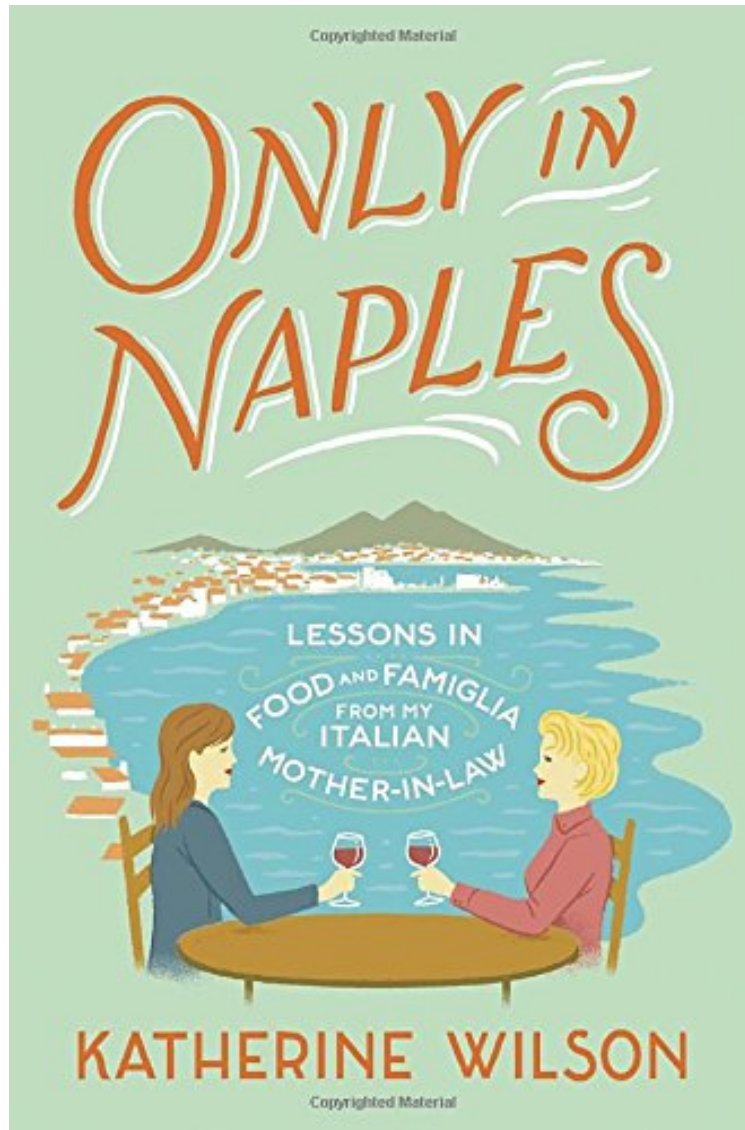


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Only in Naples: Lessons in Food and Famiglia from My Italian Mother-in-Law

Katherine Wilson

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Katherine Wilson : Only in Naples: Lessons in Food and Famiglia from My Italian Mother-in-Law before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Only in Naples: Lessons in Food and Famiglia from My Italian Mother-in-Law:

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Yummy NaplesBy D. A. TerryI have to say at the outset that the

author is someone I know -- she was my daughter's classmate in high school, but I didn't know her well, except through her amazing talent as a singer. It seems that her talents also include the ability to write a funny, sweet, reflective memoir about her introduction to and integration into life in Naples. I loved learning about how the author's mother-in-law balanced the life of her family by providing nourishment and nurturing at the table. There are wonderful recipes, but even more there are moments of such profound love. I can't think of anyone who would not enjoy this book. 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Read it! By Customer I loved this book. I read it from cover to cover in record time. Maybe because I have a strong connection to Italy and I could feel the tastes and smells, hear the intonations, and picture the hand gestures. But probably because it is so vividly written. It feels like I've watched a movie, and I find myself referring back to it all the time. I also think I understand some of my friends and family better now.... But Italian connection or not, it's a lot of fun, like a little vacation. Read it! 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A laugh a second. Had to put the book ... By delores delgado A laugh a second. Had to put the book down after reading each page to compose myself. Every description of Neapolitans fits all of my relatives so accurately.

Full of lighthearted humor, sumptuous food, the wisdom of an Italian mother-in-law, and all the atmosphere of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, this warm and witty memoir follows American-born Katherine Wilson on her adventures abroad. Thanks to a surprising romance—and a spirited woman who teaches her to laugh, to seize joy, and to love—a three-month rite of passage in Naples turns into a permanent embrace of this boisterous city on the Mediterranean. When I saw the sea at Gaeta, I knew that Naples was near and I was coming home. “There is a chaotic, vibrant energy about Naples that forces you to let go and give in,” writes Katherine, who arrives in the city to intern at the United States Consulate. One evening, she meets handsome, studious Salvatore and finds herself immediately enveloped by his elegant mother, Raffaella, and the rest of the Avallone family. From that moment, Katherine's education begins: Never eat the crust of a pizza first, always stand up and fight for yourself and your loved ones, and consider mealtimes sacred—food must be prepared fresh and consumed in *compagnia*. Immersed in Neapolitan culture, traditions, and cuisine, slowly and unexpectedly falling for Salvatore, and longing for Raffaella's company and guidance, Katherine discovers how to prepare meals that sing, from hearty, thick ragù to comforting rigatoni alla Genovese to pasta al forno, a casserole chock-full of bacon, béchamel, and no fewer than four kinds of cheeses. The secret to succulent, tender octopus? Beat it with a hammer. While Katherine is used to large American kitchens with islands and barstools, she understands the beauty of small, tight Italian ones, where it's easy to offer a taste from a wooden spoon. Through courtship, culture clashes, Sunday services, marriage, and motherhood (in Naples, a pregnancy craving must always be satisfied!), Katherine comes to appreciate carnale, the quintessentially Neapolitan sense of comfort and confidence in one's own skin. Raffaella and her famiglia are also experts at *sdrammatizzare*, knowing how to suck the tragedy from something and spit it out with a great big smile. Part travel tale, part love letter, *Only in Naples* is a sumptuous story that is a feast for the senses. Goethe said, “See Naples and die.” But Katherine Wilson saw Naples and started to live. Praise for *Only in Naples* “In a world filled with food memoirs, this one stands out. Katherine Wilson gives us more than the fabulous food of Naples. She offers us a passport to an exotic country we would never be able to enter on our own.”—Ruth Reichl, author of *My Kitchen Year* “Warmhearted . . . an exuberant account of love and great Italian food.”—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) “Sweet and humorous.”—Publishers Weekly “Wilson has written a glorious memoir celebrating the holy trinity of Italian life: love, food, and family. Her keen eye and sense of humor take you through the winding streets of Naples at a clip, on a ride you hope will never end.”—Adriana Trigiani, author of *The Shoemaker's Wife* “How lucky we are to get these hilarious and wise perceptions filtered through a sincerely loving eye.”—Julie Klam, author of *Friendkeeping* “This thoroughly enjoyable love letter to Naples is a tribute to the author's irrepressible mother-in-law.”—Luisa Weiss, author of *My Berlin Kitchen* and founder of *The Wednesday Chef*

“In a world filled with food memoirs, this one stands out. Katherine Wilson gives us more than the fabulous food of Naples. She offers us a passport to an exotic country we would never be able to enter on our own.”—Ruth Reichl, author of *My Kitchen Year* “Warmhearted . . . an exuberant account of love and great Italian food.”—Kirkus (starred review) “Sweet and humorous.”—Publishers Weekly “Katherine Wilson has written a glorious memoir celebrating the holy trinity of Italian life: love, food, and family. Her keen eye and sense of humor take you through the winding streets of Naples at a clip, on a ride you hope will never end. If you love Italy, or the idea of it, you will love this book. And, if you ever plan to visit Naples, tuck this in your suitcase: It's the best primer I've ever read as a guide to this bustling, vibrant southern Italian port city.”—Adriana Trigiani, author of *The Shoemaker's Wife* “In her debut memoir, *Only in Naples*, Katherine Wilson manages to combine everything I love—food, family, and Italy—with heaping portions of heart and humor. How lucky we are to get these hilarious and wise perceptions filtered through a sincerely loving eye. You'll want to share this book with friends and family over a big bowl of rigatoni alla Genovese.”—Julie Klam, author of *Friendkeeping* “This thoroughly enjoyable love letter to Naples is a tribute to the author's irrepressible mother-in-law, a larger-than-life figure who teaches Wilson (and us) not just how to cook a true

Neapolitan lasagna complete with tiny meatballs, but how to approach life itself with gusto and a healthy appetite. Read this and you'll find yourself pining for your very own sequined Italian mother-in-law."—Luisa Weiss, author of *My Berlin Kitchen* and founder of *The Wednesday Chef* "Only in Naples is a cozy, funny, heartfelt love letter to Katherine Wilson's adopted city and beloved family-by-marriage, especially her mother-in-law, the gorgeous, indomitable Raffaella, whose cooking fills these pages with luscious ricotta and chewy octopus alike. Wilson's easygoing writing perfectly suits this tale of an innocent abroad, an American girl who discovers herself in the midst of a foreign culture that becomes, in the end, her own."—Kate Christensen, author of *How to Cook a Moose* "A delightful, insightful tale of being romanced by a vibrant city, a strong-willed mother and a sweet man—all at once . . . Wilson's eye for detail and character bring the culture, the rhythm, and the food of Naples to life. Only in Naples is a must-read for anyone who loves Italian food—and isn't that everyone?"—Kathleen Flinn, author of *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry*

About the Author Katherine Wilson was born and raised in Washington, D.C. She graduated Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton University, where she studied with Toni Morrison and Peter Sellars. She has lived in Italy for the past nineteen years, working in television, film, and theater. Most recently, she acted in Giuseppe Tornatore's *The Best Offer*, with Geoffrey Rush and Donald Sutherland. She lives in Rome with her husband and their two children.

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A Pizza When Salvatore sputtered up in his tiny red Fiat for our first meeting, he was over twenty minutes late. The car looked like a tin can and sounded like it was on its last legs. It spat a steady stream of exhaust, and I started to cough. Salvatore responded with two short honks of his horn and a big smile. It was the first time I was meeting this guy, and he was twenty minutes late. What was that? I was fresh out of college, and had arrived in Naples a few days earlier to start a three-month internship at the U.S. Consulate there. I was standing outside the entrance of the boarding school where I rented a room, wearing a boxy blue jacket with black trousers. My internship wasn't as much a career move as it was a rite of passage—members of my family did an "experience abroad" during or after college. Big leather photo albums in my parents' attic in Washington show my father WASPy and smiling in Bordeaux in 1961; my mother all sueded out in Bologna in 1966. They had learned foreign languages, and they'd had the time of their lives. Now that it was my turn, where was I going to go? Naples was not a logical destination. When I'd visited Italy on vacations as a kid, we avoided the city or passed through it as quickly as we could to get to Pompeii or Vesuvius. Naples was dirty and dangerous, we heard. My grandfather, whose parents were from Calabria, said that Neapolitans could steal your socks without taking your shoes off. "You really should go to Tuscany," family friends had told me. "Have you seen Siena? Florence?" The serene splendor of Tuscany would have been appropriate for an upper-class girl like me. It felt like what I was supposed to do, and I'd always been very good at doing what I was supposed to do. I spent my childhood overachieving at private schools, and in college I could have majored in *Surpassing Expectations* or *Making Mommy and Daddy Proud*. It was time for a change. The American consul of Naples was a fellow alum of my parents' graduate school of international relations. I'd been seated next to him the previous spring at a fundraising dinner in Washington, and he asked me if I'd considered Naples for my experience abroad. He could arrange an unpaid internship in the political office of the Consulate if I was interested. Naples? I thought stolen socks and wallets, the Mafia, and corruption. I also thought pizza. I was intrigued. I bounced the idea off people who asked what I was going to do after graduation. "I was thinking of going to Naples," I told them. That was when I got the Look. The Look was a wide-eyed, Beware facial expression, accompanied by warnings of "It's filthy!" "It's dangerous!" and even "The good guys and the bad guys all look alike! There's no way to tell the difference!" Aha, I thought. Sounds fascinating. I now know that Naples is like New York City: you either love it or you hate it. And if you love it, there's no use proselytizing. Those who hate it will not be converted. There is a chaotic, vibrant energy about Naples that forces you to let go and give in. If you fight it, judge it, or even hide from it, you might as well get out before you get your wallet snatched. Lucky I hadn't gotten my wallet snatched waiting for this Salvatore guy, I thought, as he opened the creaking door of his car and got out to introduce himself. I mean, twenty minutes? It had been Salvatore's mother, Raffaella Avallone, who had found me the room at the boarding school where I was staying. After working out the details of the internship, I had asked the consul's help with housing. He immediately passed the issue on to his wife, an Italian signora who hung out not only with diplomats but also Neapolitan society. She knew that the lady who got things done at benefit lunches, charity galas, and bridge tournaments was Raffaella Avallone. Plus, Raffaella had two kids this girl's age! And so Raffaella learned that there was a young woman in need of a sistemazione, a setup. *Mi sono mossa subito* is the expression she would use. I got myself moving. She found me a place to stay and told her son Salvatore that there was an American girl whom he was to call and meet up with. "Salva?" she said. "Take her out. The poor girl knows no one here. And please, don't be late." The next day I got a call from Salvatore. The telephone was a challenge, as my Italian was very basic and I could only communicate concepts like "I am hungry" and "I am American." Although I didn't understand most of what Salvatore said, I thought his laugh was adorable. Plus, I didn't know a soul in Naples. The night before, I'd gone out for dinner with two seventeen-year-old boys that I had met on a bus. I wanted to be in compagnia. So I was glad that, if I had understood correctly, this Salvatore was going to pick me up the next evening. Worst-case scenario, I figured, I could practice my Italian. "You don't look American!" I thought I understood him to say after he introduced himself. Well, he didn't look typically Neapolitan, either. He was tall; not

muscular, but long and narrow, with a thin torso that emptied into a little pool of tummy that hung over the button of his jeans. His skin was tanned, his lips full, his nose big and Roman. He was wearing a T-shirt that said miami! in bubble letters. I was expecting “Nice to meet you, sorry I’m late,” but there was no apology, no niceties, no “What do you want to do?” There was, however, that adorable laugh again. It was a laugh on an inhale, which started at a high pitch and came down the scale to end at the note of his speaking voice. It was accompanied by a smile that showed lots of perfect white teeth. He opened the passenger door, and the seat squeaked as I sat down. Salvatore seemed too big for this tiny car—his black hair stuck with static to the top. I noticed that his fingernails on the steering wheel were such perfect ovals that they could only have been shaped by a manicurist. He was a boy, not yet a man, who ate and lived well. Salvatore’s style of driving did not necessitate keeping his eyes on the road. He looked me in the eyes and tried out his horrific English, with no apologies for messing up his verb forms. How could a boy of twenty-three be so confident? I felt infantile, passive, silent. Try to say something in Italian! I told myself. Like, for example, Where are we going? You can’t have zero control of the situation! “Dove andiamo?” “To my apartment. America! America! Petrol-dollar!” American oil dollars? Did he have some idea that I was super-rich from oil? I now know that thanks to the TV show Dallas, lots of Italians believe that if Americans have money, it’s thanks to Texas oil. But in the car that first evening, I didn’t know where this expression came from—only that Salvatore greatly enjoyed saying it. Over and over. And then there was that laugh again. “My” apartment, for a twenty-three-year-old Neapolitan did not mean a dorm room or a flat with a roommate. It meant his parents’ apartment. I had assumed that we would go to a pizzeria or that he would show me around the city. Instead he was bringing me home to Mamma and Papà. The Avallones lived a short drive from my boardinghouse in Posillipo, the nicest residential area of Naples. Named Pausilypon by the Greeks—meaning “rest from toils”—the hill is the high end point of the promontory that juts out into the Bay of Naples. For thousands of years, before the area became part of the city, the Neapolitan upper classes would summer here in the villas that dot the coastline. Winding up the panoramic Via Posillipo, you can see the stone markers for Villa Elena, Villa Emma, Villa Margherita. Steps lead from these villas down to Marechiaro, the clear sea. Although the city of Naples is one of the densest in Europe, Posillipo is airy and peaceful. The Avallones’ building is opposite the entrance to the Virgiliano, a terraced park with views of the electric blue water and the islands of Capri, Ischia, and Procida, as well as the Amalfi coast. During the day, you can hear the squawks of seagulls; in the evening, the occasional buzz of a motorbike or distant fireworks over the ocean. You think you’re from Posillipo is a Neapolitan expression meaning you’re a snooty ass, get off your high horse. The Avallones’ palazzo, which Salvatore’s father had built in the 1960s, was set inland. It had twelve apartments, nine of which were owned by the family. The building had survived the massive 1980 earthquake unscathed (although Salvatore later told me he remembered leaving the soccer match he was watching on TV and running down steps that swayed and swelled like the ocean). The palazzo was theirs and it was built well, in a place of beauty and rest. We pulled into an underground garage maze. It was unbelievable how many vehicles at how many different angles were parked in such a small space. They were nose to nose, side window to side window, bumper to bumper. I was confused: there was so much space outside! (“What,” Salvatore would respond when I asked him about it later, “people don’t steal cars where you come from?”) He parked the little Fiat between two other cars in one swinging, expert maneuver and led me to the elevator. I hadn’t smelled the sea air. I smelled mildew and humidity and exhaust fumes. We were silent in the tiny elevator that brought us to the third, and highest, floor. Salvatore opened the door to the Avallones’ apartment with a bulky silver key and showed me in. “Vieni, vieni,” he said as he dumped the keys on a eighteenth-century chaise longue at the entrance to the living room. From the foyer, I peeked into the dark, elegant salone, where I could make out statues of gold cherubim and folds of heavy silk. Terra-cotta vases stood on pedestals (“Oh, those are from Pompeii,” Salvatore would explain—there was a lot of looting when Pompeii was rediscovered nearly three hundred years ago). I waited to see what would come next. “Mammmmma!” he called. That resonant tenor voice that I had found so charming in the car was grating and nasal when he called his mamma. I was beginning to dread meeting his parents. It was hard enough to understand Italian and speak with someone my own age: the last thing I felt up for now was conversing with an imposing, formal, wealthy Neapolitan woman who was surely protective of her son. On her own turf! Also, I was ravenously hungry. “Mammmmma! È pronto?” (Is dinner ready? Wasn’t he going to say that the American girl was here?) I heard the shuffling of bedroom slippers and in came a man whom I took to be Salvatore’s father. About seventy, he was not a scary patriarch, but a gentle, distinguished man wearing a dark sweater and lots of cologne. We shook hands and he introduced himself as Nino. He spoke some English, thanks to the thirty years that he had spent managing his family’s luxury hotel. “Salvató, è pronto ’a magnà?” Nino reverted to Neapolitan dialect to ask his son if dinner was ready, grabbing Salva’s arm. He was as hungry as the rest of us. I was led into the kitchen, where Raffaella was getting off the phone as she took the homemade pizza out of the oven and closed the refrigerator with her heel. It was all movement, all action, all graceful. She wasn’t fat and stationary and stirring pasta sauce. She was gorgeous. About five foot four and fit, Raffaella wore high-heeled boots and a pink oxford shirt. Her white jeans were tight and cinched at the waist with a rhinestone-studded leather belt. She was fully made up: lip liner melded into gloss, eyeliner smudged naturally into charcoal eye shadow. Her hair was short and blond, highlighted expertly. Despite the sparkles and heavy-handed makeup, her look was in no way trashy, only glamorous. I felt large and gawky

in my blue blazer and baggy pants. My mother had called the outfit “slenderizing” in a spacious Washington dressing room, but next to this fifty-six-year-old in white jeans, I didn’t feel slenderized. I felt like a silent American slug. “Ciao tesoro! Honey, have a seat. I hope you like Neapolitan pizza! Nino, scoot your chair over.” When Raffaella moved, whiffs of Chanel perfume cut through the aroma of baked dough and basil. The salone of the apartment may have been opulent but the kitchen was minuscule. On the right side, a rectangular Formica table was built into the checkered tile wall and sat four people at most. The stove, oven, sink, and some (very limited) counter space were on the left. If more than two people were eating at the table, nobody could pass to get to the refrigerator at the back of the kitchen. Why would any family who clearly had money not build a bigger kitchen? I wondered. As it turned out, extra space was reserved for the living room with its dining niche, where the Avallones ate when they had guests. The kitchen was for cooking and eating in famiglia. You can scooch around and bump into family, after all. Lean over them, step on them, feed and be fed by them. A lot of space isn’t really necessary when you’re with people you love. There was no place at the table for Raffaella, but fortunately she wasn’t planning on sitting. She was planning on doing at least eight other things, including making the American girl feel at home. At some point Salvatore’s older sister, Benedetta, arrived, squeezed in, and introduced herself. She was twenty-six, three years older than Salvatore, and had intimidating turquoise eyes framed by thin Armani glasses. Her light brown hair was long and silky straight, and swished like that of the coolest girls in high school. Strangely (it was only 8:00 in the evening), she was wearing pajamas, decorated with pink and white teddy bears holding balloons and a ruffle at the neck. Mi piace star comoda, she would tell me later. When I’m at home I like to be comfy. Her brother was wearing his comfy T-shirt and jeans and she was in her comfy PJs. Only their mother had spent time getting done up.