

# *Leading Ladies*

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By Nancy Honey

*Interviews by Hattie Garlick*

**Mary Contini:** *High profile cook and cookery writer*

- 1956**        **Born in Edinburgh**
- 1983**        **Became a director of Valvona & Crolla**
- 1999**        **Published *Easy Peasy: Real Food for Kids Who Want to Cook* with Pru Irvine**
- 2002**        **Published *Dear Francesca*, a cook book and family history**
- 2004**        **Valvona & Crolla opened VinCaffè, a restaurant, wine bar and café**
- 2007**        **Published *Dear Olivia*, a cook book and history addressed to her second daughter**
- 2009**        **Published *Valvona & Crolla, A Year at an Italian Table***

**My earliest memory is...** of my very small, grey pram outside my daddy's ice cream shop in the fishing village where we grew up. It was parked next to my sister's and I remember vividly that hers was much bigger. I must have been two, and that's the root of my competitiveness!

**We all lived on top of our ice cream shop and the fish and chip shop.** One of my earliest food memories is of waiting for my older brother and sister to go off to school so that I could eat what was left at the kitchen table. By then, my mother had already had two more babies after me – she has eight of us in the end – and at that stage I was obviously thinking, *will I get fed?!*

**I had to be self-sufficient from an early age** because my mum was having babies all the time. I was a bit of a loner, eventually I made a bedroom in a cupboard at the top of my house and that's how I found my own space in such a crowded house.

**I was brought up by strong women:** my mum – who was half Italian, half Irish; my Italian grandmother; and the Scottish ladies who worked in my father's business. Women were very strong presences in both the Scots and Italian cultures, so we had a very rich mix of influences.

**We didn't really mix with other Scottish families,** have friends over for sleep overs or things like that. We were an extremely strong unit; friendships and fun were all self-contained within the family.

**My father, unusually for an Italian man, was determined to educate us.** He sent us all to Edinburgh to get a Catholic, private education. All eight of us went to university, encouraged by him. His big ambition was to get us away from the family business because it was just a stepping-stone for immigrants. His earliest memories were of really struggling to make a living.

**My dad worked from six in the morning right through 'til two am the following day.** It was a very, very hard way of life and we all helped from an early age. I remember standing at the till aged four, before I went to school, and being told to shout if anybody wanted cigarettes.

**My convent school education had a very strong influence over the rest of my life.** We had to queue up at twelve o'clock and say the angelus for twenty minutes, which you didn't want to do at fourteen. But the spiritual experience, music and faith of the Catholic Church were very beautiful and inspiring. As an adult, I try, very hard, to encourage people to do their best. Money is not the thing that drives me; it's more about always striving to be the best at what we do.

**Trying to do the very best we can at what we do is very deeply rooted in us.** We don't always succeed, but it's what we aim for. Doing things honestly is incredibly important to me, and to us, as a family.

**Service to the customer is really ingrained in me,** making sure that the person you're buying or selling to is treated very honestly, but competitively, too. People we buy from will tell you that we're very tough to negotiate with, but once we've secured that relationship, we'll give them a lot of loyalty. My upbringing at school, and my father's example, has bred that in me.

**You can work round the clock in pursuit of those goals,** and I think that's what we've done! As it's a family business, too, it can be all consuming. We talk about it over the dinner table; it's a way of life.

**But we've been really blessed to do it together, as a family.** My older daughter joined the family business about eight years ago. Now she's married and has a baby, Alfonso, who is regularly in the shop, too. Working together has been our life and that's been the joy of it.

**I had to act like one of the boys in my first job after university.** I was a graduate trainee at Littlewoods, one of the first females they had taken on. Apart from having to do twice as well as the men, I had to also be aware of being given favours because I was a woman.

**"You'll end up behind the counter,"** said my dad when I married Philip. He was a wee bit disappointed because he knew that if I married into an Italian family with a business I would end up working as hard as he had.

**But the first thing I did as a young bride was insist I became a company director.** No woman had ever been allowed onto the board at Valvona & Crolla. One maiden aunt had worked her whole life in the business without being given shares. I told my mother-in-law, "If I'm going to have a career within the business, I need to be a director." I put my foot down, and that's what happened.

**How did they welcome me?** I just flirted with the other directors, so I got away with it. The board consisted of my husband, uncle and father-in-law, but I brought outside experience which was an advantage.

**Sometimes men will go head to head over a disagreement, whereas a woman will take a sideways look at it.** We'll find a way round it that's surprising to the men.

**I think that sideways view helped transform Volvone & Crolla.** The turning point for our business was when the supermarkets arrived and we weren't the only ones stocking Italian products anymore. We decided to differentiate ourselves by finding the *best* products from Italy, sourcing direct and local. After that we opened our cafe bar, which became a huge success.

**One of our most challenging moments was when...** House of Fraser approached us to work with them. It was a daunting choice to make but the competitive instinct kicked in: *if we don't do it, someone else will*. Or, in the mind of my early self: *if I don't get in that bigger pram, someone else will!*

**Strangely, the fifteen-year gap between my two daughters has been an advantage to the business.** Because I effectively had one child at a time, it was easier for me to become really involved in work.

**My sense of self is hugely bound up in a love of good food. The boundaries are blurred;** I don't see my job as 'work'. Enjoyment and respect for food is what brings joy to our lives and it's what we share with customers and suppliers.

**The only thing I complain about is** not having enough sunshine in Scotland.

**People's shopping habits say such a lot about how our culture is changing.** Before the war, the market for Italian food was only Italian immigrants. After the war, soldiers and prisoners of war coming back from Italy became customers, too. Now the vast, vast majority of our customers aren't Italian.

**Since women have gone out to work, supermarket has come to dominate and dictate our eating habits.** That's been a huge change. When I first married, I didn't go back to work for three or four years, so I had time to go out every day and buy my fruit and my meat and make our meals.

**I wonder if having less time to prepare food from scratch, and having to pay for childcare, costs more in the long run.** But today many families rely on two incomes.

**Education, being self-sufficient and stretching your mind are rights that everybody should have.** But I hope that in the future there will be a better balance of life for families. Perhaps both parents will work shorter contracts so childcare will be shared.

**Older men are still prejudiced against women when talking about money and accounts.** As a woman, you need to know exactly what you're talking about and be extra alert to be taken seriously.

**I admire young men these days** – my son in law is just as comfortable with looking after the baby and preparing the meals. Perhaps a change is coming...