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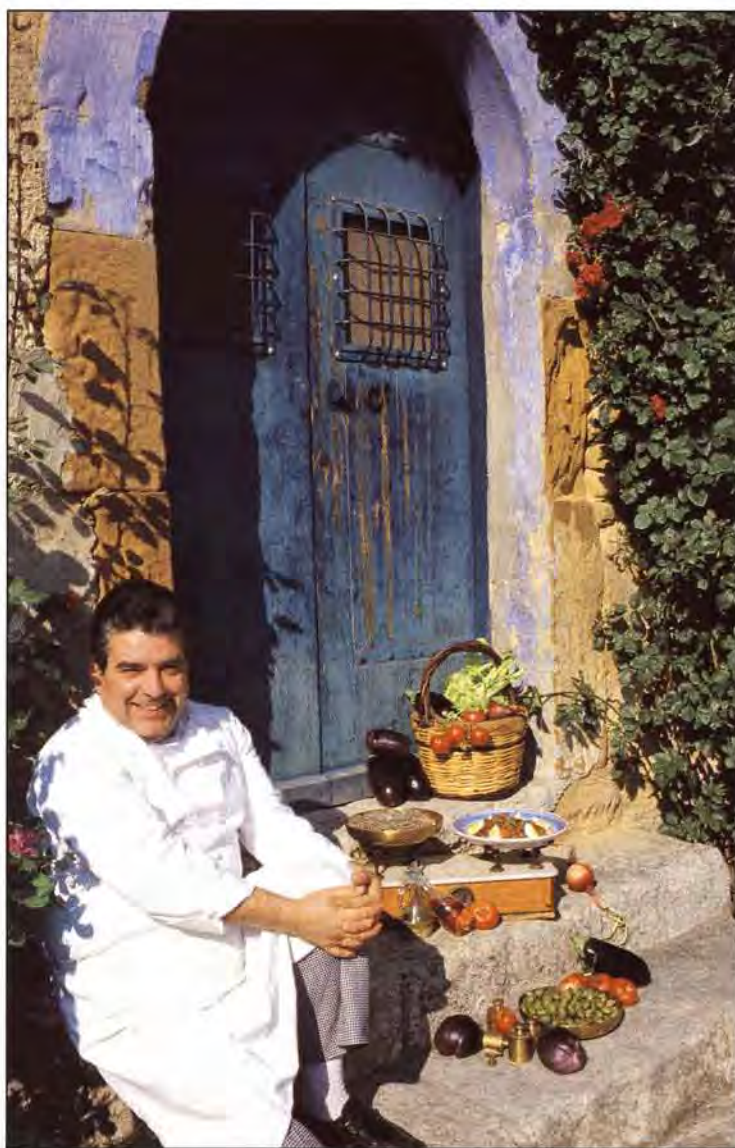
Sicily's Home Cooking

*At Regaleali, on an ancient Sicilian estate, student chefs
learn the arcane cooking style known as monzu—and preserve a unique
blend of French technique and Mediterranean warmth*

BY PETER MIKELBANK PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEFANO SCATA

It was a style whose secrets were passed on reluctantly in whispers. A crossbreed of French and Mediterranean influences, Sicilian *monzu* cooking—which originated with chefs descended from Napoleon's entourage—flourished at the grand banquets of the Belle Epoque before all but vanishing this century, with its elite, possessive chefs, apprentices, and unwritten recipes. Surviving in fewer and fewer of the island's private households, the too-jealously-guarded cuisine is a hand-me-down tradition that has come down almost to its last pair of hands.

You notice that, even when in motion during the morning classes, Mario Lo Menzo's hands are distinctly those of a cook. Almost forty years after first being apprenticed into one of Sicily's rare *monzu* kitchens, they are as tellingly pale as flour. Their constant play—whether showing an intuited pastry fold, sauce, or pasta-making technique—composes an elaborate body language that conveys instantly what accompanying translation cannot. Acknowledging his haste, the 54-year-old chef tells a half dozen encircling students that his hands hurry. "They want to teach what I



know, so it won't go to the cemetery with me."

Twice a year, the Messina-born private chef—now perhaps the last remaining *monzu* (the title derives from an Italian pronunciation of *monsieur*) leads classes at Sicily's two-year-old Regaleali cooking school. An open-book break with the closed, medieval way in which the cuisine was historically learned, it is, to say the least, an unusual course.

The school was started by three sisters, Marchesa Anna Lanza di Mazzarino, Principessa Costanza di Camporeale, and Donna Rosemarie Tasca, the daughters of Conte Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita. Its four-day courses consist of morning classes (constructing enormous luncheon menus) and even larger evening banquets at the family's 1,500-acre mountain winery. Offering sampler instruction in Lo Menzo's hybrid Sicilian/*monzu* specialties—such as *caponata* (sweet-and-sour eggplant), *arancini* (rice balls resembling tiny oranges), and *biscotti regina* (sesame cookies from an ancient Roman recipe)—Regaleali amounts to a very informal, very spontaneous hands-on experience in a countryside location so remote and isolated that it seems to have conspired to ensure the cooking





A family business (clockwise from left): sisters Rosemarie Tasca, Costanza di Camporeale, Anna Lanza di Mazzarino; their father, Conte Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita; and mother, Franca.

PASTA CON SARDE

1 pound fresh fennel
1 large onion
½ cup olive oil
¼ cup tomato sauce
3 tablespoons pine nuts
3 tablespoons dried black currants
1 pinch grated nutmeg
salt and pepper
1 pound boned sardines or tuna
cut in 1-inch pieces (set aside
three whole sardines for
garnish)
3 salted anchovy fillets, chopped
6 threads saffron
1 pound pasta

Boil fennel until tender in large pot of water. Drain and chop.

Sauté onion in olive oil until clear in large saucepan. Add tomato sauce and simmer. Add fen-

nel, pine nuts, currants, nutmeg, salt, pepper to taste. Cook over low heat for 20 minutes. Add sardines and anchovies and, stirring occasionally, continue to simmer an additional 15 minutes.

Dissolve saffron in two tablespoons warm water. Cook pasta in boiling, salted water.

Prepare fried sardine garnish. Heat olive oil in frying pan over medium heat. Dust sardines lightly with flour. Place in hot oil and fry until golden. Remove and drain on paper towel.

Drain pasta and return to pot, adding saffron. Add sardine sauce and mix thoroughly. Place on warm serving dish and garnish with fried sardines.

Serves 6

tradition's survival.

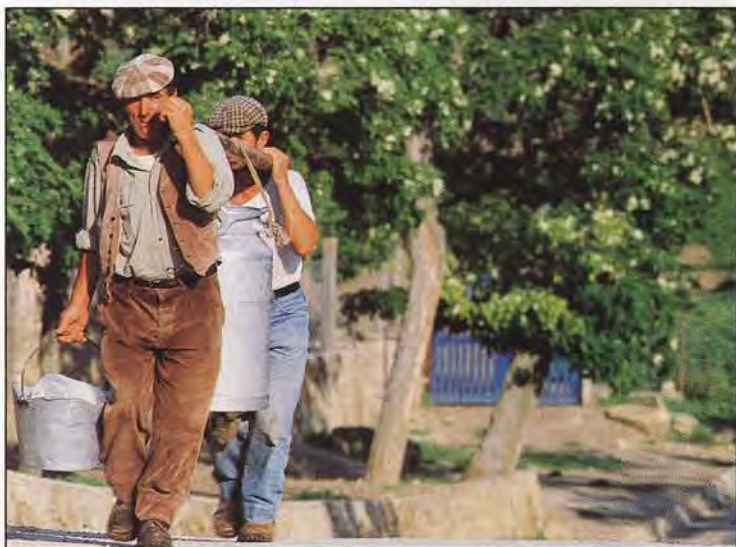
In many circles, Lo Menzo is already famous—for not being famous already. Considering that he is a family chef who has rarely worked publicly before, and that the school's enrollment has been largely due to word of mouth, Regaleali has, so far, attracted an intriguing assortment of students: largely commended food professionals and a rapidly growing coterie of chefs from fashionable U. S. restaurants (eight arrived from San Francisco for classes last fall), along with a baroness from Belgium and an Indian maharajah, as well as Prince Charles's personal chef. "We started the school because we realized that our family had a tradition that was very rare," says eldest daughter Anna Lanza. "We felt we had a responsibility to

share it and rediscover its dishes. Growing up, you see, we always had a *monzu*."

An hour into class, there is simmering on the burner a rich tomato sauce that smells like heaven, pasta spilling like jackstraws across the counter, and an exhausted translator.

Lo Menzo is talkative. Afraid of forgetting any detail, he offers dozens. Wedged into a chalet kitchen the size of a small ship's galley—and made smaller by his considerable girth—he's gregarious and boyish, issuing a fast, frequently humorous stream of Sicilian dialect. Working without assistants and creating several dishes at once, his manner is unstaged and wholly efficient.

Moving quickly to a corner marble slab, he sieves, sweetens, and resieves a mountain of ricot-



Estate bakers Liboria and Camillo di Martino mix the dough and then carry the loaves to the oven (top left, right). Above left, right: Shepherd Salvatore di Martino also makes the cheese.

ta, creating a rich cannoli filling. Lo Menzo rushes to focus his attention on the day's main attraction, *timbaletti*.

Deceptively simple-looking—just angel hair pasta combined with béchamel. Then, molded, stuffed, breaded, and fried to form delicate cones in a two-day, two-page recipe. Inverting each timbale with the snap action of a casino croupier, students repeat the critical wrist-over-thumb flip/twist/turn. Coaching patiently, Lo Menzo praises some, corrects others, and tells one that she “brought the wrong thumb to class.”

Like a well sung aria, the exacting, inventive use of simple ingredients typifies the extremely refined cooking of the *monzu*, who built on Sicily's history as the Mediterranean crossroads of spices and sugars,

as well as on its long legacy of older cuisines, including the six-hundred-year-old *cucina baronale*. “All the invaders,” says Anna Lanza, providing course translation and commentary, “the Greeks, Moors, French, Saracens, the Spanish, Bourbons—all the invaders who came to Sicily left their mark. As surely as they left it in our architecture, they left it in our food.”

Often described by islanders as “a taste of the sun,” Sicilian cuisine is rich in robust ingredients and sensual pleasures, uniquely characterized by its frequent blend of sweet-and-sour flavors, such as raisins, vinegar, sugar, and onions in the same dish.

“Mario represents not only the last of the *monzu*,” says student Nancy Oakes of San Francisco's

L'Avenue restaurant, “but of a broader Sicilian tradition. He's a private chef with an amazing repertoire. He has all these Sicilian street dishes in his cooking that are wonderful . . . and a few things he hasn't a clue as to where they come from.”

Lo Menzo admits he didn't initially aspire to the role of *monzu*. Hired in 1954, “as muscle” for a Tasca wedding, he was suddenly pressed into kitchen service when another apprentice angrily stormed out. “They had to force me into Giovannino's kitchen. He was that bad tempered,” he laughs, “but a very brilliant, intelligent cook.”

“Giovannino Messina was very jealous of his professional secrets and hadn't found anyone who shared the same kind of affection for his kitchen. After the war, he

sensed there was no longer a way for *monzu* to survive. He knew he might be the last of the breed.”

Heir to his *monzu* father's own blend of French/Sicilian/Arabic cooking, Messina trained in Palermo's grand turn-of-the-century kitchens. Most remember him as an irascible, oppressive, rarely benevolent tyrant. “He wasn't very nice at all inside the kitchen,” says Lanza. “Outside, he was *borbottava*, always grumpy.” Another sister is even less forgiving, recalling “a despot who frightened little children away.”

Even with four years' experience in another kitchen, Lo Menzo found himself a much-unwanted apprentice during the larger part of their eleven-year association, spending “most of my first years trying to learn his sauces myself, tasting pans he'd



Cooking school students Thomas Lombard and Roseanne Green explore the lemon grove in front of the Case Grandi (above); the fruit's juice goes into the icing on *cassata* (left), a Sicilian dessert made with sponge cake, ricotta cheese, pistachios, and candied fruit. The island is known for its elaborate, sugary confections, which are often associated with religious festivals or even long-abandoned pagan rituals.

leave me to wash, and trying to figure them out." Patience and Lo Menzo's marriage to another *monzu's* niece finally began to thaw Messina. Slowly, the nearly-80-year-old began teaching a few standards—by example. Lo Menzo's sudden elevation came unexpectedly one evening when the temperamental Messina raged out of the house, leaving dinner unprepared.

"It was a most important dinner," says Lanza, whose prospective father-in-law was expected. "Mother asked Mario if he felt up to finishing. He said he honestly

didn't know. After dinner, the Conte leaned back and said, 'It's good to see Giovannino is still Giovannino.'"

Soon, Messina began uncovering and teaching unwritten recipes from his own youth, a truffled pasta vol-au-vent; an enormous cheese brioche (which Prince Charles on a Regaleali visit last May swore "to remember until death"); and other banquet epics: *pasticcio di selvaggina* (intensely rich sable-colored game pâtés, which, Messina taught, need a twenty-to-one reduction); and recipes for "biscuitlike baskets,"

announces Lo Menzo, suddenly picturing its ingredients. "Made to hold caramelized grapes surrounded with a warm chocolate sauce. Whenever anything like that came up, something grand, Giovannino would refer to it, saying, 'Ah, yes! And this from the great banquet for King Umberto at the Gangi Palace . . .'"

That dinner, with a dozen courses, summarized a fashion that emerged with, and roughly paralleled, the rise of Palermo. Beginning with Napoleon's brother Joseph's rule over the kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the island's

SICILIAN CASSATA

PAN DI SPAGNA

(Sponge Cake)

5 eggs

5 tablespoons sugar

5 tablespoons flour

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

RICOTTA CREAM

14 ounces ricotta cheese

1 cup sugar

ALMOND PASTE

2½ cups almond flour

1½ cups sugar

ICING

3 ounces warm water

1 tablespoon finely granulated sugar

Juice from one lemon

Slices of zuccata (candied squash) or other candied fruit for garnish

On the first day: Combine ingredients for sponge cake and bake at 350°F until light golden brown, about 30–35 minutes.

Press ricotta and sugar through a sieve twice. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

On the second day: Make almond paste by combining sugar with a little water in a saucepan. Gradually add the almond flour, stirring constantly, until a grainy paste forms. Remove from heat and cool. Spread paste on a marble slab or between two pieces of waxed paper and roll out into doughlike sheets.

Line a nonstick cake pan with the sheets of almond paste. Slice sponge cake into ¾-inch-thick pieces and place them on the almond paste in a single layer. Cover completely with ricotta cream and another layer of sponge cake. Repeat. Refrigerate one hour.

Dissolve sugar with a few drops of lemon juice in warm water. Remove *cassata* from refrigerator and invert onto a serving dish. Spread icing over the surface and sides. Decorate with zuccata or candied fruits and chill at least 12 hours before serving.

Allow 2½ days or more to prepare this moist marzipan and ricotta cheesecake. The recipe yields about 2¼ pounds of very rich cake, at least 10 to 12 servings.