

LA CUCINA ITALIANA

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Summer Cookout

10 casual recipes for entertaining al fresco

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SIMPLE SEAFOOD

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VINO VERITAS:
VOLCANIC WINE FROM SICILY



Duchess for a Day

A regal palace in Palermo opens its doors for cooking lessons, revealing a panorama of Sicilian taste.

BY FAITH WILLINGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLY CAMPBELL



I CAN THANK SANTA ROSALIA, nicknamed Santuzza, the patron saint of Palermo, for discovering A Day Cooking with the Duchess, a culinary and cultural experience with the Duchess of Palma di Montechiaro that, to me, is the perfect introduction to Sicily. I had the good fortune to meet the Duchess while visiting Sicily's capital during the annual festival that celebrates Santuzza, who believers claim saved the city from the Black Plague. Held July 14, the festival is marked by a parade that winds through Palermo and ends with an opulent fireworks display. A great friend and culinary maven, the Duchess's sister-in-law, Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza, suggested that I watch the fireworks from the Duke and Duchess's terrace overlooking the city's harbor.

At their palace, the Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, I took the elevator upstairs to an apartment filled with locals and hunted for the hosts, Duke Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi and his wife, the duchess, Nicoletta Polo Lanza. After hearing I am a food and wine writer, Nicoletta told me she had just created her own culinary experience for visitors. "[It's] not just a cooking lesson," she told me, but a day of immersion that includes shopping for the meal, a tour of Palermo and her 18th century palace, cooking in her kitchen, and a grand meal. It offers an insider's view of a modern Sicilian noble lifestyle, paired with a learning experience and delicious food. I was hooked.

Sicilian cuisine, and its culture, for that matter, is distinctive and hard to summarize. Historically, anyone who was a player in the Mediterranean passed through Sicily, and the island saw several invasions in the course of its history. The cuisine shows signs of Arab, Spanish, Norman and French influences, and its unique ingredients—capers, olives, citrus, oregano, hard wheat, wild fennel, sea salt, and wines made with grape varieties found only in Sicily—take on great importance in the culinary world. I've found Sicilians especially hospitable and welcoming, perhaps because they've had to accept so many cultures

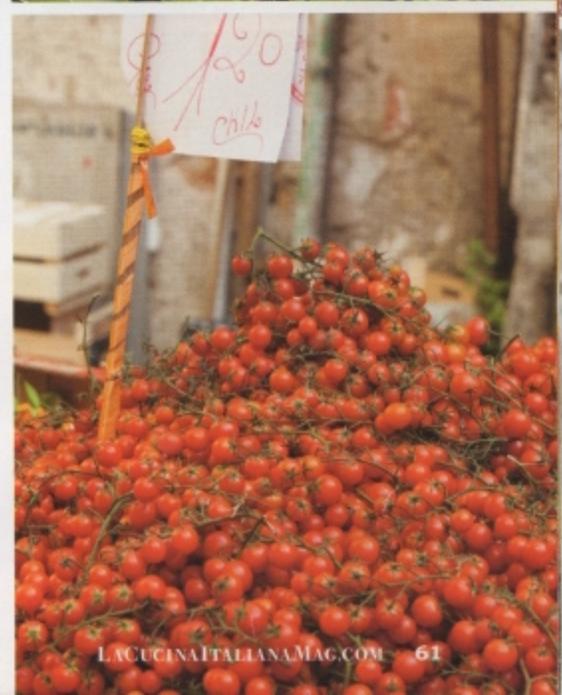
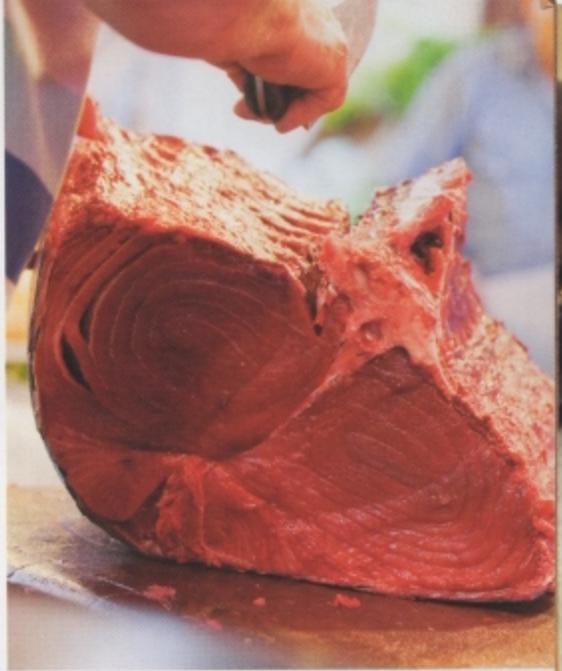
after all those years of invasions.

Nicoletta—no one calls her Duchess or Duchessa—was not an obvious contender for running a well-respected cooking school in northwest Sicily, though food played a notable role in her upbringing. Raised in Venice, she told me that all the women in her family were cooks. Her mother was Venetian, her grandmother Tuscan. Nicoletta studied Russian in Russia, and traveled to Paris and South America, picking up languages and recipes along the way. When she returned to Venice, she met her husband, Gioacchino, while working for a music program at the Biennale, the city's biannual art exhibition and contemporary music festival.

Gioacchino, whom everyone calls Gio, is a well-known musicologist as well as the adopted heir of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the author of *The Leopard*, the famous Italian novel that chronicles cultural changes in Sicily during Italy's unification in the 19th century. When Gio was the head of the Italian Cultural Institute at New York University in the late 1990s, they entertained often. Vacations to her husband's home in Palermo cultivated Nicoletta's interest in the local cuisine, and she immersed herself in *Profumi di Sicilia*, by Giuseppe Coria, a classic, highly regarded and encyclopedic Sicilian cookbook, ultimately embracing the island and its traditions.

Returning to Gio's roots, the couple eventually moved to Palermo full-time and restored his family's palace, an expensive, extensive and lengthy process. It required modernizing the 18th century building's heating, cooling and wiring, on top of the general restoration. The building had been altered over the course of centuries—it once was a college for nobles, belonged to Prince Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi di Lampedusa »

This page and opposite: At Palermo's Capo market, Nicoletta Polo Lanza, the Duchess of Palma di Montechiaro, leads a class in selecting top-quality ingredients.





(the model for the prince in *The Leopard*), and was subsequently purchased by his great-grandson, author Prince Giuseppe Tomasi, after his family's palace was destroyed in World War II. He lived there the rest of his life, until 1957. When Gio inherited it, he launched the restoration.

After converting some of the building's rooms into 11 apartments, Nicoletta began renting them to visitors and, with her sophisticated sensibility for entertaining, started hosting luncheons for special groups. Her cuisine is decidedly seasonal and Sicilian, though influenced by her Venetian heritage as well as her travels.

Everyone who attended her luncheons wanted to learn how to make the food she served, which inspired her to create a distinctive educational experience for small, manageable groups. Her sister-in-law, Anna Tasca Lanza, runs a highly regarded cooking school at the family's winery in the countryside, but no one was doing lessons in Palermo. It seemed like a natural niche for her to fill, so she started A Day Cooking with the Duchess.

She wanted to offer something more interesting than a typical cooking lesson, so she designed a one-day experience that combines cuisine and culture. Students join Nicoletta in the morning, accompanying her at the market and local shops to learn about selecting ingredients for a customized multi-course Sicilian meal.

After the market, Nicoletta takes them on a tour of Palermo to learn about the city and its history, then leads the group in a hands-on cooking lesson in her kitchen. Finally, they sit down in one of her elaborate dining rooms to enjoy the fruits of their labor as staff serves them. Nicoletta separately rents the lush,

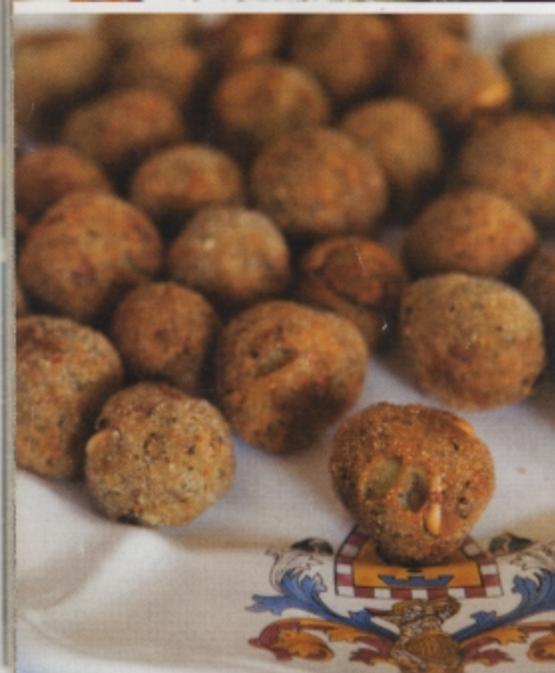
spacious apartments in her palace under the name Butera 28 Apartments, so visitors can stay longer to immerse themselves in the city, availing themselves of her personal suggestions for what to do while they're in town.

WITH A PERFECT EXCUSE TO RETURN

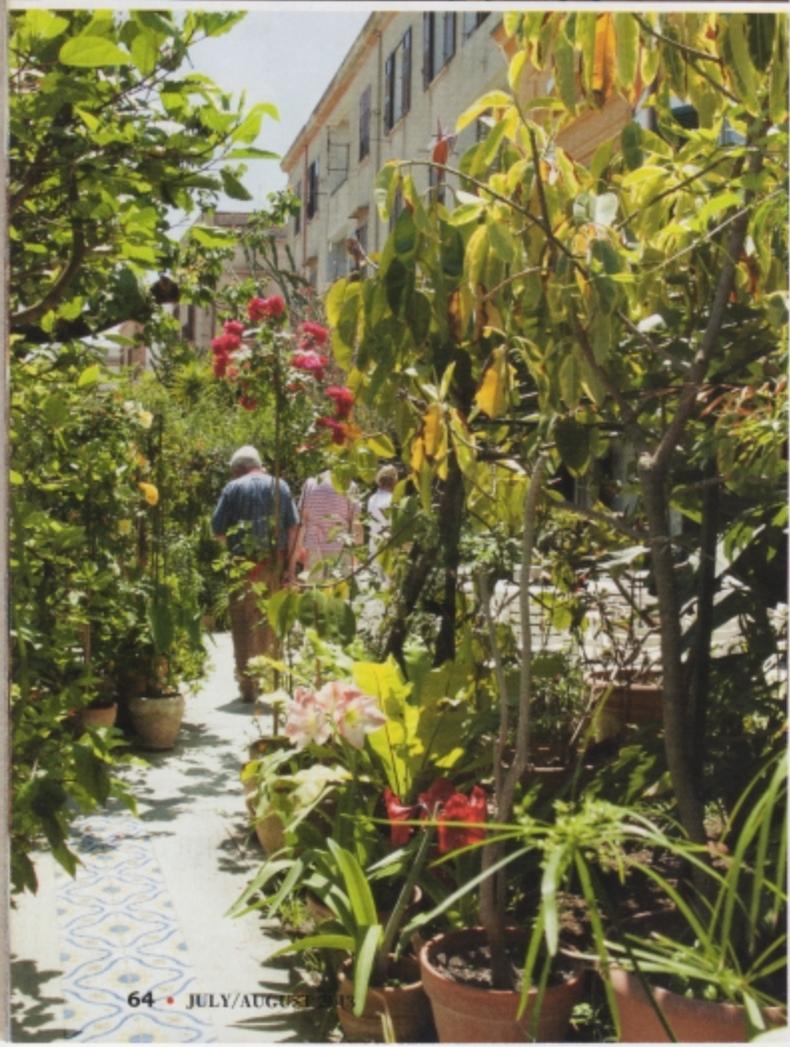
to Palermo, I booked one of her apartments, which come in several sizes and prices, and can be reserved by day, week or month. Mine had spacious rooms furnished with Sicilian antiques and beautiful pottery (and I'm picky about Sicilian pottery), a balcony overlooking the sea and a fully equipped kitchen stocked for breakfast. The palace is in the heart of Palermo, in the Kalsa neighborhood, a once elegant area that went into decline but now is undergoing a renaissance, with new shops and restored museums.

While strolling down the building's street, via Butera, I couldn't resist stopping at Fratelli Battaglia, where the legume, seed, and dried fruit and nut selection, open sacks of beans, rows of multi-colored candies and more was too tempting, and I purchased passolina currants (dried black seedless grapes), chick pea flour, and cubbaita (sesame seed brittle). The fruits and vegetables at Antonio Biondo's produce shop, especially the tomato and olive salad, and boiled seasonal vegetables, made for a light lunch in my dining room. I also picked up a sandwich of sesame roll stuffed with panelle, fried chickpea crêpes, dressed simply with a squeeze of lemon, from a stand on the corner of via Torremuzza and Piazza Kalsa.

Nicoletta recommended the nearby Cioccolateria Lorenzo, specializing in everything chocolate—bars, pralines, mousse, cakes, and gelato in summer months when working with chocolate is difficult—along with coffee and tea, perfect for breakfast, light lunch or a snack. On my way back to the apartment, I detoured to via Alloro and Cana Enoteca for a glass of wine, and picked up a bottle for my apartment. I was in love with the neighborhood. »



From top: Chopping mint; the Duchess offers hands-on instruction in her kitchen; eggplant croquettes on a plate decorated with the family coat of arms. Opposite: a salad of orange, fennel and olives.



THE NEXT DAY, NICOLETTA WAS

hosting lunch for a group and would be busy cooking. "Could I join you," I asked. "And help out in the kitchen?" I tagged along while she shopped the Capo market that morning, shadowing her as she stocked up for the meal. For each class, she brings her students on this trip, instructing them on selecting ingredients and navigating Sicily's busy market and food shops. Her menus are inspired by the season, and she's a skilled shopper

DETAILS

A Day Cooking with the Duchess

Classes at the school are designed for smaller groups and last one day. Prices average €150 per person for 2 to 3 participants; €140 per person for 4 to 6; €130 per person for 7 up to 14. For larger groups, €100 per person. Contact the school for the latest prices and details. Via Butera 28, 90133 Palermo, Sicily. Tel. 39 333 3165432. cookingwiththeduchess.com.

Butera 28 Apartments

The Duchess has several on-site apartments that she rents by the night or week. See the website for details on the apartments and rates. butera28.it.

SHOPPING

Fratelli Battaglia

Wide selection of beans, seeds, fruits, nuts, candies and more. Via Torremuzza 12, Palermo, Sicily. Tel. 39 091 617 0625.

Panificio Porta Reale

The Duchess's favorite source for bread and other baked goods. Via Niccolò Cervello 17, Palermo, Sicily. Tel. 39 091 616 4128.

Cioccolateria Lorenzo

A wealth of chocolate, including bars, mousse, cakes and gelato, perfect for a break or light snack. Via Quattro Aprile 7/7°, Palermo, Sicily. Tel. 39 091 784 0864.

Cana Enoteca

Well-stocked neighborhood wine store and bar. Via Alloro 105, Palermo, Sicily. Tel. 39 338 697 5950. canaenoteca.it.

who clearly has the respect of her vendors. Each one provided the best catch of the day, freshly picked seasonal vegetables and fruit. "Why bother with tasteless, out-of-season fish or produce?" she said, though it was more declaration than inquiry. The colors, scents and sounds of the market were intoxicating—screaming sales pitches in Sicilian dialect, a constant thrum of movement and exchange. Nicoletta chose a cut of tuna, bright red, that looked more like beef than fish, carved to order, then bought olives and pistachio nuts from one stand, ripe cherry tomatoes on the vine from another, and salted anchovies from a specialist, who sold them from a large can. Our last stop was for flowers from an old man on the corner.

The leisurely walk home became a mini-tour of Palermo, as the Duchess pointed out sites of historical note—the Quattro Canti, also known as Piazza Vigliena, a remarkable example of Sicilian Baroque, as well as Piazza Pretoria's Fontana della Vergogna, the Fountain of Shame, sculpted by Tuscan Renaissance artist Francesco Camilliani. Along the way, we bought bread from her favorite bakery, Panificio Porta Reale, as well as prepared panelle from a nearby stand, which she'd finish at home. "I make them from scratch when I teach," she noted.

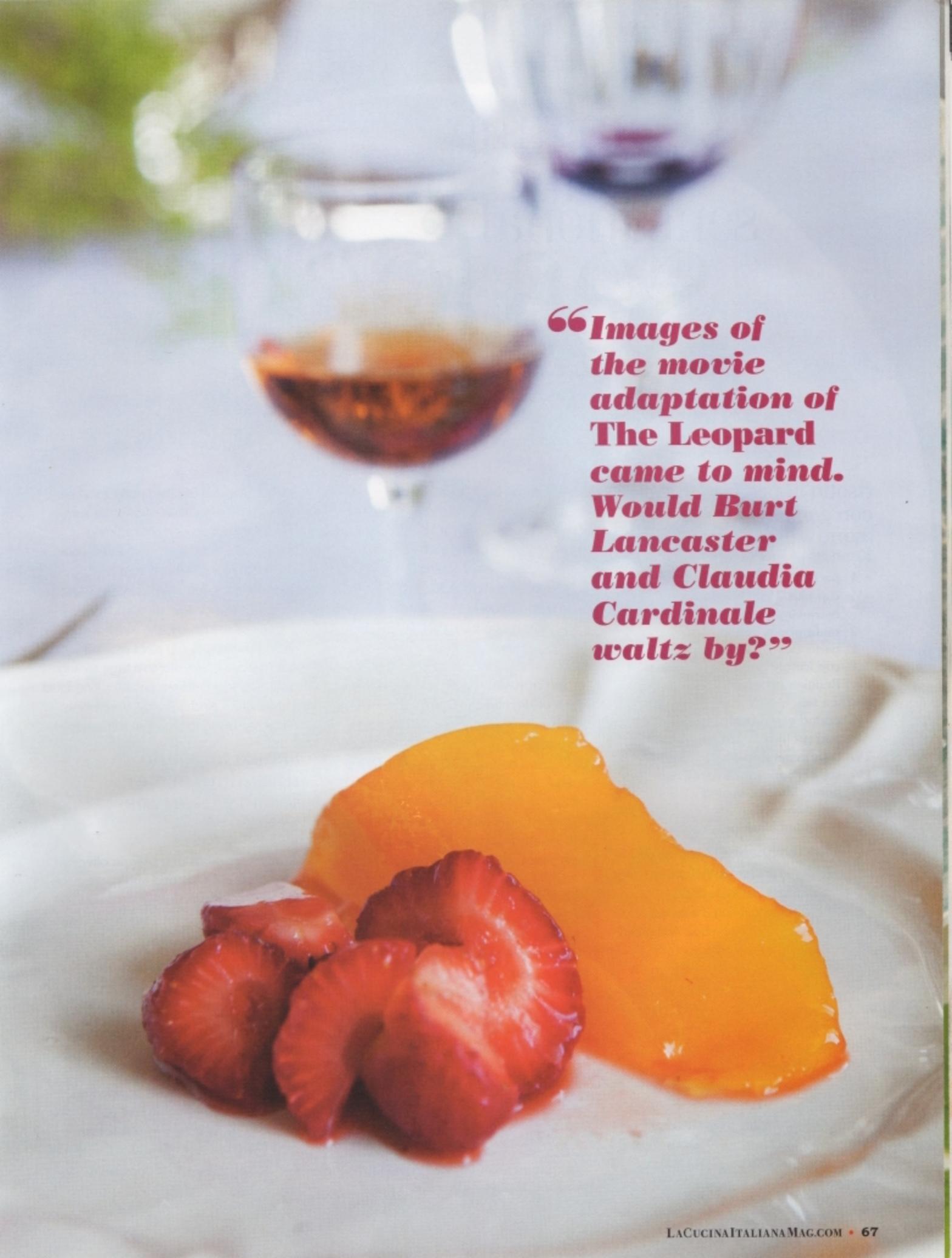
Inside her well-equipped but uncluttered kitchen, punctuated with attractive blue and white tiled walls hung with copper pots, I cubed piacentino, a Sicilian sheep's milk cheese flavored with saffron and laced with peppercorns, while she puréed a black olive, caper, almond and pistachio tapenade to be spread on bread rounds. "We'll fry the panelle at the last minute," she told me.

She prepared a pistachio pesto for fusilli by puréeing the nuts with »

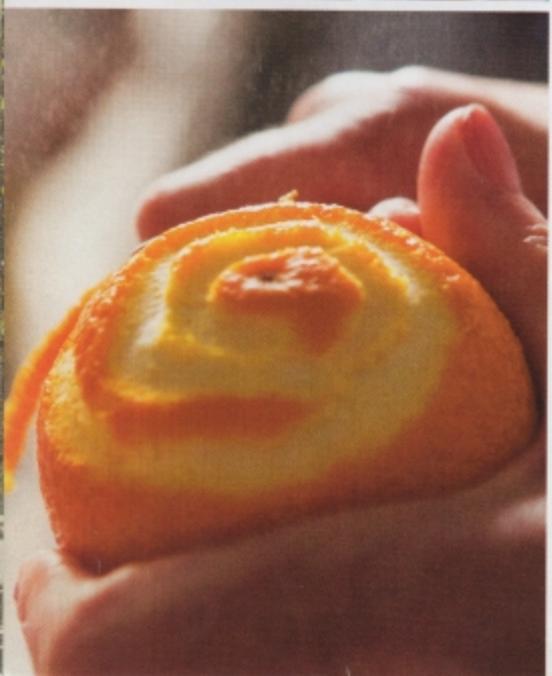
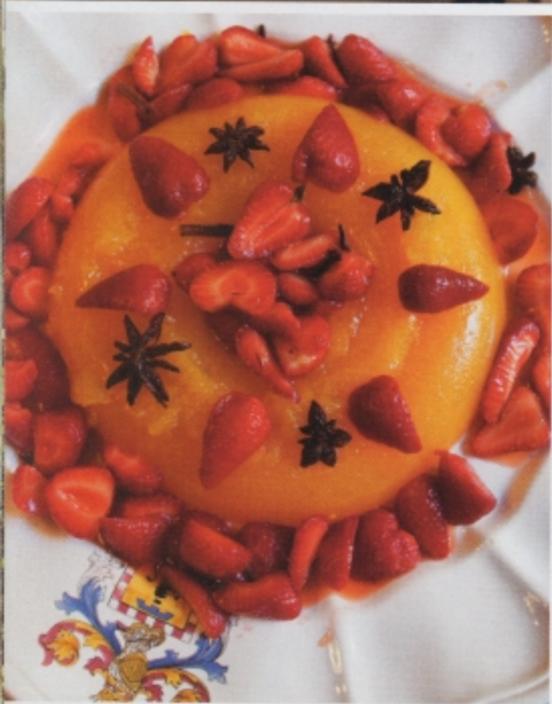
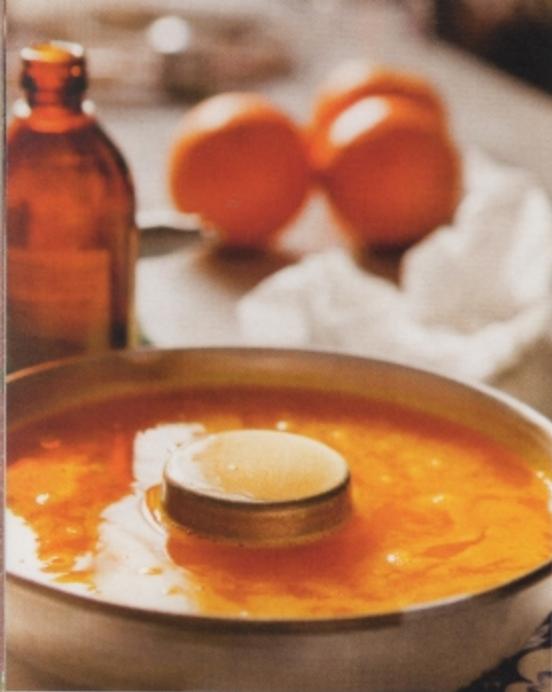
This page: Roasted eggplant; penne with tomato and olive sauce.

Opposite: The Lanza Tomasi palace dates to the 18th century; students eat a formal meal after a class.



A photograph of a dining table. In the foreground, a white plate holds several sliced strawberries and a large slice of orange. Behind the plate, two wine glasses are visible. The glass in the foreground contains a dark red wine, while the one behind it is partially filled with a lighter wine. The background is softly blurred, showing a white tablecloth and some greenery.

***“Images of
the movie
adaptation of
The Leopard
came to mind.
Would Burt
Lancaster
and Claudia
Cardinale
waltz by?”***



parsley, basil, a little Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and delicate extra virgin olive oil. Another popular dish she serves is penne with a tomato sauce flavored with green olives and capers. She also cut the tuna for a mint-flavored tuna stew. Nicoletta likes to serve fruits and vegetables. We sectioned oranges, which were paired with sliced fennel and olives for one of my favorite dishes, and she roasted eggplant for croquettes.

I peeled boiled potatoes for a salad with tomatoes, capers and oregano that's typical on the Sicilian island of Pantelleria. She made a beautiful salad of tender greens, pomegranate seeds and citron—a local fruit that looks like an oversized, lumpy lemon. Once peeled and sliced, I realized it was the first time I'd encountered citron in its natural, non-candied state. It was quite delicious. She finished the dish with nasturtium flowers from her terrace, orange wedges with the skin, and lemon zest. "Our Sicilian citrus is so amazing, I use the skin as well as the fruit," she told me. Everyone in Sicily makes caponata, a classic sweet and sour eggplant dish with a range of variations. But Nicoletta shared with me her winter version, when eggplant isn't in season, that she makes with green apples.

We juiced oranges and lemons for a jelled citrus dessert. "Please, don't use powdered gelatin—the sheet gelatin gives much finer results," she said. The molded gelatin was served with strawberries spiced with cinnamon, cloves, star anise and pink peppercorns, and decorated with orange blossoms. She explained that if this had been one of her classes, everyone would have joined in the preparations, while she carefully explained her moves, assigning tasks to participants and answering questions as they went.

From top and opposite: An orange and lemon gelatin mold, finished with strawberries, cinnamon, cloves and star anise, served for dessert. The duchess loves Sicilian citrus and regularly uses it in her menus.

We had lunch in one of the palace dining rooms. The table was elegant, set with a silver pheasant centerpiece, linens and silverware. Plates featured the Duke of Palma di Montechiaro's coat of arms (a lion standing over a crown), cut crystal goblets held water and wine, while heirloom candelabras and low flower arrangements decorated the table. The service suited the room—white-gloved, uniformed waiters bore silver platters of the morning's preparations. The meal was elaborate, but when Nicoletta teaches, the menu is reduced to a simpler five-course menu of readily available ingredients. I got copies of her recipes, as all lesson participants do, along with a sturdy printed menu with the family crest that includes a history of the palace on the back.

Nicoletta gave me a tour of the palatial apartments. It was easy to imagine Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his study, lined floor to ceiling with books, sitting in his easy chair, sipping a glass of Marsala. The ballroom was impressive, with striped cherry and walnut parquet flooring, stately furniture and grand paintings from the 16th to 20th centuries, all beautifully but not excessively restored. Images of the movie adaptation of *The Leopard* came to mind. Would Burt Lancaster and Claudia Cardinale waltz by? When we walked onto the terrace, with its spectacular hand-painted tiles and marble fountains, I saw a jungle of vines—wisteria, bougainvillea and jasmine—that I hadn't noticed on my first nighttime visit, distracted as I was by the fireworks. Santa Rosalia didn't just save Palermo from the plague; she brought me to Nicoletta. Thank you, Santuzza. I couldn't wait to get home to try the Duchess's recipes. Or to come back. □



To try the Duchess of Palma di Montechiaro's Apple Caponata and Orange and Lemon Jelly recipes, go to icimag.com/duchess.