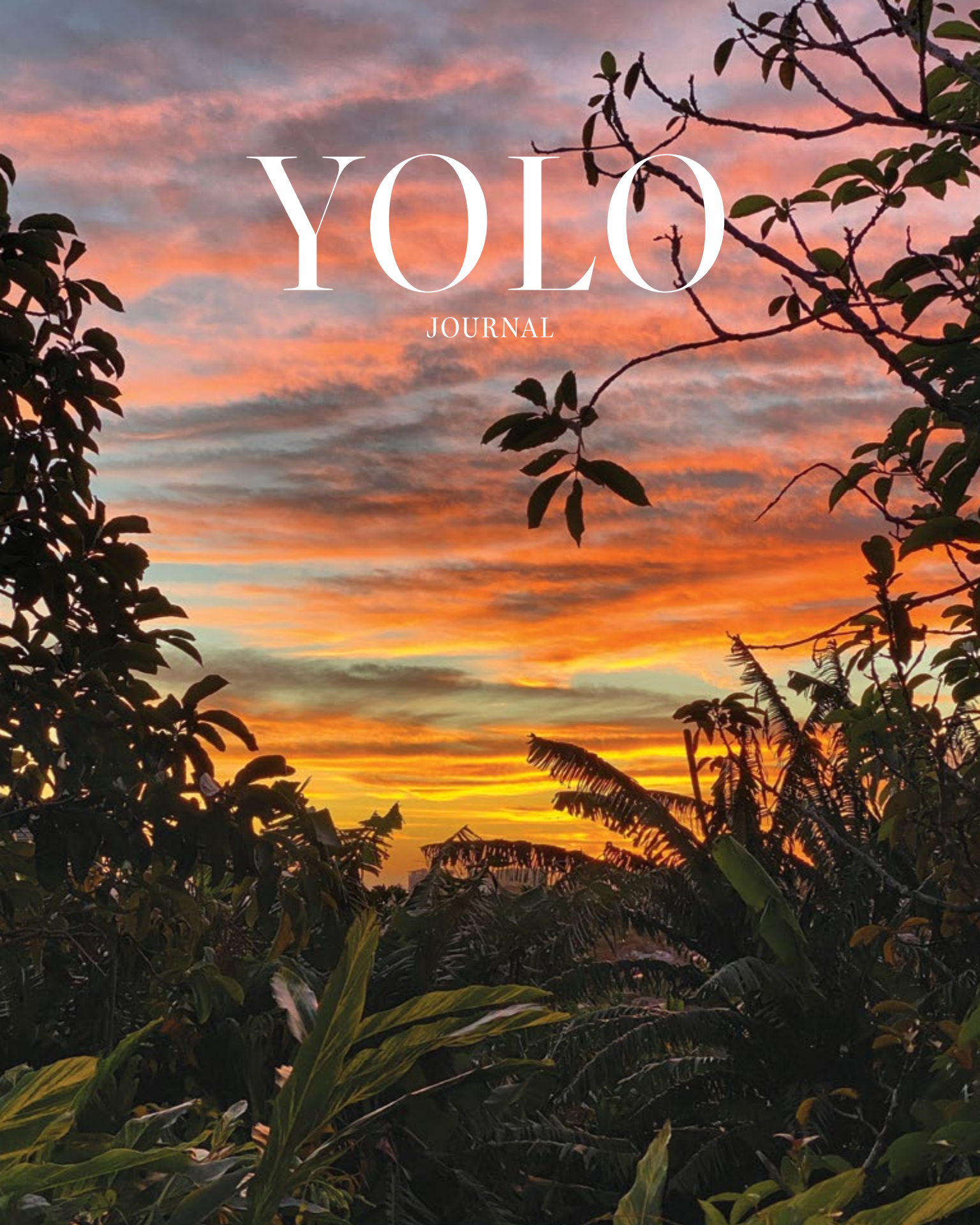


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ITALY

THE TYRRHENIAN SEA

Words by Lucinda Scala Quinn. Photographs by Andrea Gentl

Not until I was shoulder to shoulder on a ferry deck amidst joyous, vacationing Italians bound for the island of Ischia did it dawn on me. My great-grandmother Aquilina, a newlywed at age 16, had sailed for America in 1893 from the very same Neapolitan port we were now pulling away from. More than a century later, mine was a reverse journey, having begun on an overnight flight from my home in New York City, six miles from her Ellis Island disembarkation. While my ancestor had traveled 3,000 miles by sea for the promise of a better life, mine, on the cusp of my 65th birthday, had just come unmoored.

I had spent the previous two years immersed in the writing of my eighth cookbook—focused, as it happened, on the American-made Italian cooking of my foremothers. Soon after meeting my April book deadline, my beloved husband of 40 years passed away. With him went half my heart. Our thriving kitchen-tool business, Mad Hungry, had to accommodate six months of my devotion to at-home nursing duties. It felt as if I were drifting further and further off course.

As if sent by a celestial source, a trip invitation arrived in my inbox on June 20—the birthday of my late mother, Rose (one of my cookbook muses)—and a day before what would have been our 38th wedding anniversary. *Italy. Food. Women. Restoration. Transformation*, the subject line read. A retreat billed as “Find the Current Within” described a six-day collaborative culinary and

life-coaching adventure aboard a 68-foot wooden sailboat circling Italy’s Pontine and Phlegraean islands. A pioneer in culinary travel who helped bring Slow Food to America, trip leader Peggy Merkel has designed and directed food and culture trips around the world for close to 35 years. My own food adventure, nurtured by growing up in an Italian-American kitchen in Detroit, began when I was a 16-year-old line cook in high school and accelerated through professional kitchens, food magazines and television cooking shows. It seemed that Peggy and I were destined to meet, so I took the leap of faith and signed up.

This voyage was her first collaboration with Ashley Wick, a leadership coach who has spent 15-plus years working with globally recognized brands. While Peggy would plot daily with our *capitanos*, Antonio and Dino, cooking and shepherding us about on various islands, Ashley would elegantly provide a safe space for us six women to explore our various personal journeys. While some arrived as friends, most boarded as strangers, united by a love of Italy, pasta and self-reflection. Alongside a handful of bathing suits, linen cover-ups and plenty of Dramamine, we’d all tucked a little faith into our duffle bags.

Our plan was to travel from Procida to Ischia, Ventotene, Ponza and Palmarola, spending a night in each port. Every day would be anchored around *la bella cucina*—prepared daily by Peggy and her skilled assistant, Nikki, or cooked by Italian chefs at the hidden





gems where we dined out—as well as swims, walks, talks and starry nights. But the best-laid plans are inevitably at the mercy of the weather, which would have different ideas. “Going with the wind is part of the lesson of letting go and seeing yourself and the world with fresh eyes,” Peggy had written in our itinerary notes. It turned out that trust would be essential to fully embrace the flow of the days at sea.

Sailing away from Procida, dolphins weaving through the water alongside the boat, our first swim stop was off Vivare, a nature reserve and protected oasis on the way to Ischia. The deep, comfortably cool water epitomized

the buoyant, salty, full-floaty, cerulean Tyrrhenian Sea. One of many glorious on-board lunches was a platter of figs, burrata, pistachios, olive oil, salt and honey, along with butter-slathered anchovy bruschetta topped with lemon slices, capers and mint.

Seafood in all shapes and sizes dominated this trip, along with pasta and wine, for lunch and dinner. From the tiny, crispy, salty fried anchovies and little clams nestled in *spaghetti alla vongole*, to grilled calamari and *gamberetto*, the undisputed native queen that pulls the flavors together is lemon. This region is famous for its large lemons, which are prized for their intense flavor and healthy properties. Peggy not only recited Pablo Neruda’s poem “Ode to a Lemon” to us (“we opened/two halves/ of a miracle,/congealed acid/trickled/ from the hemispheres/of a star,/the most intense liqueur/of nature...”), but also introduced its multitudinous uses. Lemon salad is a local specialty, made from thinly sliced Procida lemons known as *limone de pane*. Mildly sweet fruit, thick and pithy, is tossed with olive oil, salt, pepperoncini, and mint or parsley. Endless lemony treats unfolded over the week—lemon cream on our morning pastry, lemon risotto, lemon soda, lemon sorbetto. Giant lemons were even used as paperweights to hold down the napkins from flying away in the breeze.

The evening was capped off with a visit up the mountain to Taverna Verde to dine on Ischia’s signature dish,

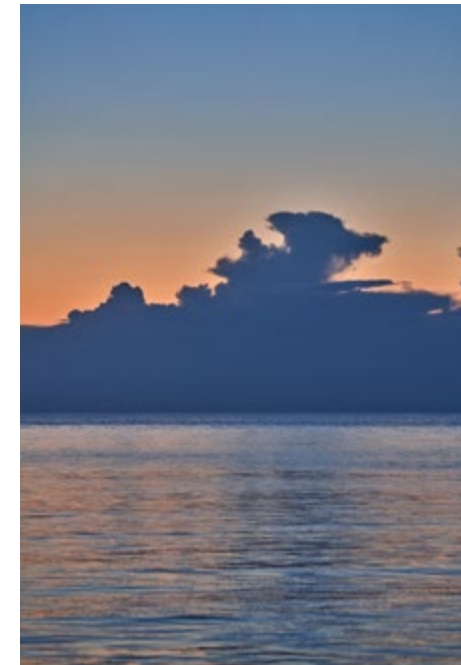
“Going with the wind is part of the lesson of letting go and seeing yourself and the world with fresh eyes.”

coniglio all’Ischitana. Wild rabbit was introduced to the island thousands of years ago by the Phoenicians. Nowadays, the depleted wild rabbit population has given way to innovative domesticated breeding methods using earthen tunnel pits instead of cages, a technique prized by the Slow-Food movement. Meanwhile, cooked rabbit really does have the chickeniest flavor ever. Ischia is filled with reasons to visit—for more than two millennia, its thermal waters have been taken for their extraordinary healing properties. And King Nestor’s legendary golden mixing cup from *The Iliad* was discovered in 1954 in the San

Montano cemetery. We sailed around to the other side of the island, and moored near the Castello Aragonese, where a small Italian film festival illuminated the starry night. I ate a most memorable local dish called *le chicche con cozze e zeste di bergamotto*—baby “gem” gnocchi with mussels and bergamot butter, the tiny mussels and fluffy little dumplings wading in a unique citrusy sauce.

On Day 4, Capitano Antonio and Peggy decided to forego the jaunt to Ponza and Palmarola, and instead made a hasty dash from Ischia to Ventotene to outrun an imminent blustery Mistral. That day-sail conjured up emotions >





reminiscent of giving birth: you know what is coming, you just don't know when, how hard it will be, or how long it will take. Large waves unsettled nerves and some stomachs. Each of us was challenged to accept the unknown, to "go somewhere new and to dig deep," as the trip description also portended.

Peggy's longtime collaborator, Antonio, the founder of Blue Dreams Sailing Charter, is a native son of Procida, an ancient seafaring culture. A poetic soul who casually read Flaubert in Italian down below during our breaks, he retrospectively described this leg of the journey as "the dance," explaining, "The sea is like a dance partner. One doesn't stiffen, yet moves with it, because the sea, she will always win. So you must not fight it." This from a man who, while sailing, handed



the helm over to co-captain Dino, sure-footedly hopped down to the galley, and emerged with two espressos and a hand-rolled cigarette.

Our sailing days offered opportunities to read, rest, swim, sunbathe or chat in small circles, and it didn't take long for us to feel like a newly formed family. Ashley offered individual coaching sessions, which I eagerly procured. Her gentle work focuses on rediscovering one's own essence and flow. At her prompting on that day of rough seas, I lay down, closed my eyes, and dove within to recall the dolphins' movements, which I'd studied on our first day. It allowed my supine body to move >

up and down with the natural movement of the waves. Ashley's words had illuminated a possibility: my anxious mind could separate from its willful soul, something I'd practiced in meditation for years, but which I achieved that day on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Catch the hook of old narratives in your mind before they take hold in the body, and you can change the tired old stories you tell yourself. It was simple yet profound, offering a lifeboat in which to venture into my new aftertimes life. It has kept me afloat to this day.

We arrived at the island of Ventotene, each in our own way transformed by the unexpected tumult of the weather. The afternoon yielded to glorious sunshine. We moored at the local marina for a few nights. For dinner on board, Peggy, Nikki and Antonio prepared lemony pasta with mussels procured from a local fisherman, and his mamma Lucia's lemon salad, with all of us passengers sitting together around a table next to the galley, pitching in to prep dinner while giggling, singing and drinking Negronis. The evening ended with unfettered exaltation, dancing and sipping limoncello, secure for the night on our trusted vessel.

For our final day on Ventotene, we all strolled to a black sand beach, swimming around rock caves near an underwater grotto, walking the sandy shore amongst multi-generations of vacationing Italian families—sunbathing, chatting, gesticulating and laughing as

if from a lost, more innocent decade before cell phones, electronic noise and loud pretense infiltrated our lives. Proud Italian ladies and girls of all sizes and shapes moved unabashedly along the sandy shore with a comportment we American women only dream of, preoccupied as we can be with our imperfections. Afterwards, we stopped for evening drinks of Aperol and Peronis around Roman cave ruins. On the stroll from the harbor to the beach, we caught up with Vincenzo, a one-man farmer's market who sells local lentils, and hand-preserved jars of anchovies, capers, chiles and tuna. These were the best souvenirs of place to bring home.

Our final sail took us back to Procida for a last dinner out before heading our separate ways. A dessert celebrating my upcoming milestone birthday topped by a blazing candle illuminated my true north once again. Peggy is a deeply experienced worldwide traveler, talented cook and storyteller. She and Ashley created a powerful voyage for all of us. At that table, I felt gratitude for all of it, and especially for Aquilina, who'd made the long and arduous voyage to America to create a new life for herself. A century later, I'd journeyed back to her birth country on a very different trip of discovery. Washed in the salty sea, nourished by its bounty and balmy winds, each of us found a "current within" to take us home.

