

SOFFRITTO

For the past 50 years, mostly through the medium of film, rural life in Italy has been portrayed as one of great warmth and humanity. It is a world of peasants toiling in fields; loving and forgiving neighbours; everyone being gloriously wicked, foolish and vulnerable about matters of the heart; and extended families enjoying the produce of the land during long, languorous lunches.

It is a huge compliment to chef and restaurant owner Lucio Galletto and writer David Dale that the same sense of a happy, sepia-toned Elysium is so powerfully evoked in this delightful book.

This is basically the story of how a young Italian, Lucio, met an Australian girl, fell in love, emigrated to Australia, established a legendary Sydney restaurant and then decided to return to his birthplace, Lunigiana in north-west Italy, to rediscover his roots. It is a story that, inevitably, is part history, part family saga, part travel adventure, part recipe and food guide and part nostalgia.

Dale juggles these many strands with considerable adroitness and photographer Paul Green captures the unfolding story with images of the family, the landscape, details of Italian life and, most importantly, the mouth-watering dishes on the tables waiting to be eaten.

The end result is a vibrant account of a life well lived and the story of a culinary tradition that has seduced the tastebuds of the world. Oh, yes, and there is lots of fascinating information about Lucio's Sydney restaurant and plenty of recipes for those who want to try to recreate a little piece of Lunigiana in their own kitchen.

This is one of those rare books where the love and passion of all the people involved is evident on every page. It is no accident that the title page credits are: "Lived by Lucio Galletto, written by David Dale, photography by Paul Green". Each member of the trio has been essential to the creation of the book. The end product is a wonderful celebration of food and the Italian way of life.

A love story, a war adventure, a family saga, a travel memoir - Soffritto is also a guide to an undiscovered part of Italy. Every Italian cook has a soffritto - the 'starter kit' of olive oil, herbs, garlic and other core ingredients from which a great dish is built. Lucio Galletto was in search of the soffritto of his life.