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The Other SICILY

W pays a visit to Count Tasca's farm, and travels on, in this special Italian section, to chats with designer Franco Moschino, Arrigo Cipriani of Harry's Bar, the King of Grappa and the pasta princess. **By Eileen Daspin**



Count Tasca in his serious wine cellar

A

t the fork in the road leading up to Regaleali, Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita's 1,100-acre mountain vineyard, cooking school and family retreat, two signs mark the way: "Regaleali, due east, 3.5 kilometers," and "Regaleali, due west, 2 kilometers."

Idling at the crossroads with a map on his knee, the first-time visitor might think he's misreading the signs. He is not. He's peering into the Pirandello-esque reality of Sicily, where nothing is what it seems and then somehow it is.

Go west up the gravel road or east along the better road, and you will still arrive at the same place, though it looks different from every angle. Regaleali is breathtakingly beautiful on approach, an oasis in the middle of the Sicilian mountain desert. But it's a thriving commercial venture that produces 2.5 million bottles of wine a year with state-of-the-art technology, employs 30 full-time workers and is the summer home of one of Sicily's richest families.

It's also a well-worn, 200-year-old working farm. Slight Sicilian men in rumpled work clothes are herding sheep. There's a shack where Toto DeMarino, like his father before him, has made fresh pecorino every morning and every evening since he was a boy. There is a sacred talisman—one of the world's few stainless steel Madonnas, looming three stories above rows of 5,000-liter tanks of fermenting white wine.

And finally there is the 81-year-old Count Tasca, inspecting the estate from behind the wheel of his Mercedes sedan, a plaid Burberrys scarf around his neck and a pistol that looks as if it has never been fired strapped under his arm.

"Everyone is always surprised when they arrive here," says Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza, the Count's oldest daughter, about the contrast between Regaleali and Sicily's dark and violent image.

"It's incredible," says the Marchesa. "People who should know better, don't. I met a woman last week in New York, all elegant and well dressed, and she said, 'Can I come to Sicily with my jewels?' I said, 'I don't take my jewels to New York, I leave them in Sicily.'

"Even if I show my clean face and my clean wine, there is still the association with dirt. What can I say? There are two Sicilies."

Regaleali is certainly part of the civilized one. Originally a grain farm sprawled over almost 3,000 acres, the estate has been in the Tasca family for almost two centuries.

"You used to be able to look out the window and see nothing but wheat," says Count Tasca, who is still fuming about the post-war agrarian reforms that reduced the estate, and others all over Italy, by giving land to peasants. The idea was to set the peasants up as independent farmers, but often the plots were too small to support a family and many of the peasants just sold out and moved away.



The last monzu:
family chef
Mario Lo Menzo

"That used to be mine, and that used to be mine," the Count says indignantly, pointing out sweeps of lush green off in the distance. "It would have been OK if the reforms benefited society, but they just took land away from us and it didn't help the peasants."

In the mid-1950s Count Tasca stepped up the planting of vineyards on his diminished lands, against the advice of friends and neighbors.

"Times had changed and I realized that grain couldn't earn as much as wine," he explains.

After a disastrous start—the first two vats burst when they were filled with water to test their capacity, almost killing two workers—



The Other Sicily

Count Tasca started bottling in the late Fifties.

"A friend told me I'd be lucky to sell 20,000 bottles the first year. Instead I sold 80,000," says the Count, whose wife, the Countess Franca Tasca d'Almerita, peddled the Regaleali wine from the back of her car.

The miracle is that while Regaleali today is far more modern than it was when Tasca started bottling wine (electricity only arrived in the mid-Sixties), it has somehow remained an authentic, which is to say old-fashioned, Sicilian estate.

The workers who care for the fields had fathers and grandfathers before them who did the same. Chickens squawk in the courtyard, sheep block traffic. Carmello DeMarino, brother of cheesemaker Toto, continues to make semolina bread for the family every week (his secret: keep adding water until the dough won't absorb any more, and knead the dough for 45 minutes).

The family chef, Mario Lo Menzo, one of the last of the *monzu* chefs trained in the French culinary arts as was the tradition during La Belle Epoque, has been with the Tascas since 1954.

"It will never be repeated the way it is now," says Marchesa Lanza. "Mario is the last *monzu*. The shepherd is the last of his generation. His son won't milk the sheep twice a day and make cheese twice a day. He's worked hard so his children can go to college. The bread Carmello makes is compact,

Nevertheless, learning from Lo Menzo, who in turn learned his craft from Giovanni Messina, one of Sicily's most illustrious *monzus*, is one of the cooking school's main attractions. "I came here when I was 18, as a kitchen helper," says Lo Menzo. "Slowly Messina began to teach me his secrets, but very slowly."

Nothing, of course, was written down, and Lo Menzo still cooks by memory, taste and sight. His are a hybrid of the Sicilian *monzu* specialties that blend the influences of the various cultures that have invaded Sicily, from Greek to Roman, Arabic, French and Spanish.

During the course, Lo Menzo instructs students on how to make *pasta con sarde* (pasta with sardines and fennel, Sicily's national dish), *caponata* (sweet and sour eggplant), *arancini* (rice balls resembling tiny oranges) and *biscotti regina* (a type of sesame cookie).

"My cooking is particular," says Lo Menzo. "It's not fast. There are old dishes that people don't make any more."

The school has had a number of famous guests, including Julia Child (who took private lessons from Lo Menzo), an Indian maharaja and Prince Charles's personal chef, whom the Prince sent after he fell in love with Mario's cheese brioche during a visit in 1990.

"She was a girl of 26, who was very nice until the Prince arrived," says Marchesa Lanza. "She got hysterical because she had to prepare his butter in the shape of flowers and bring him lemonade all the time. She turned awful to everyone."

But more than anything else, Regaleali remains a family farm. All the vineyards are named after children and grandchildren, and, with the exception of Rosemarie, the youngest daughter who lives in Rome, all the Count and Countess's children live near the estate, which is about two and a half hours inland by car from Palermo.

Lucio, the only son, oversees the wine business. Anna tells a story about an extremely traditionalist uncle who arrived for her birth and the birth of her sister Costanza with a beautiful, heirloom brooch in his pocket. But he waited until a male—Lucio—was born to present his sister-in-law, the Countess Tasca, with the brooch.

"My mother wanted to throw it at him. But it was so beautiful, she kept it," says the Marchesa.

Lucio's two sons, Alberto and Giuseppe, will be the next generation at Regaleali, and are now learning the ropes. "I love it here, it's so wonderful," says Alberto, a former professional race-car driver who only arrived a few months ago.

"For me, Regaleali is a meeting place for the family," he adds. "It's where everyone comes for parties and where we drink like crazy people." ●



The stainless-steel Madonna



Contadini: the men who make Regaleali work

yellow bread. You don't have holes you can stick your fingers through. Already when our maid makes the bread, also by hand, it's not the same.

"This time is passing. Our children, my brother's children who are taking over Regaleali, won't have all this. This is one of the last real farms."

To help promote the Regaleali wines and to earn some money of her own, in 1989 Marchesa Lanza started holding cooking courses at Regaleali. "To do a cooking school complemented what we had," says the Marchesa.

She convinced Lo Menzo to conduct lessons in "baronial cuisine," and enlisted the help of her mother, friends and sisters who give tips on everything from pasta to cassata, the dazzling ricotta and marzipan torte for which Sicily is famous.

The week-long course also includes bread-baking lessons from Carmello, cheese-making lessons from Toto and tips from Marchesa Lanza on how to make marmalade (she has her own line, Case Vecchie, which she makes from fruit grown on the farm). Given the uniqueness of the setting, it irks the Marchesa that her courses aren't booked to the maximum.

"Lorenza [De Medici, the chef and cookbook writer] books her classes two years in advance!" she sniffs. "People don't think about Sicily. It's not in the minds of tourists or travel agents."



Alberto, heir to Regaleali



"This is one of the last real farms," says the Marchesa.