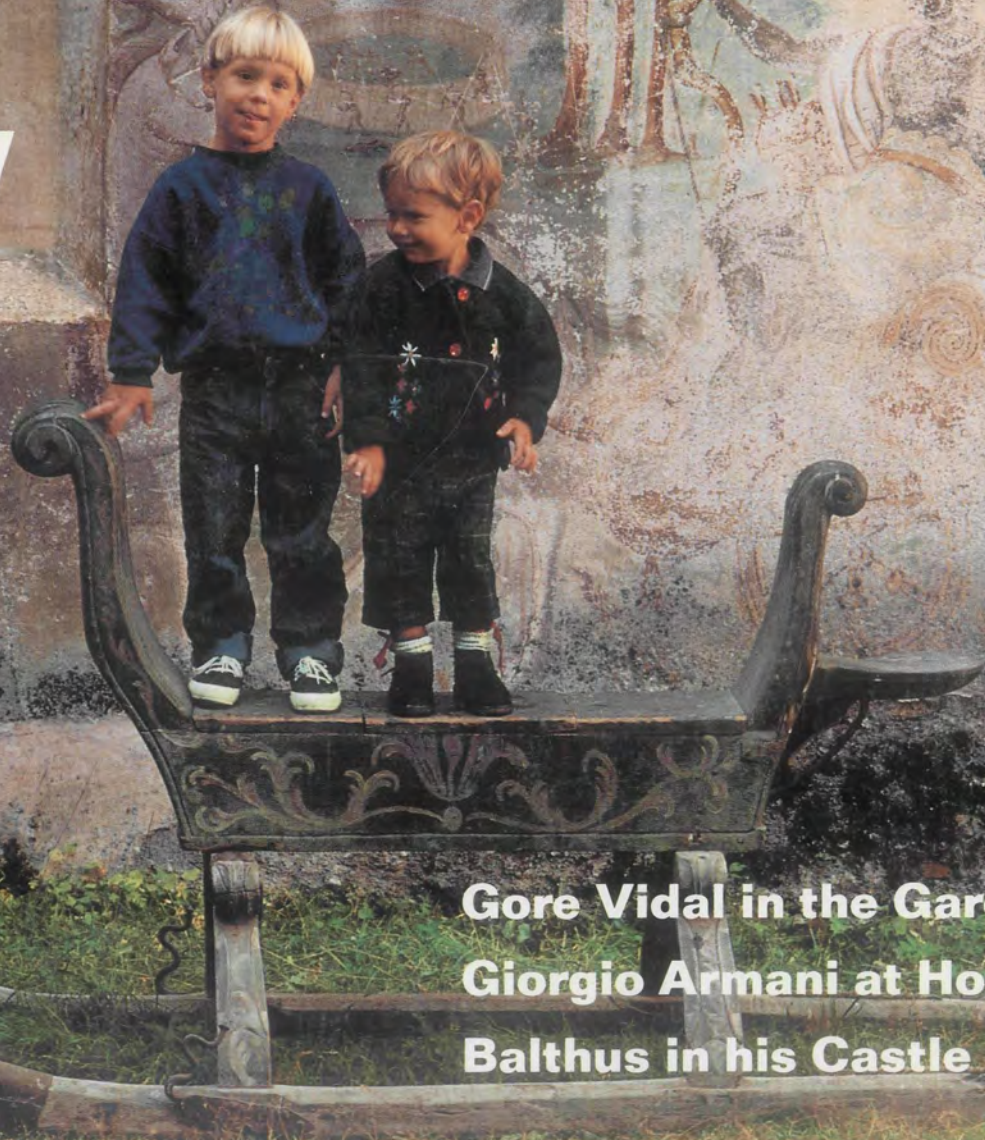


APRIL 1990
\$4.00

HG

HOUSE & GARDEN

Italy
Now



Gore Vidal in the Garden
Giorgio Armani at Home
Balthus in his Castle





The Tasca estate, Regaleali, left, where Mario Lo Menzo reveals the secrets of his noble trade. Far left: The chef tests the bouquet of a tangerine stem.



Costanza Tasca Camporeale, Anna Tasca Lanza, and Rosemarie Tasca in the 1960s.

The Last of the Monzù

Mario Lo Menzo upholds a vanishing tradition of Sicilian family chefs

BY MARY TAYLOR SIMETI

Imagine the desperate poverty of postwar Sicily—it is 1954—and a young lad, fresh from the provinces, being conducted along a palm-lined drive on the outskirts of Palermo toward a luxurious garden of swan-filled pools and bougainvillea vines brilliant against a backdrop of magnolias and tall cedars. Behind the garden rises the severe façade of Villa Tasca, pale brown stone decorated with an elaborate escutcheon of carved marble.

Mario Lo Menzo was eighteen then, a Sicilian version of Dick Whittington in search of fame and fortune. With four

years' experience as a kitchen boy, a remarkable talent with food, and most probably a certain dose of trepidation, he was on his way to enter the service of Giuseppe Tasca, Conte d'Almerita, as helper to the count's chef.

Count Tasca was something of an anomaly among Sicilian aristocrats, for together with his lands and his title he had also inherited a pronounced entrepreneurial bent. His forefathers had already turned Regaleali, a large feudal estate in the Sicilian interior they had acquired in the 1830s, into a model farm for livestock and grain production; he himself was soon to begin bottling and marketing the estate's wines—heretofore produced only for local consumption—with such success that today Regaleali wine is sold internationally.

Young Mario may have been awed by his first meeting with the count, but he was probably downright terrified by his first encounter with the king of the kitchen. Chef Giovanni Messina, who had been serving the Tascas for forty years, was familiarly known as Giovannino, an unlikely nickname for a bad-tempered autocrat who was extremely jealous of his secrets and his prerogatives and very much aware that he too was heir to a glorious title, that of monzù.

The first monzù had come to southern Italy with Napoleon's army as chef to Joaquin Murat. When his boss lost the crown at the Congress of Vienna, Monsieur Robert went home, leaving behind him a taste for French cuisine and the title of monsieur, which in Neapolitan dialect soon became monzù. From the Bourbon court at Naples the fashion for French cooking spread rapidly to aristocratic households throughout the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The early monzù, Frenchmen imported at great expense, were succeeded by Neapolitans and Sicilians who had trained in



Tangerines transformed: panierini al mandarino

the great kitchens of Paris. A well-paid elite, they owed their title less to their training than to their employers—the monzù served only the aristocratic families and never fraternized with the chefs of the bourgeoisie—and to their art. In their hands the ancient tradition of Sicilian baronial cuisine reached new heights of sumptuousness.

It was during the Belle Époque, a period of lavish entertaining, that the monzù Giovannino served his apprenticeship, working his way around the aristocratic kitchens of Palermo and learning each master's specialty, from soups to ices, sauces to pastries. The art of making consommé could be acquired under Giuseppe, chef to Baron Lo Monaco, whereas Enrico, who worked for the duke of Salaparuta, was famous for his ability to transform vegetables for his employer's amusement so that what appeared to be pasta con le vongole turned out to be made with eggplant.

Mario's own apprenticeship lasted nine years. Giovannino, in his eighties by that time, was despotic and loathe to part with any of his secrets. He would tolerate no youthful levity or distraction

in the kitchen and demanded that his assistants concentrate totally on the food at hand: the whole body must be present before the stove, he claimed, with all its senses alert. It was harsh training, especially for a jovial youth like Mario, but it produced an heir worthy of the old monzù. The first meal prepared under Mario's command was served to a frequent guest at the Tasca table, Conte Lanza di Mazzarino, the father-in-law of the eldest Tasca daughter. "Ah!" sighed the guest at the end of dinner, "Giovannino is still Giovannino." No mistake ever gave more satisfaction.

Mario has carried on Giovannino's

The first monzù arrived with Napoleon's army —and left behind a taste for French cuisine

traditions, both in the everyday delights of Sicilian cooking and in the exquisite masterpieces created for weddings and other gala Tasca family occasions: pasticciò di selvaggina, a pâté of pheasant and quail, or medaglioni di pollo, round slices of chicken galantine decorated with pâté, aspic, and truffles and served in wide baskets made of pasta woven with fresh flowers dipped in wax. While these require professional skill, even an amateur can master panierini al mandarino, a delicate citrus gelatin served in baskets of tangerine peel. A very old Sicilian dish, this probably originated as a tornagusto, served, as ices often were, between two very rich courses in order to cleanse the palate. Today it makes a pretty and pleasantly refreshing dessert.

Like his predecessor, Mario has the privilege of working with homegrown ingredients. Most of the vegetables, fruit, meat, and dairy products as well as the olive oil, vinegar, and wine that he uses in his cooking are produced at Regaleali, where the Tasca family spends much of its time. The strong Sicilian flavors hold their own even in the face of exotic imports, like the caviar in Mario's version of pasta al caviale.

Despite the strong hold of tradition, Mario has created his own recipes. Occasionally his innovations are fortuitous—like all artists he is a great believer in using flair to turn error into advantage

—but ordinarily Count Tasca wishes to be advised ahead of time of any changes, and only those that meet with his approval become part of the repertoire. One such invention is castrato al Rosso del Conte, a ragout Mario created to celebrate a fine red Regaleali wine. Although on the Tasca estate this dish is made with the meat of young goats, it is perfectly adaptable to mutton or lamb.

Mario's debt to Regaleali goes beyond his ingredients. In an age when few aristocratic families can still afford to employ chefs of his standing, Regaleali and its winery have allowed him to become one of the last true claimants to the title

of monzù. At the fairs and exhibitions where the Regaleali wines are being promoted, his cooking has acquired an international reputation, and now the lovely old stone buildings of the estate have become the setting in which he can teach others his secrets.

The count's three daughters, who share their father's enterprising spirit as well as his fondness for the old baronial cuisine of Sicily, have recently inaugurated a series of spring and fall cooking courses at Regaleali. While they attend lessons in which Mario demonstrates his skills, small groups of American enthusiasts are guests at the cottages of Anna, Costanza, and Rosemarie Tasca. With the help of yet another generation of Tascas, the glorious traditions of the monzù are gaining a new audience.

PANIERINI AL MANDARINO

- 1 ounce sheet gelatin
- 1 cup warm water
- 2 cups orange juice, freshly squeezed
- 2 cups tangerine juice, freshly squeezed
- ½ cup lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- 2 cups water
- 1½ cups sugar
- 1 dozen tangerines with stems and leaves attached

Soften the sheets of gelatin by soaking them for a few minutes in the water. In a saucepan combine the softened gelatin and its water with the juices, the remaining water, and the sugar (adjust amount of

sugar according to taste and to the acidity of the oranges). Bring to a boil over low heat beating the mixture continually with a whisk so that the gelatin dissolves. When it comes to a boil, remove from heat and, using a slotted spoon, skim off the foam that has formed on the surface.

Place a chair upside down on a table, place a bowl on the underside of the seat, and tie a dish towel to the legs so that it is suspended over the bowl. Slowly pour the gelatin mixture into the towel so that it will filter through the cloth into the bowl. Cover the bowl and place the liquid in the refrigerator overnight to jell.

With a sharp knife cut an opening on either side of the stem of each tangerine leaving the bottom half intact and a 1/2-inch strip going over the top so that the peel forms a round basket with a handle. Carefully extract the pulp through the openings. About an hour before serving, remove the gelatin from the refrigerator, stir it lightly, and spoon it into the hollow peels. Serves 12.

PASTA AL CAVIALE

- 1 1/2 pounds vermicellini
- 3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley
- 2 tablespoons chopped chives
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

- 2 ounce jar red lumpfish caviar
- 2 ounce jar black lumpfish caviar
- Freshly ground black pepper

Cook the pasta in boiling salted water until al dente. Drain, reserving a half cup of the water, and place in a serving bowl.

While pasta is cooking, heat the oil in a skillet over a low flame and sauté the onion until softened but not colored. Remove from the heat and immediately add the parsley, chives, garlic, and half of the red and black caviars, stirring well. Add immediately to the pasta and mix well, with a little reserved cooking water if it is too dry. Add the freshly ground pepper. Garnish with the remaining caviar and serve immediately. Timing is all important because the garlic, herbs, and caviar must cook a little but only in the heat given off by the onion and hot pasta. Serves 6.

CASTRATO AL ROSSO DEL CONTE

- 1 leg of lamb, boned and cut into large pieces
- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 bottle Rosso del Conte Regaleali
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 cup brandy
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 pounds white mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 pound pancetta

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 pounds whole baby onions, peeled
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons flour

Put the lamb together with the onion and bay leaves in the red wine and marinate in the refrigerator overnight. Drain the lamb pieces, reserving the marinade, and dry them with paper towels. Rub them with the olive oil and brown lightly in a frying pan. When the pieces have colored and the juices evaporated, add the brandy. Set fire and let the brandy burn until evaporated.

Place the meat in a heavy saucepan, adding the reserved marinade and salt and pepper to taste. Cover and cook slowly over a low flame for about 1 1/2 hours. The sauce should just cover the meat; add additional wine if necessary.

While the meat is cooking, sauté the mushrooms and pancetta in oil until lightly colored. In a saucepan sauté the onions briefly in the butter. Add sugar and enough water to cover, and simmer uncovered until all the water is absorbed. When the meat is done, add the mushrooms-pancetta mixture and the onions. Simmer for a few minutes. Add the flour, dissolved in a little water, and bring to a boil, cooking over low flame for a few moments until the sauce is slightly thickened. Correct the seasoning if necessary. Serves 8-10. ♣