



Episode 13: Ugly Club
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Phoebe Judge: It's not Piobbico. Well, how do you pronounce this town's name? Not Piobbico.

Benedetta Aluigi: No. It's Piobbico.

Phoebe Judge: Piobbico.

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah. More or less.

Phoebe Judge: I won't have to say it again, I hope. Tell me about Piobbico. What is this town like?

Benedetta Aluigi: Piobbico is a magic town. Everyone in Piobbico is feeling like he's in the place he has to be.

Phoebe Judge: Piobbico is a medieval Italian town tucked between two mountains and surrounded by waterfalls and caves. It's a very small town. 2,000 people. This is Benedetta Aluigi. She was born and raised here.

Benedetta Aluigi: We really care about our town.

Phoebe Judge: Does everyone know each other?

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah. We are 2,000 people and we know each other very well. We really care about each other's life and we try to stay together. It's something that in Piobbico, we really have this feeling about others.

Phoebe Judge: Even if you don't live in Piobbico there's so much to like about it right away. They have a sort of homemade-looking Piobbico sign perched up in the mountains, their version of the Hollywood sign. And there's the food. They have two specialties. One is polenta alla carbonara. The polenta is cooked in a copper pot over a wood fire and stirred by hand with a big wooden stick. And the other is homemade pasta with fresh truffles.

Phoebe Judge: You're the truffle man?

Alessandro: Yes.

Phoebe Judge: Hi.

Alessandro: Hi. How are you?

Phoebe Judge: Black and white truffles. Two of the hardest to find and most expensive things to eat anywhere in the world are naturally abundant here.

Phoebe Judge: What's your name?

Alessandro: My name is Alessandro.

Phoebe Judge: How long have you been looking for truffles?

Alessandro: 25 years ago.

Phoebe Judge: You started looking around this town.

Alessandro: Around this town. Yes. Start my-

Phoebe Judge: Truffles grow completely underground and Alessandro uses dogs to help him figure out where they are. He digs them up and ships them all over the world. He says when he started out every household in town could have as many truffles as they wanted. He says they were as common as potatoes but now the rest of the world is interested.

Phoebe Judge: He says truffles are expensive because they grow slowly and they don't grow everywhere. The conditions have to be really specific and perfect. And even then you need a dog and a lot of patience to find them. Piobbico is very proud of their truffles. Not just because they're wonderful, but also because they're ugly, and Piobbico is a place where everyone wants to be ugly.

I'm Phoebe Judge and This is Love.

Phoebe Judge: I've read somewhere that this town is the capitol of ugly.

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah, it is. In this town, in Piobbico because we have the Ugly Club. Club dei Brutti.

Phoebe Judge: When you're driving into town, even before you see a sign for the town, you see a sign that says Club dei Brutti, the Ugly Club, founded in 1879.

Benedetta Aluigi: And at the beginning there were a lot of spinsters in Piobbico. And so, this club started in order to give husbands to the spinsters. It was like an agencia matrimonial, like Tinder.

Phoebe Judge: In 1960, the club shifted its focus to quote "Make citizens aware of the problems of the ugly." And it was led by one man who kept getting reelected as the club's president year after year for 30 years.

Benedetta Aluigi: His name was Telesforo Lacobelli but the nickname was [Lele 00:04:26] and everybody know him. Everybody knows him. He got something in his eyes, in the way he spoke, in the way he could create a very good atmosphere.

Phoebe Judge: Lele called himself an ugly man. He wasn't happy with his nose. Which he said was too small. He often said he didn't have a problem with attractive people, he had a problem with the commodification of beauty and it was Lele who instituted the Ugly Club's motto, "Ugliness is a virtue. Beauty is slavery."

He loved Piobbico and he loved Piobbico's truffles, which he saw as kind of a metaphor. "Truffles are the ugliest growth in the ground," he said, "and yet they're so precious. Even an aphrodisiac. Nature is very honorable. It gives other qualities to those of us who are ugly."

Benedetta Aluigi: That's why in Piobbico people love each other because they learn to see and not to judge people from the outside but to understand the soul of everyone.

Phoebe Judge: The club's headquarters are in the center of town, a tiny room with stone walls in a very old building. There are pictures of Lele and other club members everywhere. They also have a clubhouse which is really like a private bar, a few steps away, where they meet whenever they can to drink homemade wine.

Phoebe Judge: So, where are we now?

Benedetta Aluigi: This is the Cantina dei Miracoli. This is another important headquarter and it's very beautiful. The owner of this place is Luca and his brother, which is also a very important member of the club but now he's not here because he's working. He's also the pharmacist of Piobbico. And this is where we come every time we have a meeting. I mean, a meeting where we have to decide for organize and things like that. Or when we want to drink, have party, and relax.

Phoebe Judge: The club's patron is the mythological Vulcan. When Vulcan was born he was so ugly that his mother threw him over a cliff. He fell down for a day and a night before eventually crashing into the ocean. He survived and grew up to be a talented blacksmith. He got so good he was admitted to Mount Olympus where he married Venus goddess of love.

Phoebe Judge: The Italian writer Umberto Eco has a book called "On Ugliness." He writes, "Beauty is in some ways boring. A beautiful object must always follow certain rules. Ugliness is unpredictable. Beauty is finite. Ugliness is infinite like God."

Phoebe Judge: Lele was president until his death in 2006. The new president is Gianni Aluigi. His nickname is "la Belva" or "the Beast." He's won the last seven consecutive elections.

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:08:10]

Phoebe Judge: Benadetta is his daughter and she helped us translate. When did you first become a member of the Ugly Club?

Benedetta Aluigi: [foreign language 00:08:24].

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:08:26]

Benedetta Aluigi: More or less, he became member when he was 14 years old.

Phoebe Judge: Was your father a member?

Benedetta Aluigi: [foreign language 00:08:38].

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:08:39].

Benedetta Aluigi: Yes. He was.

Phoebe Judge: Are you proud? Are you happy to be working so closely with your daughter in the club?

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:00:08:48]

Benedetta Aluigi: Yes, of course. And also because it is a confirmation that I got the best from him and he said, he's a happy craziness.

Phoebe Judge: Is your mother a member of the club?

Benedetta Aluigi: Of course, my mother is a member of the club as a member. She's a proud member and a proud wife.

Phoebe Judge: Will you tell me what the criteria for being in the Ugly Club is? What is the test?

Benedetta Aluigi: Yes. We have a card where there are different marks. It started with undefined and sufficient, medium, good, great, and extraordinary. And of course we talk about ugliness, not beautiness. So if you are extraordinary, it means that you are extraordinary ugly.

Phoebe Judge: Would you give me the test?

Benedetta Aluigi: Of course, of course. Of course. If you want, we can do it right now.

Phoebe Judge: Yes. And don't hold back. I mean, I would like to, I would like a real critique here. Okay. We need the president to do the ugliness evaluation and at least one counselor. So this is pretty good. Cause I have the president and a counselor here who happens to be the president's daughter.

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah. [foreign language 00:10:09] So we need, yes, we need your name and surname.

Phoebe Judge: So my first name is Phoebe.

Benedetta Aluigi: Okay.

Phoebe Judge: My last name is Judge.

Benedetta Aluigi: Huh?

Phoebe Judge: Judge.

Benedetta Aluigi: Judge. Really?

Phoebe Judge: Really.

Benedetta Aluigi: Okay. And now we have to judge.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:10:34].

Benedetta Aluigi: Phoebe.

Alessandro: Phoebe.

Benedetta Aluigi: Phoebe Judge.

Alessandro: Phoebe Judge. [foreign language 00:10:46].

Benedetta Aluigi: You're a beautiful woman.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:10:52] .

Benedetta Aluigi: It's not possible to give you a higher, so high mark.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:10:59].

Benedetta Aluigi: But you came from far, far away.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:11:06].

Benedetta Aluigi: So the Mark for the president is good.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:11:12].

Phoebe Judge: So I'm kind of in the middle?

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah. More than in the middle.

Phoebe Judge: I'm little more than in the middle. Thank you very much.

I knew they were going to be easy on me to be polite. It's a strange experience to sit still and let strangers use a report card to grade how ugly you are. I shouldn't complain. My evaluation was basically private. Senior producer Nadia Wilson had to stand and be evaluated by a packed room of Ugly Club counselors.

Benedetta Aluigi: This is kind of a big deal. The president with the help of the counselors will judge your ugliness.

Phoebe Judge: They took the job seriously and took their time looking at her and casting their votes out loud. One at a time.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:12:12].

Benedetta Aluigi: And he just said, Nadia Wilson from now on and forever you're a part of this club. Bring this card with the pride and honor forever, forever your life.

Alessandro: [foreign language 00:12:55].

Phoebe Judge: Do you have to be inducted in person? You know, no one can do this online. They have to be here in front of the president.

Benedetta Aluigi: Yes. It cannot happen online. They have to be present. Sometimes it happened that some people sent us letters written by hand and with pictures inside because they really wanted to be part of the club. In that case, they were so strongly willing to do this, that we made an exception and we did it, but not online, not online.

Phoebe Judge: We were eager to talk with as many members of the club as we could. And we learned that it's easy to find people to ask because everyone in the town is a member of the club and they all have nicknames. Here's the clubs, vice president Mateo. His nickname is Gideon. Do you consider yourself ugly?

Francesco: [foreign language 00:14:10].

Speaker 5: Sincerely? Yes. I feel ugly, but ultimately ugliness is objective. Everyone can appreciate something about someone else, but those of us in the club, we feel really ugly.

Francesco: My name is Francesco and [foreign language 00:14:31].

Speaker 5: I guess I have always felt ugly. I never liked myself. I always had something that I didn't like about me. I don't look at myself in the mirror. Instead I tried to focus on the way I relate to others. When you do that, a lot of things can happen in your life.

Phoebe Judge: Francesco's fiance is also a member of the Ugly Club.

Speaker 5: My fiance is my female photocopy, I started sentence and she ends it. It's a natural thing. To me, she's the most beautiful person in the world. But other people might look at us and say they we're both ugly. We really do not care.

Phoebe Judge: We spoke to a younger club member named Frederico he's 20. And he told us, he remembers his grandfather taking him to the club's annual festival for ugly people when he was seven years old. Each year, hundreds of people come together in Piobbico to cast their votes for the Ugly Club president. There's a parade and music and everyone dresses up. Frederico remembers his grandfather explaining to him what the Ugly Club means. And ever since then, he says he's wanted to be a part of it. Everyone was excited for us to meet one man in particular, his name is Daniella and his nickname is the undertaker.

Benedetta Aluigi: Undertaker.

Gianni Aluigi: Under the undertaker.

Phoebe Judge: That's the undertaker.

Gianni Aluigi: The undertaker.

Phoebe Judge: He was wearing a top hat.

Hello? Do you think you're ugly?

Speaker 5: For me in order not to be a part of the Ugly Club, you have to be like, I don't know. As handsome as Brett Beet or George Clooney, otherwise you must be a part of the Ugly Club.

Phoebe Judge: The undertaker told us that he thinks he's actually gotten better looking since he joined the club. This is sort of a theme. We heard it more than once. People in the Ugly Club feel better about themselves after joining. They obviously like being together. It's sort of surprising to see a large group of adults, all different ages and personalities, completely at ease with each other. No one was being standoffish. No one was looking at their phones. Or maybe Ugly Club members feel better about themselves because the club is an explicit daily reminder to be kind to other people. And to yourself.

It's funny that this club exists in Italy.

Benedetta Aluigi: Why do you say it's funny?

Phoebe Judge: Because I think that there's this idea that Italy is all about beauty. You know that every ...The food is beautiful. The scenery is beautiful. The people are beautiful. The fashion is beautiful. There isn't anything about Italy that isn't beautiful.

Benedetta Aluigi: Yeah, actually it's true. But it doesn't mean that this is the only beauty. And we want to make everybody know that even if something is not beautiful and it's not judged as beautiful, it doesn't mean it isn't.

Phoebe Judge: Do you think that you're ugly?

Benedetta Aluigi: I think ... No, I don't think I'm ugly. Being part of the Ugly Club doesn't mean you have to be ugly. You have not to be beautiful outside in the outside, but you are a part of the club when you understand why you don't have to be beautiful. If you understand that you don't have to be beautiful. You have to accept yourself for what you are, how you appear. And you have to work on yourself in order to be a good person inside.

Phoebe Judge: With both her mother and father in the Ugly Club. Benedetta grew up thinking about these things. We heard this from other people too, that when you grew up in Piobbico, this is just how things are. Benedetta says it meant a lot to her when she was a teenager.

Benedetta Aluigi: And I think that for a woman is also harder than for a man. And I think that the aim of the Ugly Club and being part of it, it helps me a lot. It's something that helps children too. Because when you are young, when you're a baby, when you are a child, it's difficult to understand that it's more than what people says about you. It doesn't, it's not what they say that make you, the person you are. And so it helps a lot. And now I really like myself, my personality, my appearance, and no, I don't think I'm ugly.

Phoebe Judge: She's 27 now and works with refugees, mostly women and children from Nigeria, Iraq, and Pakistan. There's a history of ugly clubs around the world. Dating back even earlier than this one and Piobbico. In Liverpool the most honorable and facetious society of ugly faces operated from 1743 to 1754. It was also known as The Ugly Face Club. Their motto was

before all things, an ugly face, only men were allowed to join. If they got married, they were kicked out.

Records were kept of the members' names and brief descriptions of their face. For example, John of Liverpool elected 1751 had quote, "a face altogether, resembling a Badger." Someone else was described as, "having a tongue like an anchovy." Here in the United States, there are records of ugly clubs on college campuses. There was one at the University of North Carolina dating back to 1838. But when you start looking into the history of ugly clubs, you pretty quickly come across so-called ugly laws. Laws that were on the books in various American cities all the way until the 1970s. Chicago's ugly law enacted in 1880 said that any person who was quote diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way, deformed would be fined a dollar each time they were seen in public. There are lots of articles and books written about beauty, but a lot less has been written about ugliness and what there is, points out how often historically the word ugly has been code for disability.

Benedetta Aluigi: We care about this situation a lot. We don't want this to happen. We want that every person who is different from another one, it means that has something to say. We can be all equal only if we are all different.

Phoebe Judge: Piobbico's Ugly Club campaigns against workplace discrimination. When they take care to respond to correspondence from people around the world who hear about the club and write in with their stories.

Benedetta Aluigi: In fact, one of the work that we have to do right now is to take this and catalog all the things because [foreign language 00:22:33] .

Phoebe Judge: What does that letter say?

Benedetta Aluigi: I thank you for the good thoughts and the teaching and maybe one day we will see each other. We will meet. And this is from [foreign language 00:22:55] .

Phoebe Judge: From 1986. And sometimes Benedetta says they still receive letters from people asking for help meeting someone.

Benedetta Aluigi: Not long ago, we received a letter. A widow wrote to, to my father, to the president that he was retiring now and he was feeling a little lonely because his wife passed away. But he was a good person. And he wanted someone to spend the rest of his life with. And so he asked the president to make him meet someone. We were so impressed by this letter because it's not so common. And so we published it without the name of course ... There was also a picture. We published it. And we talk about this case, this person. And I think that he met actually a woman. I don't know if they're together now, but in some way, he got to know someone.

Phoebe Judge: She says, you're welcome to write to them too. They're also on Facebook now. And if you want to go visit Piobbico, go in September. That's when the Ugly Club Festival takes place. The fall is also the best time of the year for truffles. There's a festival for that too. As Benedetta said, every occasion is an occasion to have parties. Eventually Benadette his mother called and asked her and her father to come home. It was her sister's birthday and they needed help to make the polenta. Before we said goodbye, the club sang their Anthem for us.

Benedetta Aluigi: This is something that we have to do. It's just stick together.

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:25:05].

Phoebe Judge: With Club dei Brutti's permission, you've created a special Ugly Club pin just for our listeners. We have a link in the show notes, or you can just pick one up when you go to Club dei Brutti's headquarters in Piobbico.

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:25:46].

Phoebe Judge: This is Love is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Audio mix by Michael Raphael and Rob Byers. Special thanks to Nico DeSanto, Lindy Russell, and Susannah Roberson. Julianne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of This is Love. You can see them at thisislovepodcast.com. We're on Facebook and Twitter, @ThisIsLoveShow. This is Love is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. And we have a whole season of stories from Italy coming your way. Stay tuned. We'll be back in a couple of weeks. I'm Phoebe Judge and This is Love.

Gianni Aluigi: [foreign language 00:26:46].

New speaker: Radiotopia from PRX.

Benedetta Aluigi: Do you like it?