



YouTuber and retired art teacher Giovanna Bellia La Marca shares tales of home-cooking and recipes from a new edition of her book *Sicilian Feasts: Authentic Home Cooking from Sicily*

From the southernmost town of Sicily, Ragusa, Giovanna Bellia La Marca moved to New York, USA, when she was 10 years old. As a highschooler, she got into Bronx Science — an internationally-renowned high school for gifted young people — and was the only Italian immigrant in her year of 700 pupils. She later taught art at the same school.

After retiring, La Marca says that her husband kept saying: “You should write a cookbook because you have no idea how much you know.”

From a family of professional chefs and prolific home cooks, she had first learnt how to make Sicilian food with her grandmother in Ragusa. She had never stopped visiting Sicily and felt very connected to her culture, accumulating a wealth of knowledge about the island’s history and food.

When she spotted a class called ‘How to Publish a Cookbook’, La Marca went along. The next day, she wrote a 64-page recipe book proposal, which she presented to an editor. The book was commissioned immediately, written in three months, and published in six.

How did you manage to write your book in three months?

“I had been keeping a kind of diary of all the entertaining we did, and each page would have the date, the nature of the dinner party, the guests, and the

menu, and then under that would be every recipe. The effect was that I had tested thousands of recipes already — I didn’t have to do anything. So I sat down and wrote a book in record time.”

What sets Sicilian cuisine apart?

“Italian food is regional; we’ve never codified our cooking. One of the features of Sicilian cuisine is the vegetables; we love vegetables, and part of that is historic. Until, I would say, after World War Two, people had meat on Sunday. Nobody had meat every day, you had vegetables and grains. The meat was measured, but the fruits and vegetables were not, and so we developed a cuisine that was so rich in vegetables that half of this book is vegetarian, and a good portion is vegan.”

How has the history of Sicily affected its food?

“Sicilian cuisine is affected by the people that ruled Sicily, and for 2,500 years, Sicily did not have its own rule — not until it became part of Italy.

“[Before then, Sicily was ruled by] the Greeks, the Arabs, the Spaniards, the French... All of that influenced our cuisine. So, there’s no other region in Italy that makes couscous. But in Sicilian food we have couscous because we had Arab rule for a hundred years. That’s one example.

“If you go to Ragusa, my home

town, the next town over is Modica. When chocolate was discovered in the so-called New World, the Spanish were ruling Sicily at the time, so when cocoa came to Europe, it came to Sicily by way of Spain. There’s a pastry shop in Modica that still makes chocolate using the Aztec recipe. It’s not a smooth chocolate.

“It’s not creamy. It has no butter, no milk, and no cream. It is cocoa and sugar. And they heat it enough to melt the cocoa, but not to melt the sugar completely, so when you eat it, it’s crunchy. The crunch is sugar crystals that haven’t melted.

“Sicily has prickly pears: the fruit of a cactus. This cactus was brought to Sicily and naturalised in the entire island. They’re everywhere; it’s a street food. They are incredibly delicious and sweet. What you do is you melt this thing in your mouth with your tongue, and when you’ve got all that sweetness, you swallow the whole business, including the seeds. In Italian, they’re called the *fichi d’India* (figs of India). Why? Because when travellers went west, they were looking for India; prickly pears came from the New World.”

What food do you always have at home?

“My grandmother used to say, if you have a handful of flour and an egg, you can make dinner. Flour and eggs and milk are always in the house and in reserve. And olive oil; my book is a little bit of an ode to olive oil because it is so delicious and good for you.”

What’s your go-to recipe to feel warm and cosy in winter?

“Soup — any kind of soup. I’m a great believer of soup. My favourite food growing up was a soup that my grandmother made especially for me with collards and pasta and a little tomato, and to this day that’s my soul food.

“I feel more fulfilled with a soup than with almost anything else.”

How important is good nutrition in Sicilian cuisine?

“Nutrition is very important; a Sicilian diet is a nutritious diet. We eat a combination of meat and vegetables and fruit, but never — never — to the extent that Americans eat meat. Meat is flavour; you put it in sauce, and two pounds of meat will serve the whole family.

“The Sicilian will eat grains, he will eat his vegetables, he will eat soups; he will eat a great variety of foods — and that’s considered healthful.”

Notes: 1 US cup = approx 240ml

To make the pie you will also need to make *Giovanna's tomato sauce and savoury pie dough*.



Recipes by Giovanna Bellia La Marca from *Sicilian Feasts: Authentic Home Cooking from Sicily*, text copyright © 2022 by Giovanna Bellia La Marca. Image credit: Francesca LaMarca Sacco. Reprinted with permission of Hippocrene Books, Inc.



SCACCIA RI BRUOCOLI E SAUSIZZA (SAUSAGE AND BROCCOLI PIE)

Ingredients | Serves 6-8

- ½ recipe Savoury Pie Dough (see recipe)
- ½ cup Tomato Sauce (see recipe)
- 1 head broccoli
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 450g Italian pork sausage, casing removed

Method

- Prepare the dough and set aside.
- Preheat the oven to 190C.
- Wash the broccoli, spin dry, and cut the florets off the stems.
- Cut each floret head into 4 quarters through the core.
- Peel the stems, chop them, and add them to the tops.
- Season with the garlic, tomato sauce, olive oil, salt, and pepper.
- Cut the dough into 2 pieces, making one piece slightly larger than the other.
- Take the larger piece, and roll out into a circle to fit a 12-inch (30cm) pie plate.
- Spoon the broccoli pie filling into the dough-lined pan and then dot the top with sausage meat.
- Roll out the smaller piece of dough into a circle to fit the top of the pie plate.
- Cover the filling making sure that the top and bottom crust are well adhered by pressing around the circumference of the pie with the tines of a fork.
- Crimp the edge to be sure that it is closed.
- Glaze the top with the beaten egg.
- Prick the surface in a decorative pattern.
- Bake for 1 hour and 15 mins.
- Remove from the oven, and cover with a dishcloth and then a bath towel so that the scaccia cools gradually while the crust absorbs the juices.
- Let rest about 1 hour before serving. It will still be hot, although it's equally delicious at room temperature.

SARSA RI PUMMARORU (TOMATO SAUCE)

Makes enough sauce for 1lb (450g) pasta

“This is a delicious chunky sauce that is good with eggs, on pizza or on pasta.”

Ingredients | Serves 4-6

- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 x 800g can peeled Italian tomatoes
- 1 tbsp sugar
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 8 fresh basil leaves, chopped

Method

- Heat the olive oil, add the garlic, and as it begins to colour, add the tomatoes, ½ can of water, the sugar, salt, pepper, and the basil.
- Lower the heat, simmer for 30 mins.
- As the sauce cooks, crush the tomatoes with a fork to break them down.
- Turn upside down to coat both sides, cover, and let rise until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour.

PASTA PI' SCACCI SAVOURY PIE DOUGH

Makes enough dough for 2 scaccie

Ingredients

- 8 cups of flour
- 1 tbsp instant yeast
- ½ cup lard or shortening
- 1 tbsp salt

Method

- Place the flour in the bowl of a mixer equipped with a dough hook.
- Add the yeast, and cut in the shortening, and add the salt.
- Pour in 2 cups warm tap water, add the salt, mix for 4 mins at low speed, then knead at medium speed for 6 more mins. To mix by hand, place the flour and the yeast in a large bowl, cut in the shortening and add the salt.
- Make a well in the centre, add the water, and mix the flour from the edge into the middle, slowly incorporating all of the flour into the water.
- Turn the dough on to a floured surface, and knead until smooth and elastic.
- Place the dough in an oiled or sprayed bowl.
- Turn upside down to coat both sides, cover, and let rise until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour.