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Maria Guarnaschelli, Legendary Editor of Cookbooks, Nonfiction, and Literature

--Obituary--

New York, February 8, 2021—Maria Guarnaschelli, the editor behind the most highly acclaimed and successful cookbooks of our time, including the monumental 1997 revision of *The Joy of Cooking* and the new classic *The Food Lab*, and mentor to a generation of writers and editors who have transformed the way Americans read about and understand food, died late on Saturday, February 6, 2021 at Northwell Health Stern Family Center for Rehabilitation in Manhasset, New York. The cause of death was complications of heart disease, according to her daughter, chef and Food Network television personality Alex Guarnaschelli.

During her four-decade book publishing career, Maria Guarnaschelli introduced and edited books by culinary visionaries including J. Kenji Lopez-Alt, Judy Rodgers, Rick Bayless, Maricel Presilla, Jim Lahey, Stella Parks, Dave Arnold, and Michael Ruhlman and Brian Polcyn, among many others. She also acquired and edited highly influential works of science, behavioral science, history, and fiction by authors including David Quammen, Steven Pinker, Anne Enright, Deborah Tannen, Russell Shorto, John T. Cacioppo, and John Mack Faragher. Her authors won dozens of the nation's most prominent book awards, including, in the years since 2000 alone, thirteen James Beard Foundation Awards, at least thirteen International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP) Awards, and more than thirty additional awards.

Ms. Guarnaschelli spent the most recent two decades of her career as a vice-president and senior editor at W. W. Norton & Company, the independent book publishing company, which she joined in August 2000 and where she worked until her retirement in 2017. Upon her arrival, Norton's

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then-Chairman and President, W. Drake McFeely, noted, “Maria Guarnaschelli has one of the most creative minds in trade publishing. Not only does she instantly establish Norton in the cookbooks field, but she will also contribute strongly to our general books program.” She went on to acquire and edit more than 100 books during her years at Norton. Current Chairman and President Julia Reidhead reflected in a memo to staff today on the ways that Maria’s colleagues described her: “brilliant; exuberant; indomitable; a stunning reader; laser-like in spotting quality or falsity; Shakespearean in her comic sense; irreverent; charming; and—repeatedly—beloved.”

Shortly after Ms. Guarnaschelli’s arrival at the firm, she acquired the landmark work *The Zuni Café Cookbook: A Compendium of Recipes & Cooking Lessons from San Francisco’s Beloved Restaurant*, by Judy Rodgers (2002). The book went on to win two James Beard Foundation awards, including Cookbook of the Year, and the IACP Julia Child Award for First Cookbook. It was described by Dwight Garner in *The New York Times* as “This year’s best cookbook—the one people are still likely to be talking about, and cooking from, 20 years down the line....” Seventeen years after that prediction, the book was selected as one of “The Best Cookbooks of the Century So Far” by Helen Rosner in *The New Yorker*. Also in 2002, Ms. Guarnaschelli brought out the pioneering book *What Einstein Told His Cook: Kitchen Science Explained* by chemist Robert L. Wolke, introducing readers to the genre of food science, a field that has since exploded in the public consciousness and on university campuses.

These books were followed in 2004 by Molly Stevens’s *All About Braising*, which received the 2005 James Beard and IACP Awards for Best Single Subject Cookbook and was named a Top 10 Cookbook of 2004 by *Food & Wine*, among many other honors; in 2006 by *The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook: Stories and Recipes by Southerners and Would-Be Southerners* by Matt Lee and Ted Lee, which won two James Beard Foundation Awards, as Cookbook of the Year and Food of the Americas cookbook, and two IACP Cookbook Awards: Best American Cookbook and the Julia Child Award for First Cookbook.

Ms. Guarnaschelli was eager to introduce readers to international flavors, techniques, and methods, and cultivated her readers’ global palate with books like *Gran Cocina Latina* (2012) by Maricel Presilla (a James Beard Foundation Cookbook of the Year); *Cradle of Flavor: Home Cooking from the Spice Islands of Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia* (2006) by James Oseland (James Beard winner in Asian Cooking); *Mediterranean Fresh: A Compendium of One-Plate Salad Meals and Mix-and-Match Dressings* (2008) by Joyce Goldstein; and several definitive, critically-

acclaimed works by Chinese cooking expert Fuchsia Dunlop, including *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China* (2008) and *Every Grain of Rice* (2014), winners of James Beard and IACP Awards, respectively. Also notable were multiple-award-winning books by Chicago chef and television host Rick Bayless, including *Mexican Everyday* (2005), *Fiesta at Rick's* (2010) *Frontera: Margaritas, Guacamoles, and Snacks* (2012) and other titles that offered a fresh and joyous approach to Mexican cuisine for family meals and entertaining.

Not infrequently, the books that Ms. Guarnaschelli edited changed the culture around them and paved the way for new enthusiasms and currents. A notable example of a game-changing book was the surprise best seller *Charcuterie: The Craft of Salting, Smoking, and Curing* by Michael Ruhlman and Brian Polcyn, which not only found its audience but also unlocked a new passion for charcuterie among tens of thousands of readers. Ms. Guarnaschelli's work with Jim Lahey on *My Bread: The Revolutionary No-Work, No-Knead Method* (2009) made bakery-quality bread easier to achieve at home than ever before. And "mad scientist" Dave Arnold's *Liquid Intelligence: The Art and Science of the Perfect Cocktail* (2014) radically altered American understanding of the art of the cocktail. More recently, the overwhelming success of *The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science* by J. Kenji Lopez-Alt has revolutionized the way hundreds of thousands of home cooks approach the kitchen. Winner of the James Beard Award in General Cooking and the IACP winner in the American category, hailed as "*The Joy of Cooking* for the modern cook" (Cassidy Olsen, *USA Today*), this book marked the culmination of Ms. Guarnaschelli's quest to present books whose authors combine art and science and bring an informed, intelligent sensibility to the practice of cooking. For Ms. Guarnaschelli, even dessert could be as smart as it was sweet, with books like Stella Parks's *Bravetart: Iconic American Desserts*, winner of the James Beard Foundation Award for Baking and Desserts.

Cookbook authors who worked with Ms. Guarnaschelli found her demanding and exacting, but also passionately engaged with their work. In the Acknowledgements for *The Zuni Café Cookbook*, Judy Rodgers wrote that Ms. Guarnaschelli "imagined, and championed, an ambitious book I'd never have had the vision to compose on my own." Fuchsia Dunlop said, "From the moment she took on my first book, taking a chance on a new writer, she was unflinching in her support, encouragement and sound advice," and J. Kenji Lopez-Alt offered thanks in his *Food Lab* Acknowledgments to "Maria Guarnaschelli, who, despite her fearsome reputation, turned out to be my biggest supporter. I trembled as I turned in my original 800 page manuscript

for what was supposed to be a 300-page product. She turned around and said 'I like it. Can you write me 600 more?' (Are you kidding? I had to work to get it down to 800 in the first place!) I've been with her for five years and three assistants now, and she has never once said 'no' to me, even when she probably should have."

Beyond the realm of food, Ms. Guarnaschelli's wide-ranging and eclectic tastes led her to edit books by scientists and behavioral scientists (Evalyn Gates's *Einstein's Telescope*, John Cacioppo's landmark work *Loneliness*, Stephen Grosz's *The Examined Life*, and Dacher Keltner's *Born to Be Good*); historians (Johnny Mack Faragher's *A Great and Noble Scheme*, Stephen V. Ash's *Firebrand of Liberty*, and Judith Flanders's *Inside the Victorian Home* and *A Circle of Sisters*); historians of science (Robert P. Crease's *The Great Equations*, *The Quantum Moment*, and other books); classicists (Edith Hall, *Introducing the Ancient Greeks* and *Women in Greek Myth*), and linguists and grammarians (Andrew Dalby's *Rediscovering Homer*, Dan Jurafsky's *The Language of Food*, Constance Hale's *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch*, and Janis Bell's *Clean, Well-Lighted Sentences*). Notably, she edited several best-selling books by science journalist David Quammen that continue to speak directly to our most pressing issues of disease and public health: *Spillover* (2012), *Ebola* (2014), and *The Chimp and the River* (2015). She was also an enthusiastic editor of fiction, serving as American editor to Booker Prize-winning Irish novelist Anne Enright (*The Forgotten Waltz*, *Making Babies*, and *The Green Road*) and introducing readers to Anne Cherian (*A Good Indian Wife*), Jacinda Townsend (*Saint Monkey*) and Zimbabwean author Novuyo Rosa Tshuma (*House of Stone*).

Prior to joining Norton, Ms. Guarnaschelli worked in publishing for more than two decades, most recently as vice-president and senior editor at Scribner Books. While at Scribner, which she joined in 1994, Ms. Guarnaschelli conceived the revisions for and oversaw the complete updating of *The Joy of Cooking*, the best-selling cookbook of all time. The new edition, titled *The All-New All-Purpose Joy of Cooking*, was the first revision of the cookbook to be done in 23 years and quickly became the number one bestseller on *The New York Times* How-To bestseller list, a position it held for eight weeks. Also at Scribner, Ms. Guarnaschelli acquired and edited best-selling cookbooks including *The Italian Country Table* by Lynne Rossetto Kasper, named *Publishers Weekly's* Best Cookbook of 1999, and *Rick Bayless's Mexican Kitchen*, winner of the IACP Cookbook of the Year Award in 1997. Ms. Guarnaschelli also edited the overwhelmingly successful *Home Comforts* by Cheryl Mendelson, the first book on housekeeping published in more than a century, which received rave reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Wall*

Street Journal, *Newsweek*, and *People*. In the realm of literary nonfiction, Ms. Guarnaschelli edited *The Song of the Dodo* by David Quammen, which won the John Burroughs Medal for Natural History Writing and the New York Public Library/Helen Bernstein Book Award for Excellence in Journalism, and in fiction, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, the critically acclaimed novel by Robert Hellenga.

Prior to Scribner, Ms. Guarnaschelli had worked at other houses including William Morrow, which she joined in 1977 and where she remained for seventeen years, working her way up through the ranks to senior editor. At Morrow, her nonfiction acquisitions included *The Language Instinct*, the first trade work by cognitive neuroscientist Steven Pinker, and *You Just Don't Understand*, the landmark book by Deborah Tannen, which was on bestseller lists for three years. Fiction included *Lost in the City*, stories by Edward P. Jones, which received the PEN/Hemingway Award and was shortlisted for a National Book Award. Her cookbooks there included *The Cake Bible* by Rose Levy Beranbaum, winner of the IACP/Seagram Book of the Year Award in 1988 and arguably the best-loved cake book of all time, and *The Splendid Table* by Lynne Rossetto Kasper, which was named Book of the Year in 1992 by both the IACP and the James Beard Foundation, an unprecedented double win. Her very first cookbook acquisition was *Classic Indian Cooking* by Julie Sahni, in 1979.

Ms. Guarnaschelli was a well-known personality in the publishing and food industries and was featured in publications including *The New York Times*, *Food and Wine*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. She served as a consulting editor for *Saveur* for decades. She appeared more than once on television programs including the Food Network's "All-Star Family Cook-off" with her daughter Alex, executive chef of Butter restaurant and an Iron Chef. Alex Guarnaschelli recalls growing up with her mother, noting on her website: "I honestly feel as if I learned to eat according to whatever cookbook my mother was working on at the time: one year was devoted to Indian as she cooked her way through the manuscript of *Classic Indian Cooking* by Julie Sahni; another year was devoted to Italian with *The Splendid Table* by Lynne Rossetto Kasper. That year was intense. My father claimed that if he saw another sprinkle of Balsamic vinegar in the kitchen, he might consider moving out!"

Melanie Tortoroli, who spent five years as Ms. Guarnaschelli's assistant editor at Norton, and who returned to the company in 2017 to continue the esteemed cookbook line, notes, "Maria lived to learn. She constantly asked questions of her authors, pushing and prodding and shaping their words into greatness. She never doubted the intelligence of her

readers, lingering on the details that we now take for granted—the history of a dish, the particulars of flavor, the sensory experience of standing over a hot stove. Her contribution to the cookbook landscape cannot be overstated—and her legacy is the remarkable mainstreaming of foodie culture, a genre of writing now with no bounds.”

The former Maria DiBenedetto was born in Brookline, Massachusetts on April 18, 1941, the eldest of four children of George Peter DiBenedetto and Horatia Alice (Peabody) DiBenedetto. She received a graduate degree in Russian Literature at Yale in 1964. While at Yale, she met her future husband, psychotherapist and men’s work specialist Dr. John Stephen Guarnaschelli, and they married in 1965. He died in 2018. She is survived by their daughter, Alexandra, their granddaughter, Ava Clark, a young Instagram food influencer, both of New York; her brothers, George DiBenedetto of Vero Beach, Florida and Stephen DiBenedetto of Austin, Texas, and her sister Lucia DiBenedetto of Portland, Maine.

W. W. Norton & Company is the nation’s largest independent, employee-owned book publishing house. Founded by William Warder Norton and Mary Dows Herter Norton in 1923, the firm now publishes approximately 450 books annually in its combined divisions and continues to adhere to its original motto, “Books that Live,” striving to publish works of enduring distinction in the areas of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, cookbooks, and textbooks.

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