

# LA FIGA

VISIONS OF FOOD AND FORM

BY CHEF TIBERIO SIMONE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATT FREEDMAN





PREVIEW EXCERPT

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# FOREWORD

MOST PEOPLE VIVIDLY REMEMBER the first time they encounter Tiberio Simone, and sometimes it seems that everyone knows Tiberio. I was at a Christmas party for entrepreneurs in Seattle, making awkward small talk around the dessert table and privately praying that the dance music would start. Tiberio, the evening's pastry chef, strutted across the room in his leather pants with unabashed Southern Italian flair. Within a few minutes, he was hand-feeding me chocolate creations as we delved into subjects ranging from love to the existential search for meaning. His vibrant, inimitable spirit was like a lightning bolt of color exploding across a gray Seattle skyline—sometimes stunning and always marvelous.

Tiberio will be the first to tell you that his love for simple but beautiful food began in his mother's Italian kitchen. Nothing can improve upon the freshest tomato grown in his garden or the mushroom he digs up during a rainy Western Washington fall. As much as this James Beard Award winner has a reputation for making beautiful cakes that delight the palate, Tiberio also provides emotional nourishment to those around him with his unique recipe of kindness, generosity, playfulness, and forthrightness. Tiberio's motto is "I love everybody, and you are next!"

Until he collaborated with photographer Matt Freedman, Tiberio's culinary creations were ephemeral. Matt's work is stunning. His portraits capture his subject's spirit and his travel photography makes you long to be in that place—to taste the food, to hear the people, to stand in the exact spot and take in the moments. Matt's sensual gaze and technical genius capture Tiberio's art as an imaginative reincarnation of the still life, a new vision of food and form. Matt makes gorgeous portraits of Tiberio's live installations—they are almost edible.

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly know how far one can go," wrote T. S. Eliot. In *La Figa*, Tiberio and Matt transport us with their provocative and mesmerizing photographs to a place where a simple fruit, combined with the basic human form, explodes our senses—from a pomegranate bikini to rolling hills of ingredient-covered hips. I, for one, will never think of seaweed or avocado in the same way. *La Figa* invites us to pierce through mundane living and savor the basic ingredients of life.

NASSIM ASSEFI, MD  
Physician and Novelist



# CUCUMBERS

## AN EXPLOSION OF JOY

I GREW UP WORKING THE LAND in Southern Italy. Those days are forever etched in my mind, and they shape my philosophy of food and life. Revisiting the stories of all the different fruits and vegetables that were part of my childhood is like spending time with friends I have loved for a lifetime.

My brothers and I were responsible for working the land with our father. In the Apulia region of Italy, an independent farmer did not work only one plot of land; our work was scattered throughout the region. The land was separated into different parcels—some big and some small—with such names as *La Cicula*, *Lu Patru*, *Lu Mea*, *Bandiellu*, *Donna Laura*, *La Patula*, *Santu Nicola*, and *Tura Noa*, from old civilizations in the area. A parcel's size was based on the type of produce that could be cultivated in that particular terrain. Because the topography was varied, our region grew many different food items, including vegetables, fruits, wheat, and tobacco. We also had quite a few orchards of olive trees, and we were known for our vineyards of Niuru Maru grapes used to make Negro Maro, a very, very dark wine with a deep, full body. We grew table grapes too, and other types for lighter wines.

Every morning, my mom packed food for us to bring to the farm and eat during the lunch break. The springtime lunches were most memorable to me because she placed in a plastic bag a few slices of bread, a good amount of cured olives, and sometimes sardo cheese, a sharply flavored hard cheese made from sheep's milk and aged for up to a year. All that was missing were vegetables, and we picked those ourselves from whichever land we were working on at the time. If that particular lot did not have vegetables, we went to the neighboring land and picked some.

All that fresh air and exercise meant I could not wait for lunch.

As I worked, I fantasized about tearing into the bread and stuffing my mouth with vegetables and olives. When we worked in the fields, I was particularly excited when the cucumbers were ripe and ready to be harvested because they were refreshing and sweet on super hot days. We weren't allowed to pick cucumbers unless they were big enough to be harvested, so when Dad gave us permission to pick some for lunch, even before he had finished his sentence, we were off and running like crazy to find the biggest cucumber. Sometimes we fought over one, which always tasted better when flavored with a win.

Without a doubt, lunch was the best part of the day. We all had our own style of eating, and my system was designed to maximize pleasure and enhance the sensual experience of eating food I'd just picked in the warm sunshine. First, I took a big bite of the cucumber, as if I was eating a banana, and chewed it slightly. Then, I took a smaller bite of bread and, halfway through chewing it and the cucumber, I added a couple of salted, cured dark olives. I used my tongue and teeth to locate all the olive pits, then spat them out, and added a tiny bit of sharp cheese to my mouth. I tried to chew this delicious combination as long as possible so the flavors would last and I could create the ultimate, heavenly taste sensation in my mouth. Mmm. Soooooo good.

Sometimes, while I was eating, my dad would ask, "Why do you close your eyes when you eat?"

Before I could swallow and reply, one of my brothers would invariably say, "Because he thinks he's eating a penis."

Then the fight would start.

To this day, I consider this very simple food to be among the most delicious I have ever eaten. For years, I wondered why, and I finally figured it out: The food was like an orgasm. On those cucumber farm days, I was working very hard, I was starving, and I desperately needed the food to give me energy to do this backbreaking work. When I finally got to eat lunch

and the food arrived in my stomach, it was an explosion of joy inside of me—just like an orgasm. Chewing the food, moving it around in my mouth, savoring the flavors—these were all sensual movements and experiences leading up to that moment when I finally swallowed and shot that heavenly concoction straight into my open, needy stomach.

I wasn't the only child who enjoyed cucumbers when we were growing up; we all used them as a source of entertainment too. More times than I can remember, my brothers, my friends, and I got up in the middle of the night and sneaked out of the house. We met in a special place and often waited as long as thirty minutes for all the "Warriors of the Night" to arrive. We saw ourselves as brave soldiers who weren't afraid of anything, and we demonstrated this with stealthy visits to local farms to steal and eat whatever was in season.

One of those fun vegetables was the cucumber. We rolled around, laughing hysterically, as we stuffed cucumbers in our pants and pretended to be big men seducing women. We chased each other and acted as if we were having sex from behind.

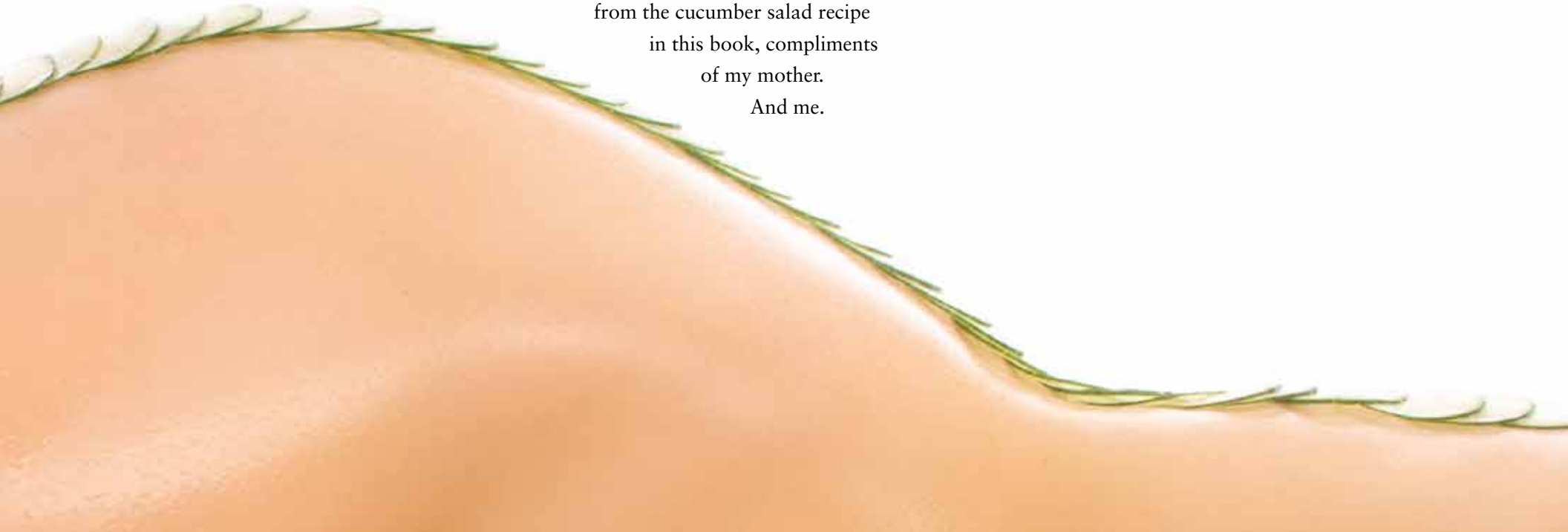


WHEN I FINALLY GOT TO EAT LUNCH AND THE FOOD ARRIVED IN MY STOMACH, IT WAS AN EXPLOSION OF JOY INSIDE OF ME—JUST LIKE AN ORGASM.

Thinking about it now, it seems so ridiculous, but it was really good, innocent fun. I have no regrets. If I could do it all over again, I would. We felt powerful, and we enjoyed ourselves.

So, even as children, we realized the cucumber's shape resembled a penis, and we saw the vegetable as a sexual image. I have known people who have used it as a sexual toy, and they've said it can be very pleasurable. But a word of advice: Select a cucumber that is a little soft and pliable. Those fresh, crispy ones might break, creating a challenging—and very embarrassing—situation.

Have fun no matter how you seek pleasure from your cucumber. Even if, to be on the safe side, you choose to get your cucumber thrills indirectly, perhaps from the cucumber salad recipe in this book, compliments of my mother.  
And me.





# GRAPES


GRAPES ARE ONE OF THOSE FRUITS that are easily eaten on their own...and are even better when you share them. The ancient Romans knew this; they understood the pleasures of parties, food, and love-making. They fed grapes to their lovers in a very seductive way, and we would do well to follow their example.

Try it the next time you come across a perfectly ripe, sweet, beautiful cluster of grapes. Discover enticing alternatives to using simply your hands and mouth when you and your lover feed them to each other.

By incorporating grapes into a recipe, however, we can enjoy their taste and texture more often. They can add a subtle, underlying flavor to a dish, or create a strong, bold presence that gets attention.

A few years ago, I was asked to create a unique New York steak recipe. After working with the result, I discovered many ways to use it with vegetarian and other dishes, and how simply perfect it tastes when spread on a crostini with gorgonzola or goat cheese.

## WHOLE GRAPE SAUCE



Purchase 1/2 lb. of concord grapes and 1/2 lb. of green grapes—make sure they're both a seedless variety. Remove the grapes from the stem, then wash and set them aside. Peel, slice, and have a couple of garlic cloves handy.

Place a large sauté pan over high heat. Once the pan is very hot, turn the heat down to a medium setting. Add 1/8 cup of olive oil and the sliced garlic, then immediately place all the grapes in the pan, forming a single layer. Add 1 sprig of fresh rosemary and 1 to 2 teaspoons of fresh thyme and stir for just a few seconds. Let the mixture cook for about 30 seconds, or until you see the garlic starting to turn light brown.

Turn the heat up as high as it will go and immediately add 1 cup of dry white wine, 1/2 cup of port wine, and the zest from half of the peel of a medium-size lemon. Fold the sauce gently. Once the wine is reduced down to about 1/2 cup, add 3 ozs. of thinly sliced butter. After the butter has melted, fold it over the smooth skin of the grapes. Finish the sauce with a pinch or two of good sea salt.

In addition to vegetarian and meat dishes, try using this sauce on desserts and, of course, the human body. You and your partner will feel loved.



# COFFEE

COFFEE IS IN MY BLOOD. In Italy, much like in America, we need coffee early in the day to revitalize our senses and restore our energy. Espresso is the morning drink of choice, and people flock to the bars to quickly down their first of several cups. An Italian bar is similar to an American coffee house—plenty of windows opening onto the street, a selection of baked goods, a friendly and relaxed atmosphere—but with the added benefits of elegant counters and colorful bottles of alcohol lining the back wall.

Drinking coffee is also a social activity suitable for any time of the day or evening. Relaxing at a bar or bistro in the neighborhood piazza, chatting with friends both old and new, leisurely sipping a hot cappuccino or espresso, watching the world stroll by—these are timeless, soul-nourishing moments.

My ultimate coffee experiences have come from a dessert my mother makes called *Dolce Mocha*, which is an amalgamation of biscotti, butter, toasted almonds, coffee liquor, and espresso. The recipe is secret, however, and I vowed a long time ago to never divulge it. Perhaps I will make it for you someday, and then you will understand the preciousness of this family recipe for the perfect coffee experience.

My mother's recipe is not the only heavenly coffee beverage I look forward to when I return to Southern Italy each year. On my first evening back in Neviano, I walk over to the local bar and order an Espresso Affogato, which is, literally, ice cream drowning in coffee.

## ESPRESSO AFFOGATO

This is a very simple treat to make for a guest or for yourself, especially in the late afternoon or evening of a hot day. Be sure to use a good brand of vanilla gelato or ice cream, and high-quality espresso.

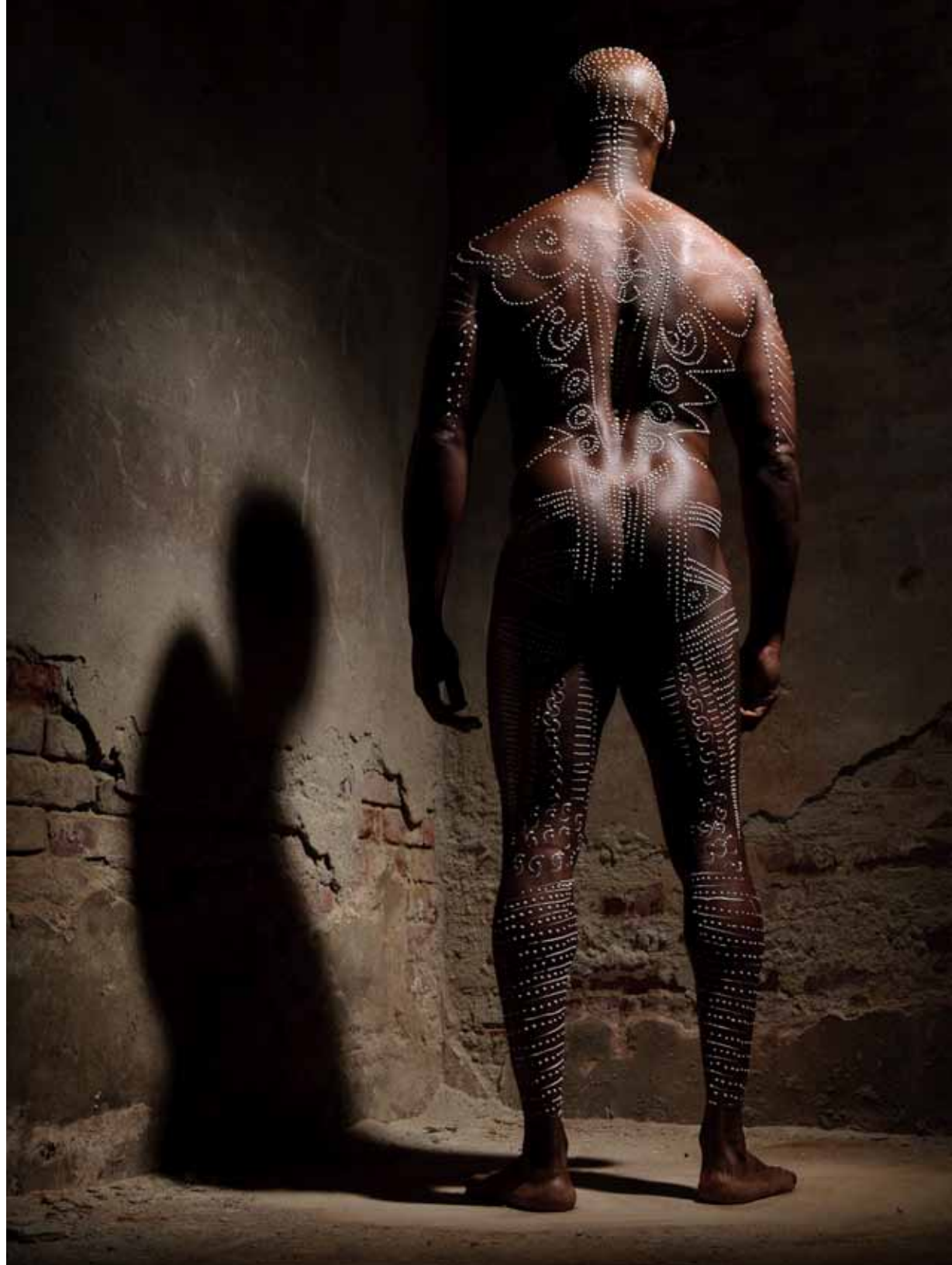
Select a small and elegant bowl, a half-moon dish, or a ramekin to prepare and serve your Espresso Affogato. Place a scoop of gelato into the dish, and make sure the scoop is only slightly smaller than the interior of the bowl. Pour a hot, freshly made shot of espresso over the scoop, and...that's it!

The hot coffee will melt the gelato, which forms a creamy layer on top of the dark espresso. The contrasts of light and dark, hot and cold, are striking. Soon, the two will blend and create a warm, thick, creamy espresso drink.

Do the same with a friend as the two of you use a small spoon to feed each other this companionable blend of two contrasting elements becoming one.

*Che buono.*











# RASPBERRIES

A good raspberry needs only two fingers and a mouth. But if you are part of a couple and would like a playful and seductive activity, here are two creative techniques for enjoying raspberries—and each other.

## RASPBERRY NECKLACE



Begin with 2 cups of organic raspberries. Always make sure the berries themselves are firm, plump, and sweet.

Use a sewing needle, and fine fishing line as thread. Cut whatever length you think will work best for your neck, keeping in mind you'll need a few extra inches to tie the necklace. Gently push the needle through each berry, from the hollow end to the tip. Handle the berries carefully because they can tear easily. Thread the berries so they are spooning together—so they're cozy and beautiful to behold.

Once the necklace is complete, place it around your lover's neck. Instead of using your fingers to pluck and share a raspberry, use your lips or another body part—it's more fun and sensual as you enjoy the sweetness and texture of each delicate berry. The closer you keep the necklace to your lover's neck, the more that person will feel the heat or the tickling of your lips.

CHOCOLATE-RASPBERRY KISS



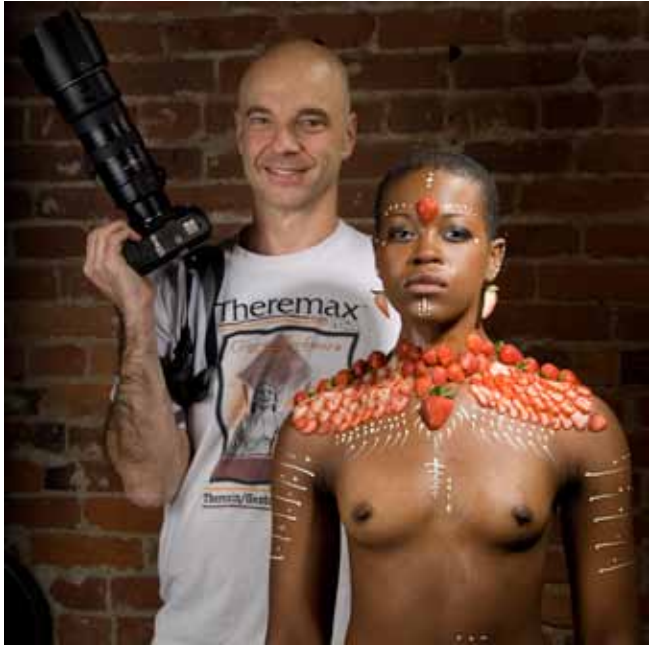
Buy or pick several cups of large, firm raspberries.

Using a double boiler, melt 4 to 6 ozs. of chopped semisweet chocolate. Be sure to melt it gently: do not allow the water to boil. Use a zester or very fine cheese grater to gather about 1 to 2 teaspoons of the zest of an orange. Avoid the white rind, as that part of the orange is very bitter. Add the zest to the melted chocolate and fold gently.


Form a cone with parchment cooking paper. Spoon in the chocolate and close the back of the cone. Cut the tip off and carefully fill each raspberry nipple. Place them in a bowl or tray in the refrigerator so they cool completely. Eat them all at once or at your leisure.

To add a creative twist, dip one side of one berry in melted chocolate and “glue” it to another berry, as if they are giving each other a succulent kiss. The chocolate will harden as it cools in your refrigerator, and your raspberries’ juicy embrace will last longer. This creation works best if you plan to feed or seduce someone with your mouth. Since the berries are relatively small, it is difficult to share a single one between two mouths—two will do the job nicely.









“Food is sensual, and *La Figa* is a feast for the senses. We build our bodies from nature, and it is only natural that the human form bonds with forms of food to build an erotic and tasty feast!”

—TOM DOUGLAS  
chef, restaurateur, and author

“Freedman and Simone unite and celebrate two sensuous pleasures, two fundamental human appetites, in a way that elevates and glorifies both. You’ll never look at dinner or your lover the same way again.”

—DAN SAVAGE  
nationally syndicated columnist and  
best-selling author

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