

WINNER GOURMET VOICE WORLD MEDIA AWARDS

food, wine & good living

# Cuisine

ISSUE 115 MARCH 2006

\$8.95 INC. GST. NZ/Aust.

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## SAVOURING SICILY

### TONI MASON visits the doyenne of Sicilian cuisine

Plumes of smoke rise from the just-harvested wheat fields as we wind our way up pitted roads towards the village of Vallelunga, one and a half hours south-east of Palermo. At the end of its long sweltering summer, the interior of Sicily doesn't need burn-off to do scorched earth, but just past the village the dry hills give way to the green vines of Regaleali, the estate of one of Sicily's most important wineries, Tasca d'Almerita. It's early October and the estate's harvest is in full swing.

We haven't come for the wine, though. We're here to have lunch with Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza, a renowned Sicilian cookbook author who runs a cooking school, *The World of Regaleali: Cooking, Culture and Country Life in a Sicilian Vineyard*, on the estate her family has owned since 1830.

Readers of Anna's cookbooks, *The Heart of Sicily* and *The Flavours of*

*Sicily*, and two on Sicilian herbs and fruit, *Herbs and Wild Greens from the Sicilian Countryside* and *The Garden of Endangered Fruit*, will know her passion for seasonal local produce. Nearly everything used in the kitchens comes from the estate – lamb, poultry, eggs, cheese... And in her market-sized garden she grows many varieties of tomato, vegetables, including the wild fennel widely used in Sicilian cuisine, and figs, quinces, bay laurels and citrus, another Sicilian favourite.

The yard outside the Case Vecchie ("old houses" – the first built on the estate), the complex where she has her cookschool kitchen, is humming with tractors bringing grapes to the barn where they will be partially dried before being made into passito, or dessert wine. Inside, Anna is offering slices of pecorino made by the estate's shepherds, accompanied by fig jam spiked with peperoncino (chilli), which Sicilians use to season their

food as we use black pepper. Students on Anna's five-day course visit the shepherds to watch them making pecorino, then ricotta from the whey.

Lunch is prepared by Anna's assistants. Jessie, an American cook, is making the risotto with oyster mushrooms – one of the few things not from the estate. Anna, a lively woman with a relaxed, easy manner (there's nothing intimidating about this aristocrat from a family of counts), keeps an alert eye on activities at the stove, jumping up from time to time to check consistency and taste. "I watch everything that happens in the kitchen," she smiles.

Risotto should be made all'onda, Anna explains, "like a wave", so that it flows when ladled or poured on to a serving platter yet can hold its form – not too soupy, not too dry. This is illustrated perfectly as ours is served.

The whole meal speaks for the virtue of the simplest yet deft preparation of the best-quality ingredients. A plate of red, orange and green tomatoes, drizzled with peppery estate extra virgin olive oil and bursting with flavour, accompanies moist pork fillets, simply panfried and seasoned with anise and dried herbs. A basket of delicious yellowish Sicilian bread made with semolina flour is passed around, and Anna's husband, Vences, a specialist in Sicilian history and entertaining conversationalist, pours the estate's classic white, Regaleali, a blend of local varieties Inzolia, Grecanico and Catarratto.

To finish, Anna has made an intensely flavoured fresh peach granita, a crushed-ice dessert said to have originated from flavourings being added to snow from Mt Etna. Hers is a refined version of what can be bought on the streets all over Sicily. She has added dried grapes steeped in Diamante, a Moscato-dominant dessert wine her father, Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita, created for his wife to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary.

When Anna decided to start a cookschool, she attended a meeting of the IACP (International Association



of Culinary Professionals) in the US. It was a mixed experience. People were interested to discover another branch of Italian food, but it was disappointing, she said, that they knew only about Tuscany and were mostly concerned about whether “they could wear their pearls in Sicily”. She has since become something of an ambassador for Sicilian cuisine, travelling frequently to speak and run courses. And culinary professionals like Jamie Oliver make their way to her cooking school to learn her authentic methods.

Sicilian food bears the legacy of the various cultures that have dominated the island, Arab being a major influence. Anna recounts the story of pasta con le sarde (pasta with sardines), one of Sicily’s national dishes. Legend has it that when the Arabs arrived on the island around the early 800s, the troops were sent out to forage. They returned with sardines, fennel, pine nuts, currants and saffron – neatly describing the philosophy of eating what is at hand.

The dishes offered in Anna’s courses are naturally dependent on the season. Students are especially eager to learn recipes with eggplant, like pasta alla

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Norma, a speciality of Catania (Sicily’s second city), made with fried eggplant, tomato sauce and ricotta salata, a salty version of the cheese. Involtni, or rolls, feature widely in Sicilian cuisine. Anna does involtni di melanzane con capellini (eggplant rolls with angel hair pasta) and involtni of meat or fish, though fish isn’t always available in this landlocked area. Chicken may be baked with orange juice and white wine. Her lessons usually have a theme, like street food, involtni and “vegetables, legumes and salads – of course all straight from the garden”.

Anna has passed her enthusiasm for fresh vegetables and herbs on to her daughter, who grows them in pots in

### RISOTTO WITH ALMONDS

This recipe from *The Garden of Endangered Fruit* called for a small cup of olive oil, which is probably a little much for New Zealand palates. We used  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup but you could use more if you prefer a richer risotto. Likewise, we used just  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of white wine.

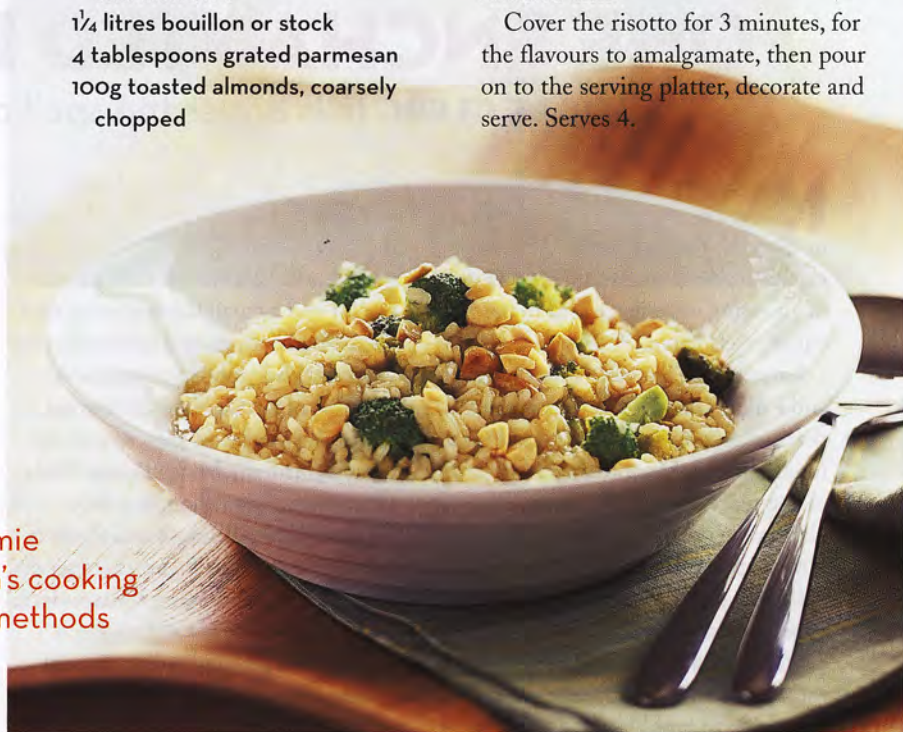
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1 small clove garlic, finely chopped
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1 small cup olive oil
- 350g risotto rice
- 1 small cup white wine
- 300g broccoli, washed, trimmed and blanched
- $\frac{1}{4}$  litres bouillon or stock
- 4 tablespoons grated parmesan
- 100g toasted almonds, coarsely chopped

Sauté onion and garlic in 1 tablespoon of the butter and the olive oil until the onions are transparent.

Add the rice and coat, stirring well. Pour in the wine and evaporate. Add some of the broccoli and start ladling in the bouillon. Continue adding the bouillon and stir almost continuously for around 18 minutes, until the rice is done but still slightly al dente, then add the rest of the broccoli.

Turn off the fire, mix in the rest of the butter, the parmesan and some of the almonds, leaving enough to sprinkle as garnish on top of the finished dish.

Cover the risotto for 3 minutes, for the flavours to amalgamate, then pour on to the serving platter, decorate and serve. Serves 4.



her apartment. “And the whole family travels like a trattoria,” she laughs.

In *Herbs and Wild Greens from the Sicilian Countryside*, Anna cites a Sicilian proverb: “If God had meant me to eat greens, he would have made me a goat.” As they cost nothing they were never offered to guests. “Now everybody loves them,” she says. “And the less you work on them the better. We say, ‘Only just boiled and served with olive oil and lemon juice.’”

A group of opera-lovers from New Zealand couldn’t agree more after attending the cooking classes at

Regaleali for four years in a row. Patricia Hurley, of Patricia’s Opera Tours, met Anna’s sister, Costanza, which led her to Regaleali. “We have learnt so much about the culture of Sicily in Anna’s kitchen and garden. She is truly charming and generous.”

■ A choice of one-, three- or five-day cookschool courses is offered at Regaleali. For further information email: antalan@tin.it. Patricia Hurley, www.operatours.co.nz

Credits: Cibo white pasta plate from Nest. For full details, see Credits Index.