

Career Change in the Pandemic...When Life Hands You Lemons, You Make Limoncello

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One year ago today, I lost my job, along with many of my friends and co-workers. I became one of the Covid unemployed after 26 years with the same company.

We received no severance and we were informed that day that our insurance coverage would run out at the end of the month—so since it was the 31st, we had about 13 hours to enjoy that cozy feeling of security that insurance brings.

Two days into my unemployment, Facebook showed me one of those, ‘hey, remember when your life was awesome?’ pics. It was a photo from 2015 inside the Blue Grotto on the island of Capri.



Ugh, thanks, Facebook.

But it got me thinking.

From fine Italian Parmesan...to free government cheese

Five years before losing my job, I'd been in Italy, living like a Roman senator. Every day on that trip was wine and pasta, rocky sun-drenched beaches, prosecco on terraces, adventures on hillsides overlooking the sea, and perfect pizzas made as the gods and nature intended.

And now, here I was, floundering around making resume updates, filling out unemployment forms, and peeking anxiously at my bank account, all while locked up at home in a pandemic.

I was in a mad flurry of lists and calls and questions and concerns. It was scary to suddenly be uncertain about my future. How do you suddenly start all over in your late 40s?

Warm lemon sunshine

In 2015, my friend Kristin called to invite me to her wedding. She and her fiancé, Andrea, lived down in the boot heel of Italy, in the rugged and rural Puglia region, in a little house surrounded by olive groves. The wedding was only a month away, but my friend Shannon and I decided to live in the moment and go. I felt like a movie star just jetting off to Italy on a whim.

We flew into Rome and then down to Naples where we stayed for a few days. Before traveling south for the wedding, Shannon and I spent one gloriously sun-drenched day cruising around Capri in a small wooden boat driven by a charming older Italian gentleman named Antonio.



He spoke little English. We spoke only a few key Italian phrases, like “excuse me” and “the girl is reading a magazine” and, (a critical one), “the cat drank the water”. This is what happens when you don’t have much time to get very far into your language learning app. But it didn’t matter.

We were swimming through sun-dappled grottoes and chatting with billionaires. Okay, I exaggerate a bit—just one billionaire—but a Getty, I'm pretty sure. We had a cool conversation about Detroit and he loaned me his goggles for a few minutes before his crew sped him back to his enormous yacht.



We spent a blissful afternoon soaking up the Italian sun and stunning vistas of Capri while drinking sweet and potent limoncello Antonio had made and brought along for our tour.

At every stop, he'd pull out a large clear glass bottle (more than one, ultimately), uncork it, refill our cups, and hand out cups to others on boats around us. It was a bright, magical elixir that somehow made you drunk with happiness and, no matter the amount you drank, never got you completely wasted. It was made with grain alcohol so to this day, I don't understand how they didn't have to scrape me out of the hull of that boat to deposit me on shore at the end of the day...just one of the many wonders of Italy.

Set adrift in 2020

When I saw that notice from Facebook, I was parked in front of a laptop, un-showered, guzzling coffee, feeling overwhelmed, and struggling to get everything done that I needed to get done. I marveled at the contrast of the much less glamorous position in which I now found myself.

The metaphorical boat I'd been on in 2020 was a salty old barge. That rusty vessel was crusted with barnacles and had been taking on water for years. No matter what maneuvers the crew suggested to keep it on course, the captain of that ship had his own ideas so it creaked and moaned and threatened to capsize with every large wave.

It was the reminder I needed in that moment. Being thrown overboard wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it was probably exactly what I needed. I felt adrift and a little ill at ease, but I became hopeful and excited about the future. Instead of "losing my job", I decided to view it as the start of a new trip, filled with new possibilities.

My new lemon-fueled journey

Now I find myself in my own tiny boat. I started up a freelance copywriting and content creation business called Thought Bubble Content. I'm still in the early stages of this voyage, but so far, the trip has been exhilarating and I've got the wind in my sails.

I'm happy to chart my own course and not just grab hold of any old beat-up bucket that floats my way. I'm planning this new excursion in life to have more fireworks and adventures—and hopefully less bird poop and bilge water.

Life had handed me a big pile of lemons one year ago...but no worries...I'm making cocktails!

Please check out my website at www.thoughtbubblecontent.com if you'd like to learn more about what I'm up to now.

ANTONIO'S LIMONCELLO

If you try this recipe that I got from Antonio for his family's limoncello, you will find that the longer you let the lemons steep in the alcohol, the brighter and more intense the flavor will become.

I'm in the US where we don't use metric measurements, but this is exactly the recipe Antonio gave me and it worked out beautifully.

For the limoncello, you will need:

- **About 7 to 10 large organic lemons** with nice peels, well washed
- **1 liter of grain alcohol.** I used Everclear. You can use vodka if you can't buy grain alcohol in your state. I've tried it both ways and I preferred the grain alcohol. It's **very strong**, but it seems to absorb the lemon more purely. I know nothing about cooking or the science of alcohol but, to me, the vodka tasted like lemon vodka...whereas the grain alcohol seemed more like summery lemon sunshine that will mess you up. Just my 2 cents.
- **1 liter of water**
- **500 grams of white sugar.** Use plain old white sugar so it keeps the beautiful yellow color that comes from steeping the peels.
- If you want to be cute about it, buy yourself some clear bottles with stoppers. Otherwise, just have a plan for what you will store your finished product in—you want glass with a lid, top, or cork. Old wine bottles would work perfectly.

~ Peel your lemons as thin as you can so you get just the thinnest outer layer of yellow peel—no white pith—that will make it bitter. (Limoncello is made with only the peel—not the actual lemon. I love that it uses the garbage to make something so powerfully intoxicating and still

delicately beautiful. Save the peeled lemons for another recipe. If nothing else, just juice them and store the juice to add to your drinking water—you'll drink more water!)

~ Place the peels into a large clear glass container that has a good lid that can be sealed tightly.

~ Pour the grain alcohol over the peels and make sure all the peels are submerged.

~ Store this away for at least 7 to 10 days in a cool dark closet or cupboard. I let it sit for a couple of months and it was great.

~ Check your peels about once a week or so and just swish them around and make sure they are submerged. The liquid should start to turn bright yellow eventually. Whenever you have a bright yellow, you are good to go, but keep them steeping as long as you want.

~ Make a simple syrup with the water and sugar. Bring the water to a boil, pour in the sugar, and stir until it is dissolved. Then remove it from the heat and let it cool. When it is cooled off, store it in the refrigerator until your alcohol is ready. This can be stored for about a week so make it when you're at the end of the process and just about ready to combine with the alcohol. Once it's combined with the alcohol, it's good for a really long time—probably years.

~ Strain your lemon peels out of your alcohol through a sieve into a pitcher and discard the peels. Strain the alcohol again, into another pitcher through a sieve with a coffee filter or some cheesecloth. This can be a bit of a long process. It should be clear yellow so if it looks cloudy, consider giving it another round of straining.

~ Mix your strained alcohol with your simple syrup. You might not want to add all the simple syrup at once if you are averse to sweet drinks. Test it to make sure it is to your liking, then store it in the freezer. It will last a really long time. I've never tested the limits.

~ Limoncello is an apéritif or a digestif, meant to be sipped before or after a meal, but you can play around with it and make cocktails. If you come up with any fun cocktail ideas, please let me know in the comments!

Now, next time life hands you some sour garbage, turn it into lemon happiness! Enjoy!