

Martha's Vineyard • Desert Isle Adventure

ISLANDS

An International Magazine

April 1997

Beach Beach Beach!

WANT CARIBBEAN PERFECTION?
TRY ANGUILLA'S SUN, SAND, & SURF

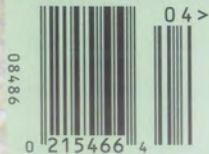
PLUS:

Bombay

Italian Gardens

Dublin Pubs

\$4.95/Canada \$5.95



Noble Tastes

AS I DROVE into the courtyard of Regaleali, the country home of the count of Almerita, his daughter, Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza, was waiting to greet me. Dignified, unpretentious, and a champion of Sicily's vernacular cuisine, she lives in a household that is one of the last strongholds of *monzù* – the aristocratic Sicilian cooking that blends traditional island ingredients with the elaborate style of 18th-century French haute cuisine. The 85-year-old count employs the last private chef who cooks in this manner: Mario Lo Menzo.

A blue sky arched above Regaleali's stuccoed buildings of ocher, pink, and faded blue, and mountains shimmered with heat in the distance as Anna took me on a slow drive around the grounds. As we drove, we discussed food. She is passionate about Sicilian cuisine.

Sicilian main courses typically feature a mix of flavors, such as anchovies, capers, currants, fennel, and fava beans. Tradition-



On the estate of a titled Sicilian family, two chefs preserve traditional cuisine.

al desserts are sweet, refined, and beautiful, like the famous rainbow-striped *cassata*, iced with marzipan and decorated with candied fruits. Anna's own creations include grapes in champagne gelatin, preserved wild mushrooms, and baked swordfish with herbs and capers.

Anna's father, however, refuses to eat the light fare she cooks; he adores the butter and cream so liberally employed in *monzù* cuisine, which Mario Lo Menzo has been cooking for the count twice a day since 1954.

"He and Mario are a real couple," Anna sighed. "For me, my parents' table represents a battleground for healthy eating!"

And then there's her husband: "Sometimes," said Anna, who has a dry sense of humor, "he will tease me, 'Do you realize I have never even tasted a hamburger?' And I say to him, 'If you want to visit a hamburger place, you visit it with a new wife!'" I sensed that the marchesa was someone used to getting her own way.

Anna showed me the garden that sup-

plies cherry tomatoes and bell peppers, olives and almonds, oranges and tangerines that both she and Mario use. Beehives set among sweet rosemary bushes yield honey, and Regaleali's own sheep provide milk that the head shepherd makes into a deep-flavored ricotta cheese.

The two chefs maintain separate kitchens. Anna's is in the old bakery, where windowsills and shelves are lined with colorful jars and bottles of homemade preserves and liqueurs: ruby-grapefruit marmalade, mandarin orange cordial, and green walnut liqueur.

For our lunch, she had prepared a starter of soup, made with fava beans, pasta, and bacon, enlivened with a relish of capers, tomatoes, and *peperoncini* (small peppers). This soup was followed by Mario's immensely rich *braciolettine*, baked roulades of beef stuffed with Gruyère, ham, and parsley, skewered between slices of dense Italian bread. Anna's accompanying salad of fennel and curly lettuce was dressed with a vinegar flavored with *vino cotto* (an aromatic grape-must with jasmine flowers and orange peel). Homegrown lemons scented the *taralli*, light Sicilian cookies, which ended the meal.

MARIO HAD LEFT EARLIER IN THE day for the family's villa in Palermo. So after coffee, Anna and I made the two-hour drive to meet him. When we arrived, he was busy making the count's high-calorie supper, a sumptuous brioche – the same brioche, he recalled proudly, that Britain's Prince Charles ate on a visit to Regaleali.

"He swore to remember that brioche till death," Mario announced grandly.

Dark, burly, and with a ready smile, the chef was very likeable – and obviously very skillful. I watched as he heaped flour onto a marble slab, added yeast and eggs, quickly unwrapped and kneaded several packages of butter, and mixed all the ingredients together into a huge, gooey mess. Then, with a magician's skill, he scraped it all up and produced a fine lump of soft dough, nearly four pounds in weight. The dough would rest, then

be rolled out, filled, and baked.

It seemed simple compared to other monzù recipes. One of Mario's prize dishes, a galantine of chicken medallions, liver mousse, and truffles, takes four days to prepare and is always presented in typically decorative Sicilian style – in baskets elaborately woven from pasta and adorned with fresh flowers dipped in wax. A work of art, it reminded me of the lifelike marzipan fruits and intricate chocolate tableaux I'd seen in Sicilian pastry shops.

Mario did not grow up around such elaborate dishes. "I was so poor I never even had a favorite childhood meal. We just ate what we could get!" So he was delighted to land a job as *lavapiatti* (literally "dishwasher") for the count's original monzù, Giovanni Messina.

Anna remembers Messina fondly. He made chicken sandwiches with butter and mustard for her. But he also had the reputation of being grumpy and secretive. As the Tascas' monzù since 1914, he didn't particularly want to train young Mario to take his place.

"I had to keep my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut," Mario told me. "No joking! No laughing!" But by concentrating on the food and humoring the old man's every whim, Mario finally made himself indispensable.

Monzù recipes and techniques have not been written down. Rather they are passed down from chef to apprentice. Yet Mario is not training his own young *lavapiatti* as a monzù. There really is no call for that kind of private chef these days, he admits, and when he retires it will be the end of an era.

After work we accompanied him home to his cottage for coffee and an apricot tart. He and his wife proudly showed me their photo albums filled with pictures of glittering banquets given by the count: great set pieces like suckling pig, decorated pheasants, and tiers of arranged fruits.

What then, was Mario's favorite food? He sighed. His own diet, he confessed, was restricted. "Luckily," he added, "my tastes are simple. I'm happy with plain white pasta, barbecued meat – ordinary things."

And what did he best like to cook?

He laughed.

"That's easy," he said, "I like to cook what people like to eat." ♦

Minestra delle Ultime Fave (Fava Bean Soup)

1 medium onion, sliced
2 cups end-of-season fava beans,
shelled and peeled
1 chicken or beef bouillon cube
6 cups water
½ cup coarsely chopped fennel bulb
Salt and black pepper to taste
Olive oil
Croutons

Combine the onion, beans, bouillon cube, and water in a medium saucepan. Bring the mixture to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer till the beans start to break apart, at least 20 minutes.

Add the fennel and season to taste with salt and pepper. Drizzle with olive oil and garnish with croutons.

Serves 4.

***Sformato di Formaggio (Cheese Brioche)**

8 cups flour
3 packages dry yeast
1 cup warm water
1½ tsp. salt
8 egg yolks, at room temperature
1 egg
½ lb. butter, softened
¼ cup milk (as needed)
½ cup cubed fontina
½ cup cubed Gruyère
½ cup cubed Edam
½ cup cubed Gouda
¼ cup cooked peas
½ cup cubed boiled ham
2 egg whites beaten with 2 tsp. water,
for egg wash

Pour flour onto a work surface or into a bowl and form a well in the center.

In a small bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water, add salt, and pour into the well.

Add egg yolks, egg, and butter to flour well. Mix gently to form dough. Knead dough on a floured surface until it is smooth, easily forms a ball, and no longer

*Those recipes marked with an * are monzù.*

sticks to your hands (about 20 minutes). If too stiff, add a little milk while kneading.

Cover with a clean towel and set aside.

Grease and lightly flour a 10-inch springform pan. Line the bottom with aluminum foil or parchment paper.

Cut dough in two, one piece slightly larger than the other.

Roll the larger piece of dough into a circle 4 to 5 inches larger than the base of the pan. Lay the dough in the pan and press it gently against the bottom and side of the pan. Allow the dough to hang over the outside of the pan. Trim so that there is a 1-inch border.

Mix the four cheeses together.

Fill the dough shell with layers of cheese, peas, and ham.

Roll the remaining dough into a circle slightly larger than the pan and place it over the filling.

Fold the dough from the bottom layer over the edge of the top dough. Pinch the edges together to seal. Cover with a clean towel and allow to rise till doubled, 1 to 1½ hours.

Preheat oven to 400°F.

Brush dough with egg wash. Bake until golden brown, approximately 1 hour.

Let the brioche cool to room temperature before serving.

Serves 16.

***Braciolettine**

Stuffing

1 finely chopped onion

2 Tbs. olive oil

¼ lb. Gruyère, cut into tiny cubes

¼ lb. boiled ham, cut into tiny cubes

½ cup chopped parsley

3 egg yolks, beaten

1 cup coarse bread crumbs

Salt and pepper

The Assembly

1½ to 2 pounds beef top round or leg of lamb, sliced ¼ inch thick and cut into 3-inch squares

Seven ¼-inch-thick slices dense

Italian bread, crusts removed

20 bay leaves, soaked in hot water

2 onions, cut into 1-inch wedges

6 Tbs. olive oil

2 to 3 cups fine bread crumbs

To make the stuffing, sauté onion in the

oil till golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove onion from the heat, and let it cool.

Add Gruyère, ham, parsley, egg yolks, and bread cubes, and mix well. Season with salt and pepper to taste and set aside.

To assemble, put a scant teaspoon of stuffing on a corner of each meat square. Roll meat over stuffing, tucking in the edges to make a small sausage-like shape, about 1 inch thick by 3 inches long. Repeat with remaining stuffing and meat.

Cut bread slices into squares about the same length as the meat rolls.

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Oil a baking pan, and sprinkle it with salt.

Thread a skewer with a meat roll, a bay leaf, a wedge of onion, and a piece of bread. Repeat to fill. (You may find it easier to use dual skewers.)

Pour the olive oil on a large flat dish, spread bread crumbs on another.

Dip the skewers in the olive oil and then in bread crumbs, coating completely.

Arrange the skewers in the baking pan, and bake 20 to 25 minutes, turning once after 10 minutes. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Serves 4 to 6.

***Sfince di San Giuseppe (St. Joseph's Cream Puffs)**

1 cup water

5 Tbs. butter, cut into small pieces

Pinch of salt

1 cup flour, sifted

4 eggs, at room temperature

Oil for frying

1½ cups of *crema di ricotta*

(recipe follows)

Candied orange peel

Boil water with butter and salt in medium saucepan.

Add flour all at once, remove from the heat and stir constantly until the dough comes away from the side of the pan.

Turn the dough into a bowl. When cooled, add eggs one by one, blending thoroughly.

In a deep fryer, heat 2 to 3 inches of oil to 350°F. There must be enough oil to allow dough to roll over and swell to about 3 times the original size.

Drop dough by the rounded teaspoonful into the hot oil. Do not crowd the pot. Cook puffs on both sides. Puffs will cook in

about 3 minutes. Drain and cool.

Fill puffs with ricotta cream and garnish with candied orange peel.

Serves 8.

***Crema di Ricotta (Ricotta Cream)**

1½ cups ricotta cheese

¼ cup sugar

You must start this the day before you plan to use it.

Drain ricotta, refrigerate overnight.

Process ricotta in a food processor till smooth.

Transfer to a mixing bowl. Add sugar. Beat with a mixer till light and fluffy.

Cover and refrigerate till needed.

Marmellata di Pompelmo (Grapefruit Marmalade)

3 large grapefruits

1 lemon

6 cups water

Sugar

This recipe is made over 3 days.

Wash the fruit, and cut into quarters. Remove seeds if necessary. Slice the fruit crosswise into thin triangles.

Put fruit into a very large, nonreactive saucepan with water. Cover and set aside for 24 hours. The next day bring the fruit to a boil and let boil 40 to 50 minutes, until the fruit is transparent.

Remove from heat and allow to sit for another 24 hours.

Weigh the fruit-and-water mixture and weigh out the same amount of sugar.

Bring mixture to a boil, stir in sugar, and return to a boil. Cook for about 40 minutes, stirring from time to time to keep the marmalade from sticking. Reduce the heat if the mixture threatens to boil over.

Test by placing a spoonful of the mixture on a dish, when it sets up when cool, marmalade is ready. Remove from heat, and stir for about 5 minutes.

Pour into sterilized jars, leaving about ½ inch of space at the top of each jar.

Seal jars, turn upside down, and let cool.

Makes about 2½ pints of marmalade.

All recipes are adapted from Anna Tasca Lanza's The Heart of Sicily. Her new cookbook, Flavors of Sicily, was recently published by Clarkson Potter.