



# FRUITS OF LABOUR PRESERVED

It took the 2011 Brisbane floods for Zoe Boccabella to unpick the rich migrant story of her Italian family, writes **Michael Bruce**

**A**s the Brisbane River bore down on the city in the flood of 2011, Zoe Boccabella and husband Roger scurried to save a jumble of belongings from a house in New Farm.

The home had once belonged to Zoe's late grandparents, Annibale (Joe) and Francesca Boccabella, and still housed many of the couple's furniture and possessions.

As the water lapped at the garage doors, and Zoe surveyed the many things that would have to be sacrificed, she spotted a broken old sign, making out the "A" and "R" that once made up "MILK BAR".

So begins Zoe's memoir, *Joe's Fruit Shop and Milk Bar*, the follow-up to her 2011 debut, *Mezza Italiana*, which charts her cross-cultural journey as the granddaughter of Italian migrants, going from an uneasy, self-conscious teenager to a young woman ultimately embracing the beauty and richness of her heritage.

Spying that sign in the corner of the garage sparked the realisation in Zoe that she'd spent much time looking to Italy to unlock her cultural heritage, but much of it resided right

here in Queensland. In *Joe's Fruit Shop and Milk Bar* she pursues this idea by chronicling the inspirational migrant story of her family, through the prism of paternal grandparents,

Annibale and Francesca.

She leads the reader back to the start in the poor family homes of Abruzzo, Italy, to arrival in Australia in 1939, through the farms and cane fields of Queensland, internment camps of World War II and, in 1946, to a small shop on the corner of Ann and Wharf streets in central Brisbane.

Zoe says *Joe's Fruit Shop* began marinating in her mind well before she wrote *Mezza Italiana*, as a teenager in fact, but it crystallised only after her first trip to her grandparents' home town of Fossa, in Abruzzo, in 1986, aged 23.

"Ever since I was a teenager, I thought I would write this book," she explains. "But it evolved a lot over the 25 years, as I'd written different versions of it even before I wrote *Mezza Italiana*."

She, in fact, began writing it as a novel, switched to a memoir and back again, but finally plumbed for a memoir after a seemingly innocuous chat with Annibale about her book.

Zoe, 42, had told him of a character

in the book, a rich aunt who, instead of leaving part of her fortune rightfully to Annibale, had instead bequeathed it all to the Catholic Church.

"He just stared at me and said: 'how did you know about that? That actually happened'. I then realised there was a powerful, true story to be

told," Zoe says.

To be truly authentic to her grandparents' story and preserve the family history in genuine form, she decided it must be written as non-fiction.

On her return from Italy in her 20s, Zoe began interviewing her grandparents in earnest, no longer relying only on the amusing anecdotes and yarns that were casually rolled out at family gatherings, but drilling down into the real, sometimes trying, migrant experiences.

Her grandfather's incarceration in an internment camp near Milmerran, for example, had never been recounted in significant detail, she says.

"I'd heard a little about internment camps during my education, but only as an aside. But I had no idea it had touched my own family, not only my grandfather, but my great-grandfather (Vitale) as well. That was definitely a big revelation."

In this post-modern age of globalism and technology, Zoe believes Australia's migrant stories continue to provide a rich seam of fascination and inspiration.

"I think it's about the strength of people, overcoming challenges and adversity, embarking on a completely fresh start with little money and that triumph.

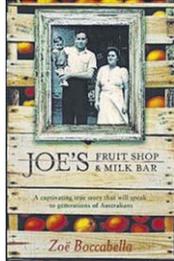
"It's about migrants prevailing with sheer hard work and the resilience in getting through difficult, challenging times and coming through



the other side.

“Basically they are great stories about the human spirit and creating new lives for themselves.”

Zoe, who is now writing books full-time, is researching for another instalment of her family’s migrant story, this time the German migrant experience from her mother’s side of the family.



**JOE'S FRUIT  
SHOP AND  
MILK BAR**

**ABC Books,  
RRP \$30**



**GRIT: Annibale and Francesca Boccabella with sons Remo and Lorenzo at their fruit shop in Ann St.**