

SPECIAL HOME COOKING ISSUE

ROSEANN TULLY'S
Intermezzo

Fine Interludes in Food, Wine, Home & Travel

**GOURMET
AT
HOME**

INCLUDING OVER 75
RECIPES & PAIRINGS

Gourmet
MEATLOAF

A is for APPLE

Technique:
MASHED POTATOES

SPICY BITES & BREWS

Beautiful BANANAS

Extraordinary
GRAPPA

Creating a
HOME OFFICE

BEANS!

ALSO: A Gift from SICILY

For many wine writers, the dropping off of sample bottles by UPS or FedEx arouses a modicum of interest and inspection before the wines are carefully logged into a ledger book and stashed away for testing.

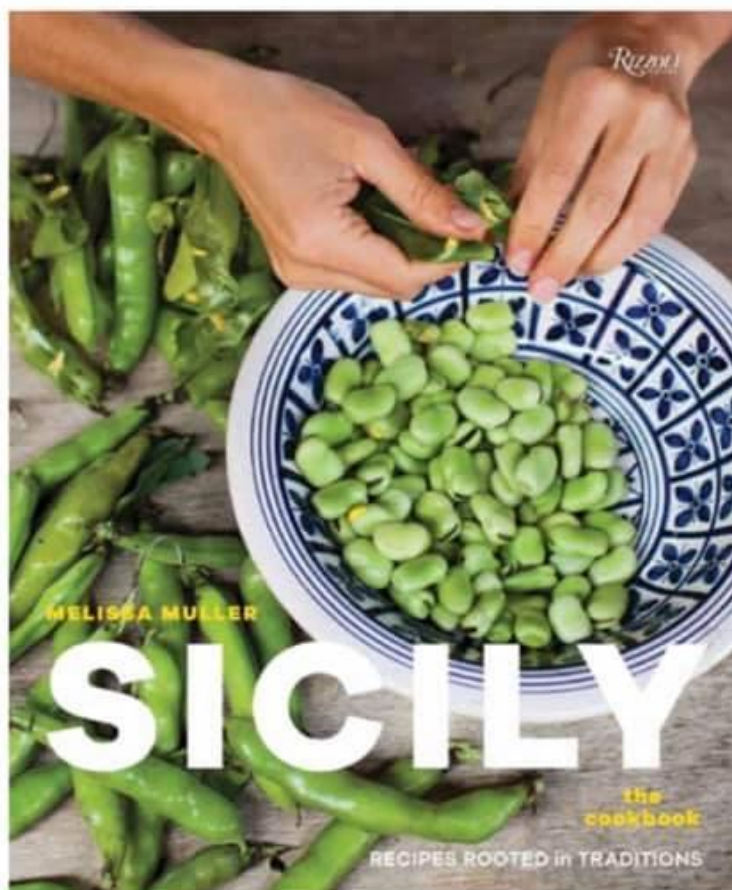
However, today's package seems different, feels different, even sounds different as I set it down on the counter and begin ripping away at the packing tape with my green plastic box cutter. First out is a magnum of Nero d'Avola — unusually large for a sample that isn't Champagne. It's from Sicily, a place of beautiful and not-too-distant personal memories.

Next out is a large cookbook with a colorful cover — a pair of hands shelling fat fava beans with bold, white lettering *SICILY* in all capitals just under the edge of the bean bowl. Origin confirmed. I briefly peek inside the book and see with relief that the recipes are in English.

But there is more inside the cardboard box — much more. Out comes an array of paper packages, sealed see-through containers, small bottles with cloudy liquids, pantry-sized jars — all with tan paper labels in a rustic, yet still neat, hand-lettered script, the kind you see on scrubbed chalk boards outside of small Mediterranean restaurants as the lunch hour approaches. *Ceci piccoli, aceto forte di campagna, estratto, maccheroni grano duro di Tuminia, lenticchie tipo Villalba*, and more.

In all, there are 14 individually wrapped, tinned or bottled culinary treasures, most labeled *biologico* or organic. A brief letter of explanation is signed "Fabio & Melissa." Further checking tells me that Fabio is Fabio Sireci, a young winemaker at family-owned Feudo Montoni winery located in the rolling hills southeast of Palermo in Sicily's west end. Melissa is Melissa Muller, the dark-eyed, former chef/owner of Bar Eolo and Pastai in New

Intermezzo



York and, perhaps even more important, granddaughter of Francesca, who left her western Sicilian village, Sant'Anna, in 1936 for a new life in America.

Hearing the noise, my wife Ella joins me in the kitchen and is soon examining bottles and jars with as much curiosity as I am. Although we have published two regional cookbooks about the Brandywine Valley together, we seldom cook together except when alternating courses for dinners for friends. We seem to march to the rhythm of different Cuisinarts.

"You know what would be a lot of fun?" I ask. "Take each ingredient and use it in one of the recipes from the cookbook." "Go for it," Ella says, "although I don't think even that bottle of wine will get through many recipes."

I start my culinary journey by first opening the package with the lentils and turning to a recipe in Muller's book for Ustican winter lentil soup. Ustica is a small island about 30 miles north of Palermo, famous for lentils and as the place where fascist leader Mussolini sent political prisoners. The recipe is simple in concept, but comes with several preparatory steps for an array of vegetables and herbs that accompany the lentils — squash, cauliflower and a soffritto of onion, carrot and celery, with garlic, potatoes, rosemary and Swiss chard. Rather than make my own beef broth, I opt for the canned version. There are no surprises in preparation, except that the lentils are done sooner than I anticipate. I toast some slices of rosemary focaccia for sopping up the savory broth and open the bottle of

Nero d'Avola. The wine is lightly fruity with good structure, perfect to match the soup, although the two of us barely put a dent in its magnum-icity.

The soup is so good I quickly finish the first bowl and go for seconds. Slow food eaten quickly.

I find this recipe and others I try later easy to follow, with pleasant surprises in ingredients and preparation steps. Melissa provides informative sections that give historic and cultural context for each food category — vegetables to seafood, pasta to preserved foods. And there are many color photographs of both ingredients and the finished dishes.

I mark the recipe for pasta ribbons with pork ragu as my next challenge.

In the meantime, I begin a long-distance email conversation with Melissa and Fabio after first reading the intro to her book — *Sicily the Cookbook* (Rizzoli, 2017) — as well as online reviews of her New York restaurants and of Fabio's family's history on the winery's website.

"Fabio and I first met — at Feudo Montoni — years back when I was researching for my book," Melissa writes to me. "I carried Fabio's wines at my New York restaurants, and I requested a tour of Montoni through his former New York distributor. Fabio and I met on several occasions after our first meeting, but always for work-related matters — photographs for my book, a TV documentary on Sicily. For our official first date, Fabio took me on a tour around Palermo, and, since it was a hot summer day, we stopped to eat lemon granita at a famous kiosk at the port of Palermo."

During her research, Melissa began planning a permanent return to her grandmother's homeland. "It wasn't difficult to change continents at all because my soul was already rooted in Sicily," Melissa says. "I spent all of my childhood summers in Sicily and always felt more at home here, perhaps because of

the abundance of relatives in my grandmother's village. While living in the U.S., all of my studies and professional work had been dedicated to Sicily."

A few days later, I return to the cookbook. Like most home cooks who find recipes we like, I first look to see if there are any ingredients I want to delete, substitute for, or even add, and which steps to slightly alter. There are no pasta ribbons in my gift box, but there is a box of *maccheroni* — wheat brown in color and fairly large tubes that look a little industrial. The recipe turns into maccheroni with pork ragu.

Otherwise, I stay close to the ingredients — pork butt cut into chunks, sausage without the casings, more soffritto, garlic, tomato paste, red wine, meat broth and a handful of spices that fall into the baking category to give some welcome aroma. The recipe is simple — brown the meat (I use olive oil instead of lard) to get some sticky bits on the bottom, add the wine and gradually bring all the elements together over a three-hour simmer. The cooked pasta is added to the sauce for the finale, and the combination is served with a dollop of ricotta.

"Feudo Montoni is located in the mountains of the heart of Sicily and is like a hermitage," Melissa says, a description that Fabio later echoes. "We are in an isolated area, located in the countryside outside of the villages. This inner core of Sicily is quite lost-in-time, and there is little sign of modern life. Keeping this in mind, the countryside inhabitants are very welcoming, but they take their time before letting a newcomer into the inner circle. "At first I was seen as an outsider by the local families and only superficial stories were shared with me, but now I have created strong bonds with the community. It's become a tradition for the farm workers and their families to share stories about Sicilian farm life over the last century, long-lost or



disappearing recipes and details about foraging.”

“Melissa has a strong knowledge of Sicilian food history,” says Fabio, who is the third generation to farm Montoni’s vines and make the wines. “Her research brought her to all parts of the island, and she knows so many small producers and recipes from other parts of the island that, as a Sicilian, I had never heard of. It’s important to keep in mind that Sicily is a very big island, and the traditions change from village to village and between families.”

Next, I dip into my magic box for one of the bottles — extra-virgin olive oil that comes with a suggestion from the brown-paper inventory to enjoy it plain with warm bread or use it in an appetizer, specifically *matarocco* — tomato and herb pesto for bread. I know I will like this because my everyday early morning breakfast by the light of a computer screen is dark coffee and two

Intermezzo

slices of toasted focaccia with olive oil, rubbed with the halves of a Campari tomato.

The chef’s note is that *matarocco* is a common condiment of the Trapani region near Marsala. On a wine trip to Sicily a few years ago, I spent a lovely hour watching the sun sink into the Mediterranean over the salt flats and wind mills of Trapani. Not surprisingly, sea salt is the finishing touch for this dish, which consists of peeled and seeded plum tomatoes with parsley, basil and celery leaves and pine nuts, garlic and plenty of the thick olive oil.

There is no cooking today and no electric appliances required for the recipe. Instead, there is only a mortar and pestle (one of the most therapeutic of kitchen tasks) to blend the herbs and tomato and then stream the olive oil in a mixing dish. Later, Ella and I enjoy some with focaccia as an afternoon snack. “This would make a great, basic

spaghetti sauce,” she says, and the next evening the leftover *matarocco* does just that.

Perhaps I have dwelled too much on food to this point and not enough on wine — a drink at which Sicily excels. The topography of the island is varied from the mountains of the east, with the still active Mount Etna volcano, to the plains of the west near Marsala, where grain growing competes with winemaking. “Feudo Montoni is an ‘island’ surrounded by six centuries of durum wheat,” Fabio says. Sicily’s most famous wines are made from native grapes with few international varieties grown. “In order to maintain the purity of our unique biotypes of Nero d’Avola, Perricone, Nerello Mascalese, Catteratto, Grillo, Inzolia — and the other heritage grape varieties that we are now identifying — I follow in my ancestors’ footsteps,” Fabio says, using traditional methods of propagating and growing