



Mario's Paradise

by **Martin Bunch**

Until I met my father-in-law I never *really* understood the difference between pesticide-free locally-grown food, and the mass produced fruit and vegetables shipped to the grocery stores. I knew this academically; I had read about it, and friends and colleagues had encouraged eating locally-sourced and organic food, but it was Mario Vettese who really brought home this simple lesson.

Mario had an impressive backyard garden, about two-thirds of a hectare in size. Surrounding the garden were pear, apple and fig trees (these last he would bury in the fall and resurrect every



spring so that they would survive the winter). Until he was informed that it was prohibited by City bylaw, he would also keep chickens that would sometimes roam in the backyard to eat earwigs and fertilize the garden. When we visited my in-laws, the first thing my daughters would do was to run to the backyard carrying baskets to pick the eggs from the chicken coop – a rare and valuable experience for city kids.

About a third of the garden was flat, accessible from the rear of Mario's back-split in North York (which

doubled as a greenhouse in winter). The rest of the garden sloped in terraces to a dry shaded ravine. Mario seemed to grow everything, including several types of lettuce, beans, peas, sweet and hot peppers, asparagus, garlic, parsley, onions, cucumbers, zucchini, raspberries, and tomatoes, tomatoes and more tomatoes. He called the garden his paradise and spent many hours tending to it every day in the spring, summer and fall. I am convinced that both the exercise and healthy produce helped to keep Mario healthy and active past his 90th birthday.

Meals at Mario's house, whether prepared by Mario or his wife Emma, were always spectacular. Partly this was the Italian cooking, informed by their early years in Cassino, and partly it was the fresh, flavourful ingredients. Mario's companionship did not hurt either! I had some of the best meals of my life there, many of them prepared and shared between only Mario and I (with me mostly observing and trying to learn Mario's traditional rural Italian cooking). Served with Mario's homemade wine, salads

seasoned with olive oil and Mario's vinegar, prepared with ingredients harvested from the garden only minutes before, I could feel how healthful meals with Mario were.



Through Mario, I learned a lot. A simple example was how I observed Mario's salads change from the spring to the fall, depending on which lettuces and other vegetables were in season. However, most telling was the taste! Every time I shared a meal with Mario I was amazed at the flavour, something I had never experienced with supermarket food. I was able to experience the underlying importance of land, Mario's little agroecosystem, and to benefit from provisioning services it offered under the skillful hands of my father-in-law.

Mario passed away December 18th, 2015. I miss spending time with him in his garden, and sharing such fantastic meals, and his companionship. However, the lessons he passed on to me will be kept dear, and as much as I can I will try to share them. I still cannot match his cooking.