

The Decameron, Isabella, and Basil

The Decameron is an early Renaissance (1350-53) collection of 100 tales. During this period of time the plague destroyed large numbers of people throughout Europe. In Florence seven ladies Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, Lauretta, Neifile, and Elissa and three gentlemen--Panfilo, Filostrato, and Dioneo decided to leave the city and go to a country estate where they tell stories, dance, listen to music, and probably dine well. A person tells a story each day for ten days. Decameron means 10 days in Greek. These stories are retold by Giovanni Boccaccio who lived from 1313 to 1375.



This story reminds me of a trip my ex husband and I took many years ago on one of the great Lakes freighters owned by Cleveland Cliffs. There were 8 of us "passengers" on board, leaving from Ashtabula, OH and going to Manitowoc, WI where we would tour the Cleveland Cliff mine in the middle of the night, and they would load iron ore on the boat. We had fabulous meals for four days – smoked whitefish and I really don't remember what else. After dinner we would play bridge, or other card games, and charades. I am sure the ten people mentioned above whiled away their time in like manor with happy memories of getting away from the plague. On my trip we got away from the big city and looked at endless miles of the Great Lakes, not long after the Edmund Fitzgerald had gone down.

In 1818 the poet John Keats (1795-1821) wrote Isabella, or The Pot of Basil, a story from Boccaccio's Decameron IV.5. "Know then, discreet my ladies, that some there are, who, reading these little stories, have alleged that I am too fond of you, and that 'tis not a seemly thing that I should take so much pleasure in ministering to your gratification and solace; and some have found more fault with me for praising you as I do."

In Keats narrative poem he describes the love a well-to-do young maiden has for one of her brother's employees. When her family finds out, the young man is killed. She exhumes the body and buries his head in a pot of basil. Basil is mentioned in stanza 53 of the poem.

*"And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new morn she saw not: but in peace
Hung over her sweet basil evermore,
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core."*

Summer has now wound down, fall is upon us. But my basil is still growing, and each day I enjoy the tomatoes with basil, and so many other dishes. Think chicken, or even a dessert with basil such as fresh blueberries and bananas. I even found a cantaloupe and basil martini online! Enjoy, because soon you'll have to grow it inside in pots! Ah, the smell of fresh basil! The Greeks, the Italians, the Vietnamese, so many wonderful aromas abound in their cooking, all using basil. And don't forget all the varieties of basil from bright greens to deep purples, each with its own fragrance.

