



Ciao Italia! A Conversation with Mary Anne Esposito

Michele Scicolone (November 06, 2009)



The renowned television host and cookbook author was in New York recently and talked about her latest book "Five Ingredient Favorites" and her cooking show "Ciao Italia", broadcasted nationally and internationally on PBS.

Did you know that the longest-running cooking show on television is Ciao Italia with Mary Ann Esposito? Now in its 20th year, and broadcast nationally and internationally on PBS, the show is partially responsible for, and proof positive of America's long-running affair with Italian cooking.

Mary Ann Esposito is both the show's creator and host and she is as warm and generous in person as she seems on tv. As Mario Batali, the TV chef and restaurateur so aptly put it when asked about Mary Ann's groundbreaking show, "She's the one who put the wheels on the wagon."

Mary Ann Esposito (who I am proud to say is an old friend) grew up near Buffalo, New York where her Italian-born grandmothers, one Neapolitan and the other Sicilian, taught her how to cook. Her



love for her Italian heritage, the language, and culture spurred her to study in Italy. The more she learned, the more she wanted to share her knowledge with others.

Back in the States, she began teaching Italian cooking classes at New Hampshire University. The classes were so popular, she decided to create her own television show. The pilot was shot in Mary Ann's home kitchen and the show was soon picked up by New Hampshire Public Television.

Mary Ann has written 11 cookbooks and she was in town recently to promote her latest, Ciao Italia Five Ingredient Favorites. Over dinner at [Marea Restaurant](#) [2], we talked about her current projects and plans for the future.

Tell me about your new book...

Less is more when it comes to Italian cooking. The philosophy is that if you have quality ingredients to start with, like imported pasta, prosciutto, cheeses, olive oil, etc., you don't have to do a lot to make a good meal. So I did everything in the book from appetizers to desserts based on 5 ingredients. Only salt and pepper don't count.

That's fair! What gave you the idea for this book?

People today don't have a lot of time to spend preparing food. They tell me all the time "I can't do this recipe because it has 12 ingredients." But with 5 ingredients, even with limited time, you can still do them. I see this also in Italy: the culture there is changing. Mama is no longer in the kitchen and Grandma is gone. Now the antipasto bar has taken over where they left off. So I think this book appeals to a younger audience as well.

Was it difficult to find 5 ingredient recipes?

I was able to come up with the 75 recipes with no trouble at all. These are 5 ingredient favorites of mine that are Italian influenced, not necessarily what you would find in Italy. Some are classics, like Spaghetti Carbonara, which is typical of Rome and never has more than 5 ingredients, while others are my improvisations, using typical ingredients in a new way. For example, I thought about how pistachios and pork are both popular ingredients in Sicily. So I came up with a recipe for breaded pork chops with a pistachio crust and I told the story of pistachios in Bronte and the use of pork in Italy.

In New Jersey the other day, I did a cooking demo of a complete seasonal menu made up of 5 ingredient recipes from the book. It consisted of Spaghetti Carbonara, Pistachio Pork Chops, Braised Fennel, Celery and Mushroom Salad, and for dessert, another improvisation: Mascarpone and Nutella Tart. It is an easy meal and each dish had only 5 ingredients.

Do you think people will ever get tired of Italian cooking?

No, I think we still have a lot of work to do. Even though I have been explaining about Italian ingredients for all of these years, people still ask me "What is extra virgin olive oil? What is balsamic vinegar?" I think there is a lot of misinformation out there, especially from places like the Olive Garden, who really should know better. After all, they have a cooking school where they say they train their chefs about real Italian food, yet that is not what they serve in their restaurants.

So what is next for you?

I have started to work on another book. This one will be about Italian family classic recipes.

2009 is a milestone year for us. We just finished filming our 20th season of Ciao Italia. So it is one of the longest running shows of any kind on TV. Me and Bonanza! (laughing) I don't think I want anybody to know that!

The other thing I have done is I established [The Mary Ann Esposito Charitable Foundation](#) [3]. I did



not want to see 20 years of my life to go down the drain. I wanted my work to continue. The Foundation will be a repository of all of the intellectual work that I have done, the books, the website, the tv shows. It will be managed by a third party and my children, Beth and Chris, will be able to decide how it will be used in perpetuity. Eventually we would like to give scholarships to students who are serious about studying Italian cooking.

I haven't thought about designing the next series of shows yet because we are still working on the post-production for this season. I might tie it to my next book, the family classic recipes, or something I have always wanted to do is a series about Italian American Festivals around the country, such as the St. Joseph's tables in New Orleans, or the San Gennaro Feast in New York. I have a whole list of festivals in San Francisco, St. Louis and so on around the country. What got me interested in this idea was when I was in Boston in the summer I went to the Feast of the Three Saints. They were 3 young brothers who lived in Ancient Rome. They refused to give up their Christian faith and were tortured and finally killed. I had never heard of these three saints, but there was such frenzy over them I wanted to learn more. They are the only saints that I have ever seen who are depicted sitting.

How about travel plans? You often take groups on culinary tours to Italy...

Yes, this year we were in Campania and we did classes at the Hotel Luna in Amalfi and went to Naples to eat pizza and visit the Duomo.

Unfortunately, it was just a few days after the big celebration when San Gennaro's blood liquefies and saves the city from Vesuvius for another year and San Gennaro's chapel was closed for cleaning.

Next year, I am thinking of taking the group to Tuscany. I have done 9 of these trips, but had been avoiding Tuscany because people think it is all there is to Italy. But it is a destination many people are interested in, so we decided to do it. Of course we will go to Florence, and I want to go to some smaller towns as well.

It was great seeing Mary Ann and we enjoyed our dinner. We said good-bye on the sidewalk and as she walked away, I think I heard her say, "Until I see you nella cucina again, I'm Mary Ann Esposito."

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