

WINE TRAVEL FOOD

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I am a guest in the Sicilian kitchen of Case Vecchie, one of the farmhouses on the Regaleali estate and the home of Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza. Sclafani Bagni is about ninety kilometers (60 miles) from Palermo. Anna is giving me a detailed description of what she describes as an all-time great Sicilian classic dish: saddle of lamb slow roasted in butter, garlic, and rosemary, sauced with a cognac and cream gravy. I am aghast. I am here to firm up my ideas about the real Mediterranean diet, centered on olive oil, fruit and vegetables, pasta, grains, cheese and tree

nuts. The diet I'm looking for is part of a healthy tradition, a way of life.

Food is culture and Sicily is the key to it all. I ask Anna for an explanation, afraid that I have come to the wrong place. Aren't we in Southern Italy?

Anna quickly reassures me: "I grew up eating more butter-based sauces than olive oil. My palate

was molded by the aristocratic, half-French, half-Sicilian dishes that graced our tables while I was a child. In fact, it wasn't until I married that I even got close to a stove and began to develop my own style and taste. I never went in the kitchen as a child because we had a cook - not just a cook, but a *monsù*, the dialect word for



Left: Anna in the courtyard of Case Vecchie. Top: Anna and our food editor. Above: Sun-dried tomatoes.



monsieur. Since Sicily was a favorite winter resort in the early decades of the century, the Palermo monzù cooked for vacationing European nobility. The monzù became a Sicilian institution - one that brought grand cooks and French influence to the estates of the Sicilian nobility. Giovannino Messina was the monzù who cooked for the Tasca family from 1914 to 1965, when his pupil and heir, Mario Lo Menzo, took over the household role."

Anna reveals that when she started her cooking school full-time, her dress-size went from a ten to a fourteen. She quickly switched to olive oil out of self-defense and the Mediterranean diet became hers with a passion. The other Sicilian cuisine - the baronial dishes prepared by Mario - is still thoroughly enjoyed without guilt on holidays and at family gatherings.

Anna is going to test a medieval recipe that her uncle was able to wheedle out of the thirty-three nuns at the

Monastero delle Capucinelle while paying his respects to a relative embalmed there. Tradition dictated embalming in the monastery for high-ranking women. "The nuns pass on their secrets only to the novitiates and it's difficult to get your hands on convent recipes," she tells me. It seems

these nuns specialize in both cooking and embalming. Dressed in a pink tee-shirt and jeans, Anna came to pick me up at the Sclafani Bagni train station as she does for the food lovers who arrive from around the world to take part in her seminars. Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita, Anna's father, fitted the old farmhouse kitchen with massive gas burners and professional ovens to accommodate a maximum of twenty students in 1989 when Anna inaugurated her cooking courses. An enormous stone oven greets me at the entrance to the

Above: Oranges are used in winter citrus salads. Right: Spring artichokes, seasoned with garlic, oregano, and olive oil, are cooked in a bed of coals.

airy high-ceiling room decorated with family crests. A battery of heavy-bottomed stainless steel pots lines one wall. The other wall is a kaleidoscope of preserves in oil and jams that Anna puts up with her helpers at Case Vecchie. "Each season brings its bounty. As the landscape changes, so does our food," says Anna while chopping up a bunch of finocchietto selvatico, wild fennel. The author of the cookbook *The Heart of Sicily* goes on to explain. "We don't

make a dish from a recipe. We create it from what we have on hand, what is growing on the land at the moment. That way we never cook out of season. In nature we have to wait for the right time to come.” She is talking and tasting the mixture of fave, or fava beans, onions, wild fennel, wine and extra vergine olive oil. “It’s time to add the pasta,” Anna concludes.

When we finally sit down at the large square table to eat, Anna is engrossed in a mouthful of the nuns’ fava bean soup and wants to tell me where the fava beans come from. “You see,” she says, “these are really fresh and tender because they are grown right here on the Regaleali estate. When I’m in town, I go to the market; here in the country, I go outside and pick what’s in the garden. If there’s nothing planted, I’ll pick some wild greens that I boil and dress simply with olive oil and salt.” While we savor the distinctive flavors in the combination of pasta with fava beans and wild fennel, Anna explains that she tries to preserve the individuality of each ingredient. She loves the taste of tomato and so adds just a sprinkling of Parmigiano or pecorino cheese when she makes pasta with tomato sauce, enough to enhance but not overwhelm. She adores the piquant flavor of extra vergine olive oil, so she grills eggplant without oil in a heavy frying pan and then marinates it with a mixture of oil, herbs and garlic. “This is what I try to transmit to my visitors here at Regaleali. We Sicilians share a philosophy of cooking. The sun gives the food here its unique flavor and all the culinary traditions of Sicily’s conquerors have had an impact on our cuisine.”

Anna works elbow to elbow with Graziella Chimera, her assistant, to reproduce food described by the elders that she encounters in her travels. She scours the countryside with her students, delving into territory that is sometimes seldom visited even by other Sicilians. The Madonie mountains, in the Sicilian Apennines, are one of her favorite destinations. We see wild orchids, anemones and peonies on our walk in the woods before lunch at Anna’s favorite trattoria, Orto dei Cappuccini. It’s run by Santo Lipani, a young cook who is also a painter in the tiny town of Polizzi. While we eat wild asparagus and hard-to-find wild mushrooms, Anna recalls, “It was really my mother, Countess Franca, who used to advise me on the phone, giving me tips as I explored the realm of more simple, essential flavors.”



Anna spends more of her time these days in contact with the rural culture of the Regaleali estate and less in the city of Palermo. The family business is a 1,250 acre (500 hectares) model farm, half of which is planted with grapevines. From the cellars at Case Grandi, almost a small village in itself, come 1,500,000 bottles of wine. When Anna’s agronomist-nephew Giuseppe Tasca d’Almerita, took me on a tour of the vineyards, I witnessed just what a model of perfection Regaleali is. We were bouncing over the dirt roads that wound through the Chardonnay grapes, when all of a sudden Giuseppe stopped the car and got out to pick up a plastic mineral water bottle that someone had left behind. This is Anna’s world. She’s not alone, however. Besides great interpreters of the unique French-Sicilian baronial cuisine, Anna has a host of helpers. Maria Leone, the gamekeeper’s wife, is one of her resident allies. Anna

 **Anna Tasca Lanza**
Savoring **Sicily**



Above: Mario the monzù with a Regaleali cooking class. Right: Carmelo Di Martino kneading bread with twice-milled semolina flour.

keeps her busy preserving and conserving as the seasons roll by. Maria's grandmother is the best pasta maker in the area. Then there's Anna's close friend Vincenzo Curzio, director of the farm, who stopped by to give us a round of the goat cheese he had just brought from Isnello in the Madonie. During Anna's courses Aunt Lina Pasqualino, a formidable

75 years old, always makes a guest appearance. She is famous in Palermo for her version of *timballo di capellini*, a baked pasta shell filled with ham and melted cheeses. When it's a question of bread-making, Carmelo Di Martino is the man for the job. He started making bread one day years ago when his wife was away looking after her sick mother. By popular demand he has been doing it ever since. He makes ten two-pound loaves of *farina rimacinata*, twice-milled semolina flour, and bakes them in the stone oven. "It's not worth firing the oven for less," he comments. Anna's sister Costanza doesn't miss a class at the Case Vecchie and her brother Lucio has recently taken their father's place at the winery. By the way, I am invited back for Christmas at Case Grandi to sample the "other" Sicilian cuisine - Mario is going to make pasta with truffles and cream. One day off my Mediterranean diet won't kill me. ■



Books by Anna Tasca Lanza

published by Clarkson Potter/ Publishers - New York

The Heart of Sicily (1993) gives you a charming inside view of a very special Sicily and the food that goes with life on the Regaleali wine estate. Recipes geared to the seasons reveal how Sicilians cook, taking advantage of the incredible bounty of a sun-warmed land.



The Flavors of Sicily: Stories, Traditions, and Recipes for Warm-Weather Food (1996) brings us home again with Anna to savor summer life, traditions and food. A vegetable lovers' delight with 122 recipes designed to be served at room temperature.

