

# UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN



*Food writer, PHOTOGRAPHER and newly MINTED barkeep* EMIKO DAVIES *has spent MORE than a DECADE whetting the APPETITES of LOVERS OF ITALY in her NATIVE AUSTRALIA and BEYOND via HER enchanting COOKBOOKS and BLOG*

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

Emiko Davies is not the first foreigner to visit Florence and fall for the charms of the city, with its picturesque piazze and palazzi, barely changed from when *A Room with a View's* Lucy Honeychurch toured the city a century ago. But while many might only fantasise about uprooting to the Tuscan capital, Davies transformed such a dream into reality.

After moving to Florence, Davies cooked her way through Pellegrino Artusi's *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* (1891), a weighty tome considered the foundational text on Italian cooking. This experiment, documented in her eponymous blog, led to Davies ultimately penning five cookbooks celebrating Italian food and gaining fans in Diana Henry, Stephanie Alexander and Nigella Lawson, who said in praise of Davies' *Tortellini at Midnight* (2019): "Davies has that wonderful gift of making you want to rush straight into the kitchen". Her work has been recognised at the Gourmand World Cookbook, André Simon and British Guild of Food Writers awards; she's also contributed to the Australian *Good Food Guide* and been published in media outlets internationally.

Davies' sixth book, *Gohan*, is a tribute to her Japanese heritage and the food her mother prepared for her as a child – a departure from the

Italian focus of her earlier works. Her original publisher turned down her pitch for the book, which was subsequently picked up by Melbourne-based Smith Street Books late last year. In May, when it won Fortnum & Mason's Cookery Book of the Year, Davies reflected in an Instagram post: "Don't let a rejection stop you from doing what you believe is worthwhile and is your story to tell".

Davies was born in Canberra to a Japanese mother and an Australian father, whose work as a United Nations economist saw the family move between Australia and Beijing during Davies' formative years. Encouraged by her mostly American teachers at her international school in China, she applied and gained early admission to the Rhode Island School of Design in the US to study fine arts. During her senior year in 2001, she lived in Florence for a semester: "I was like, *This is where I want to be*," she recalls. After graduation, she was determined to return to Italy to live as soon as possible, which she did in 2005.

There, Davies encountered sommelier Marco Lami, whose résumé includes the Michelin-starred Il Pellicano and Il Palagio in Tuscany. Says Davies: "We met in a bar" – namely, Moyo on Florence's Via dei Benci – "where he was the bartender." After marrying in 2008, they moved



OPPOSITE PAGE Emiko Davies. THIS PAGE Enoteca Marilu, Davies' cooking school, natural-wine shop and bar in San Miniato.

three years later to Melbourne, where Lami worked with Neil Perry at Rosetta (recently permanently closed) and Andrew McConnell at the Builders Arms Hotel, before returning to Tuscany in 2014.

Davies went on to study art restoration at the Palazzo Spinelli Institute for Art and Restoration in Florence with a view to becoming a museum conservator. She first landed a poorly paid job as a restorer in a photography archive – ("Long story short, I quit that job," she laughs) – next working as a receptionist. During that period, she realised, *This is not for me – I really need to do something with my hands*.

Back in 2010, Davies had created a Wordpress blog that provided a creative outlet that fused her love of writing, photography and food. She began chronicling the history of Florentine cuisine with the help of old cookbooks she'd stumbled upon and her adventures in whipping up local fare. "And people actually started reading it," she recalls. "I started writing for [website] Food52 [whose co-founder and executive chair is former *New York Times Magazine* food editor Amanda Hesser], I got an email from a publisher asking if I'd like to write a cookbook and the rest is kind of history." In 2014, she signed a book deal with Hardie Grant, which published her debut title, *Florentine*, in 2016.

Like many others, Davies, her husband and daughters – Mariù, 11, and Luna, six – left inner-city life behind after the pandemic. The family were "bursting at the seams" in their Florentine apartment, so they scouted out Marco's hometown of San Miniato, a postcard-pretty hilltop town 40 minutes from Florence. They chanced upon a charming flat, built in

1800, with frescoed ceilings and two-metre windows overlooking the surrounding valley and Apuan Alps. The day lockdown ended in 2020, they visited the apartment again with, understandably, a fresh perspective after months stuck indoors. "After lockdown, I [realised] I just needed a horizon," Davies says.

In April 2023, Davies and her husband opened Enoteca Marilu, a cooking school, natural-wine shop and bar in San Miniato. The

building, once stables, is medieval in origin, with arched vaulted ceilings and a rustic ambience. The longer courses always involve a truffle hunt.

Sustainability is at the heart of how the operation is run. The enoteca (wine bar) relies on certified renewable energy to power everything and offers seasonal, mostly vegetarian dishes with locally grown ingredients. Davies and Lami also share a passion for "natural" wine, although it's not a descriptor the couple favours, preferring "low intervention". As per Davies' *substack.com*, Lami explains: "If you want wine not to turn to vinegar, you need some sort of human intervention – not necessarily chemicals. You need knowledge. But wine's natural course is vinegar."

A true multi-hyphenate, Davies' career boasts many strands. But what weaves them together is her desire to share with the world what she loves most about living in Tuscany. "It's impossible to live in a place like this and not have an uncle or cousin or friend who makes their own this, that or the other," be that olive oil, cheese or wine, she says. "That's one of the reasons that Italians have a connection with food, even if they're not in food. It's very special." HB

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Photography by Sophie Delaunay.