

A SLICE OF SICILIAN

An old-world cooking school on a rural estate in Sicily is keeping alive culinary traditions celebrated by renowned visiting chefs like Grant Achatz and Alice Waters.

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SCENE AND HERD

At left, a flock of sheep wanders through Regaleali, a 19th-century estate that's home to the Anna Tasca Lanza cooking school, now run by the daughter of the founding marchesa. Above, the big house, Case Grandi, where the Tasca family produces Grillo and Nero d'Avola wine, among other varietals.

ON A SPRING AFTERNOON at the Anna Tasca Lanza cooking school—set on 1,300 acres of vineyard in the green hills of Sicily—preparations are underway for a celebration marking the conclusion of Cook the Farm, its new residential program at the intersection of agriculture, academics and cooking. At the farmhouse kitchen of this rural wine estate, a two-hour drive southeast of Palermo, students scurry about as they assemble a mix of dishes from home and recipes learned during the 10-week program. In a window nook across from a neat row of the school's branded jams (made from sour cherries, figs and mandarins grown on the property) hang framed photos of the Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza di Mazzarino, "Sicily's culinary ambassador to the world," as the James Beard Foundation has called her. Photographs taken during the school's early days show her posing with visiting dignitaries like Robert Mondavi and Julia Child (more recent guests include chefs Grant Achatz and Alice Waters). In the 27 years

since the school's launch, the region has emerged as an epicurean destination, with the marchesa, one of the first Sicilians to open her cloistered upper-crust life to outsiders, helping to set the stage for a new generation of chefs and winemakers.

"I think Sicily might well have the most interesting regional cuisine in all of Italy," says food writer Nancy Harmon Jenkins, who has spent time at the school. "All these influences have swept across the island and left an imprint—from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. The Normans and Germans were there too."

In recent years, Anna's daughter, Fabrizia, who inherited the school a few years before her mother's death in 2010, has targeted a younger audience, one that, as she says, is "into farming, into organic matters." In the kitchen, surrounded by Cook the Farm's inaugural class, she lines a pan with green marzipan strips, adding spongecake slices and whipped ricotta cream as she tackles her contribution to the closing festivities: a classic cassata. "It's the one

thing, in cooking, my mother taught me," she says of the Sicilian dessert. If Fabrizia doesn't sound like a natural-born heir to Sicily's rich culinary heritage, it might be that she, like her mother, did not initially seem destined for a life spent in the kitchen. They were both raised in an aristocratic bubble in Palermo, disconnected from cooking but always surrounded by good things to eat. "We had a cook, we had a maid," she says. "I never saw my mother in a kitchen."

Before returning in 2008, Fabrizia had spent 20 years living outside Sicily pursuing a career in art history. ("I had a conflicted relationship with my mother," she says. "She was a strong woman and very bossy. I was just starting my life, so I went away.") She recently finished writing a memoir about her family, told through food, in which she recounts the founding of her mother's school. In the late 1980s her maternal grandfather, the Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita, had begun to consider the fate of his country estate, Regaleali. To his son he bequeathed the big house—Case Grandi, up at the winery—parceling out the remaining houses on the property to his three daughters. Anna, the eldest, was given Case Vecchie, a stone farmhouse among the Grillo and Nero d'Avola vines. She opened her cooking school there in the summer of 1989. "The whole notion of a noblewoman actually cooking for hire, it just wasn't done," says Gary Portuesi, co-owner of New York's De Gustibus cooking school, who leads frequent trips to Sicily. "Slowly, though, the wealthier families started putting aside their egos and letting people come enjoy their properties."

The first classes at Case Vecchie were led by her father's *monzu* (a bastardization of *monsieur*, as chefs of the aristocracy became known), who came down from the big house to show off Sicily's French-influenced baronial cuisine, along with simpler peasant fare like fat arancini and sweet-and-sour



WHEY STATION From left: The kitchen garden, tended by two gardeners hired from London last year; a local shepherd and cheesemaker prepares sheep's cheese to be made into aged pecorino; the shepherd's collection of old farm tools.



eggplant caponata. “At first it was more of a hobby, a cute thing to do,” says Fabrizia. “Then it became a real business.” The marchesa, who had no formal education beyond finishing school in Switzerland, began traveling to the U.S. to promote her new venture, along with her family’s wine. “She was a very entrepreneurial woman,” says Fabrizia. “She never stayed still. She was full of ideas.” Few people she encountered knew much about Sicily beyond what they’d seen in *The Godfather*. The marchesa showed them another world.

“She was able to bring the rustic foods of Sicily into elegant New York City, because she herself had such elegance about her,” says chef Lidia Bastianich, who hosted dinners for the school at her Manhattan restaurant Felidia. The marchesa published two cookbooks in the U.S. on Sicilian cooking and became, over the years, a minor food celebrity, appearing on *The Martha Stewart Show* and delivering a commencement address at the Culinary Institute of America.

“She found a way to escape her boundaries in America,” says Fabrizia. “She had started this job in

her 50s, an age when you are dead as a woman in Italy. And she found a country where people were asking her questions, listening to her. She was a different woman in the States. She changed the way she dressed. We were teasing her. She wore all these flower prints, synthetics. And of course she made a big game of being the marchesa, being royalty—she loved it.”

These days, mornings at the school begin with just-baked bread made with flour milled from wheat grown on the property, along with fresh ricotta from sheep wandering its winding roads, jam from its orchards and the marchesa’s signature sun-dried tomato purée—a product Fabrizia hopes to market worldwide one day. “Everyone’s always asking me where they can buy it,” she says.

Regular classes, offered in three- or four-day stints from spring through fall, give a quick taste of the agrarian life on the estate: simple, hands-on cooking followed by a sit-down meal of pasta tossed with wild foraged fennel and the season’s first favas, say, washed down with a bottle of the Tasca d’Almerita

wine produced up the hill. Since taking over the school, Fabrizia has expanded its scope, inviting like-minded writers, artists and chefs for a few days at a time. Former Chez Panisse chef David Tanis has offered his take on Sicilian cuisine. This summer, *New Yorker* cartoonist Maira Kalman will host illustrating and writing workshops. “I didn’t want to spend my whole life frying chickpea fritters,” says Fabrizia.

Foreign chefs passing through Sicily will sometimes drop by to pay their respects, just as they did in the marchesa’s day. Grant Achatz spent 24 hours there while researching the Sicily menu for his Chicago restaurant Next. “We were out there picking herbs, it was a beautiful day, there was a golden retriever running around; you can’t make this stuff up,” he says. The meal he prepared with Fabrizia that night inspired much of the food served at Next, which looked to bring “grandmother cooking, home cooking” into a restaurant setting. “I would ask questions,” says Achatz. “Why do you do it like that?” And she would look at me and go, ‘Well, this is how we’ve done it for 200 years.’”







Dave Gould, a young Brooklyn chef, spent a few weeks at the school before opening his rustic restaurant, Roman's. "We walked around in the field and foraged for wild greens and cooked every meal, every day, with the ingredients they had there on the land," he recalls. "It was kind of like a spa getaway." His menu often features a pasta inspired by his visit, served in broth with primo sale sheep's cheese.

Fabrizia has also inherited some of her mother's friends, including Alice Waters, who wrote the foreword to her 2012 cookbook, *Coming Home to Sicily*. "Fabrizia obviously has her mother's passion," says Waters. "Bringing in people to experience this traditional way of cooking is very valuable, preserving not just the gastronomic traditions but the cultural richness of that place."

Cook the Farm, offered once a year, is the culmination of Fabrizia's efforts to come to terms with her mother's legacy. Its first class arrived in January for an extended stay—nine food professionals, in various stages of their careers. Over 10 themed weeks a rotating cast of food producers, academics and chefs covered everything from olive oil production to wild boar butchering. Students milked sheep for ricotta and learned about Sicily's black honeybees from the man responsible for bringing them back from the brink of extinction. A delegation from Turkey offered a comparative look at its Mediterranean food culture.

Fabrizia keeps busy with new projects all year long. She brought a young couple over from London

MOVEABLE FEAST From left: The inaugural class of Cook the Farm, a 10-week program launched this year, enjoys lunch in the courtyard of Case Vecchie; Fabrizia; for the Feast of San Giuseppe, local families prepare a traditional banquet and open their homes to the public.



last year to reorganize the lush flower and herb garden in front of Case Vecchie. Soon there will be a swimming pool next door, just past the chicken coop, with a wide deck for lounging under the cypress trees. Up the hill she's planted an heirloom orchard—reviving ancient fruit varieties—in conjunction with the University of Palermo. A hanging garden is coming too, suspended along a canopy above a long wooden table where Fabrizia will host charity banquets to raise funds for community projects.

One morning during the final week of Cook the Farm, the students gather in a small office at Case Vecchie to watch Fabrizia's new Kickstarter-funded documentary, *Amuri*, about Sicily's many religious feasts. Shot over the course of a year all across the island, it has been screened in New York, Boulder, Colorado, and at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cooking, in England.

A day after the screening we drive to a small town nearby to visit an altar set up to commemorate the Feast of San Giuseppe—a celebration just before Easter

marking the transition from winter to spring. A local family has covered a massive table at the entrance to their home with a dizzying array of vegetables, breads and sweets, a banquet intended to bring them good fortune. Following tradition, they've opened the door to all comers, offering a roll of "blessed bread" to anyone in need. "*Complimenti, bellissimo,*" says Fabrizia, addressing the woman of the house. Only children will consume the actual banquet, 19 kids of all ages, lined up in their finest churchgoing clothes. "Virgins from the village, once upon a time," says Fabrizia.

Altars like this one, displaying a week's worth of cooking, are increasingly rare in Sicily these days. "When my mother had the school, you had 12, 15 families doing the altars. Now there's one or two," says Fabrizia. "In Sicily there's a big difference between festive days and daily life. You eat more and you eat differently." She adds, "I wanted to end Cook the Farm with this because it's something nobody believes exists anymore—this way of treating and thinking about food." ●