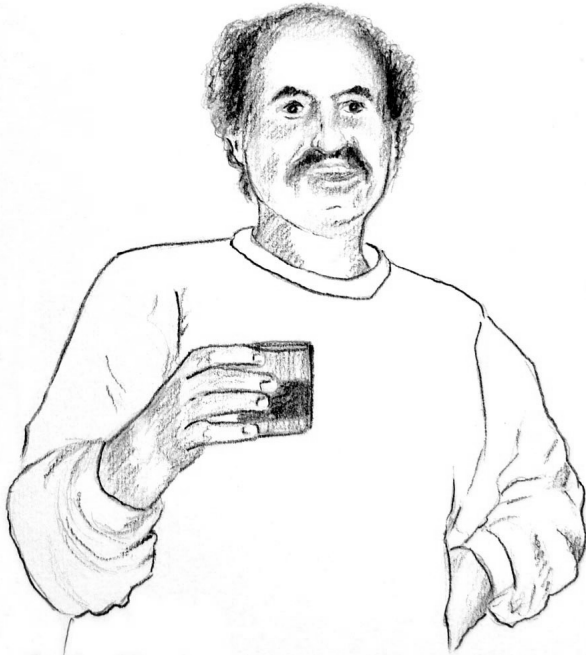


## Melchiorre - Shepherd or Wise man?

How does one describe Melchiorre, this sensitive soul named after one of the three Wise Men? I can see him following a bright star towards Bethlehem, but it would be in the company of the lowly shepherds with their flocks rather than the lordly kings seated high on their camels. Melchiorre is a shepherd. Or was one until not too long ago. And if Melchiorre were one of the gift-bearing Magi, his offering surely would have been food. Today, Melchiorre is a chef.



The oldest of eight children born to a Sardinian shepherd, Melchiorre followed in his father's footsteps - footsteps that led him to the green pastures of Umbria over forty years ago. He was thirteen years old when his father immigrated to the mainland from Sardinia, bringing his flock of 200 sheep over on the ferryboat. In addition to his responsibilities at home, helping out in the kitchen and with his younger siblings, Melchiorre attended school in town, a great distance from their mountain home. He and his siblings would stop at the home of friends on the outskirts of the city to change into their "good" shoes for school.

The rest of his time was spent accompanying his father and learning the ways of a shepherd's life, a path he chose to follow as a young adult.

Melchiorre speaks with quiet passion of his love for all animals, but especially for their sheep, 400 in all, individually named and called with affection when it came time for milking. He learned first-hand to respect the wiles of Mother Nature, her moods and her fury - the biting cold, the unexpected tempests, the unrelenting heat of August, the dreaded droughts. He learned to fear the wolf and worry obsessively about protecting his sheep, plotting ways to ensnare the hungry beast. He learned to identify the plants and herbs that grew in the wild and how to use them to flavor the simple meals that were prepared on a wood-burning stove.

Melchiorre learned to fill the lonely hours with song, and poetry, and flights of fantasy, all of which colored the tales that he tucked away in the satchel of his memory. He tells them with fervor now, decades later - stories of Amorosa the mule-headed cow who begrudgingly gave her milk for seventeen years before dying outside the barn because she refused to come in. Melchiorre swears the other cows mourned her death for years. Then there was Lalla, the sheep dog who hunted truffles as a second "career" and the plant that

cried real tears. He learned to move with the seasons putting the needs of his sheep before his own. He was fettered to his flock, but he was free.

Melchiorre remains a free spirit. He now feeds flocks of satisfied diners at his or their tables. Traveling with his equipment in the back of his four-wheel drive, he and his American partner travel to cooking jobs that take them from villa, to castle, to rustic farmhouse. He often stops along the way to pick wild fennel, or mountain asparagus, or zucchini flowers from a friend's vegetable garden, to improvise, create, and present hearty peasant-inspired meals fit for modern-day Magi. He can still make his own ricotta, or formaggio cremosa, or order a lamb from a friend who still pastures in the nearby hills. His culinary inspiration comes from the verdant pastures of his past, both real and imaginary and the results never fail to both please and satisfy. Short of stature, Melchiorre is energetic, his eyes bright as he kneads the dough for his homemade ravioli and he absolutely dances with pleasure as he sets down a platter of grilled lamb in front of guests. He sings, he recites, he plays the accordion, he dances as if possessed, he charms... Melchiorre possesses many rare gifts, wrapped in shepherd's cloth, simple and pure yet as rich as any royal treasure. Melchiorre – shepherd or wise man? Perhaps both.

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