

Rumblings from the World of Food

Remembering Anna Tasca Lanza

CAROL FIELD

If Marcella Hazan introduced Americans to the traditional cooking of the Italian peninsula, Anna Tasca Lanza opened our eyes to the immense culinary riches of her native Sicily. She wanted us to know it all: the gastronomical imprint of invaders over the centuries, the baronial cuisine of La Belle Époque, and the history, agriculture, and traditions that produced the food of the countryside.

Anna herself was an irresistible combination of ingredients: enthusiastic gardener, passionate cook and teacher, and observant student of nature whose curiosity pressed her to a deeper and deeper exploration of the island's traditions and their culinary connections. She grew up eating dinner at the family table where the food was cooked by the family chef, Mario Lo Menzo, the last *monzù* on the island. The word *monzù*, a corruption of the term *monsieur*, refers to French-trained chefs who cooked in the aristocratic kitchens of Naples and Sicily in the nineteenth century.

I first met Anna when I was a houseguest at Regaleali, the family's estate and winery, where she established her cooking school. I remember being dazed by the gorgeous, almost blue-green grasses as I drove through the nearby landscape and then



Above: Anna Tasca Lanza in her kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE MARTORANA. COURTESY OF FABRIZIA LANZA.

amazed by Anna, whose passion was obvious when she immediately put down her knitting and led me to her garden. It was my introduction to ingredients, many now endangered, whose tastes were essential to traditional Sicilian dishes. I remember

nespole (medlar) that had to be soft and almost oozing before we could eat them; *sorbe*, a particular kind of apple; snuffbox peaches; *jujubes*, and citrus such as the tangerines with which she made *mandarinetto*, a cordial of which she was especially proud.

I think that Anna would have loved seeing the competitive cooking shows on American television in which each chef is given a basket of ingredients and told to get to work. It was exactly in that spirit that I remember her taking visitors up to Case Grandi, the big house, where Mario was cooking one of his elegant dishes with its emphasis on butter and cream, and then going back to her own kitchen where she would produce a simpler yet in some ways more satisfying version using the ingredients and attitudes of Sicilian *cucina povera*.

My husband, John, and I once took a vacation with Anna on the remote Sicilian island of Linosa. None of us had ever been there, but by the end of three days the intrepid Anna had learned all about the wild herbs and greens, the local fish and shellfish, to say nothing of the birds, the flowers, and the quirks of local agriculture. We knew we were with a pro when we watched her greet an old woman carrying a blue plastic bucket that turned out to be full of capers that she herself had picked and salted. Before long Anna was bargaining for the contents and when we left, Anna had the capers safely stowed in her tote.

During the time I was collecting recipes of *le nonne* (grandmothers) for my book *In Nonna's Kitchen*, Anna volunteered to help me. We left Regaleali for nearby Valledolmo where an old woman awaited us, surrounded by three generations of her family. She seemed stunned that I, a woman from half a world away, was interested in the food she made, and I was just as dazed when she answered a question in a language that was familiar but impenetrable. Anna burst into laughter when she saw the look on my face. She translated the Sicilian dialect I didn't understand and helped me elicit secrets of food

preparation I could never have gotten on my own. That afternoon both of us learned about an exceptional rabbit salad the *nonna* made when her husband returned from hunting. Anna adapted it in one version, I in another. Now that Anna is no longer with us, I like to think of the three of us, a ninety-year-old countrywoman, the elegant Anna, and me, united in our enthusiasm for the irresistible dishes of the Sicilian countryside.

Bonnaroo's Victory Garden

JASON LEAHEY

For the ninth year in a row, eighty thousand people descended last June upon Manchester, Tennessee (normal population: ten thousand, give or take), to create a new city off I-24 in the middle of the state. That city is named Bonnaroo, and the music and arts celebration it brings to life each year in these mountains is the premier music festival in the United States. For four days roughly 180 music acts play on ten stages for around seventeen hours a day. People travel from all fifty states and dozens of countries. Stevie Wonder played this year. So did heavy metal band Gwar, hip-hop magnate Jay-Z, comedian and banjo whiz Steve Martin, CCR icon John Fogerty, Euro dancehall mystery Deadmau5, and Kris Kristofferson. A family campground was set off from the regular campground, with children's arts and play areas provided. The festival casts a wide net.

Included in this net is food—specifically, sustainably grown food, healthy food, lip-smackingly-delicious food. This year marked the full debut of Bonnaroo's Three Sisters Victory Garden, an educational and gastronomic experiment of forty-one crops that included Turkey Crow and Scarlet Runner beans winding their

way up toward the sun, Brandywines and Purple Cherokees growing fat on the vine, broccoli and strawberries and eggplants exploding in profusion against the festival's small tire-and-adobe post office. Thirty tons of compost created from last year's waste made up the soil. Because all food vendors at the festival are required to use only compostable materials, some of 2009's still-undigested biodegradable plastic forks pricked their tines up from the ground between the dill and basil plants. Everything was, of course, organic.

The back-to-basics heart of a tiny organic garden may seem incongruous with concert stages as large as airplane hangers, but the different impulses behind each form the core of the festival's sense of self. Bonnaroo is a long-term vision of health and culture, a semipermanent city that went carbon neutral in 2008, the year the organizers bought the land. It has built a year-round network of people working to push sustainability further into the zeitgeist. "We are a community," Sustainability Director Laura Sohn told me, "and food is about community."

Edible Revolution, a Knoxville-based sustainable garden business, oversaw the project, and its founder, Sarah Bush, spent festival mornings teaching crash-course lessons in sustainable eating. She explained that the ingredients of the average American dinner travel between 1,500 and 2,500 miles to reach our kitchen tables, that breeding them to be as homogenized and pretty as possible has had serious repercussions on our health, and that 80 percent of the plant varieties we grew a hundred years ago are no longer propagated.

"Other varieties are just gone," she told me. "That's the saddest thing." Then her mouth creased into a smile.