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A CASTLE IN TUSCANY

At the 12th-century Castello di Vicarello, guests feast on beautiful Tuscan food and wine produced on the castle's own estate and cooked by the redoubtable Nonna

REAL PEOPLE

Olema Ginanneschi,
known as Nonna, *right*,
and Aurora Baccheschi
Berti, *left*, cook
together at Vicarello
di Castello



Standing under the shade of a tree in the gardens of Castello di Vicarello, Nonna is rolling out a bed-sheet sized piece of pasta on a table. There's a gentle breeze and the scent of jasmine and lavender fills the air. The 12th-century castle in the Maremma region of southwest Tuscany is framed by vineyards and rolling hills on which wild boar roam. Nonna (Italian for grandma), whose real name is Olema Ginanneschi, was until recently the cook. But such is the mutual affection between her and the castle's owner, Aurora Baccheschi Berti, and her husband, Carlo, that Nonna thinks of them as her second family. She can't keep away and when she's there, she can't help cooking.

"Olema's an extraordinary cook," says Aurora. "She was also born in the castle grounds, had nine children... and everyone loves her. My three children – now grown-up – still call her Nonna."

Nonna introduced Aurora – fashion importer, keen cook and author of the recipe book *My Tuscan Kitchen* – to the local flavours and unwritten recipes handed down from mother to daughter. "She taught me how to make so many local specialities, including tortelli with 20 eggs," says Aurora, waving her hand at the scene under the tree. "As well as the incredible acqua cotta ['cooked water'] soup and scottiglia [Tuscan meat stew]."

It's hard to imagine this tranquil setting was once constantly under siege – albeit during the Middle Ages – but it was latterly a convent and then a farm. "When we first set eyes on it in the 1970s, there were cattle here," says Aurora. "The sky peeped through the roof, and there was no water or electricity. But we fell in love with this ruin and it's taken a lifetime to restore." These days the interiors are a stylish mixture of Indonesian antiques, Moroccan copper bathtubs and 1960s Italian furniture. »

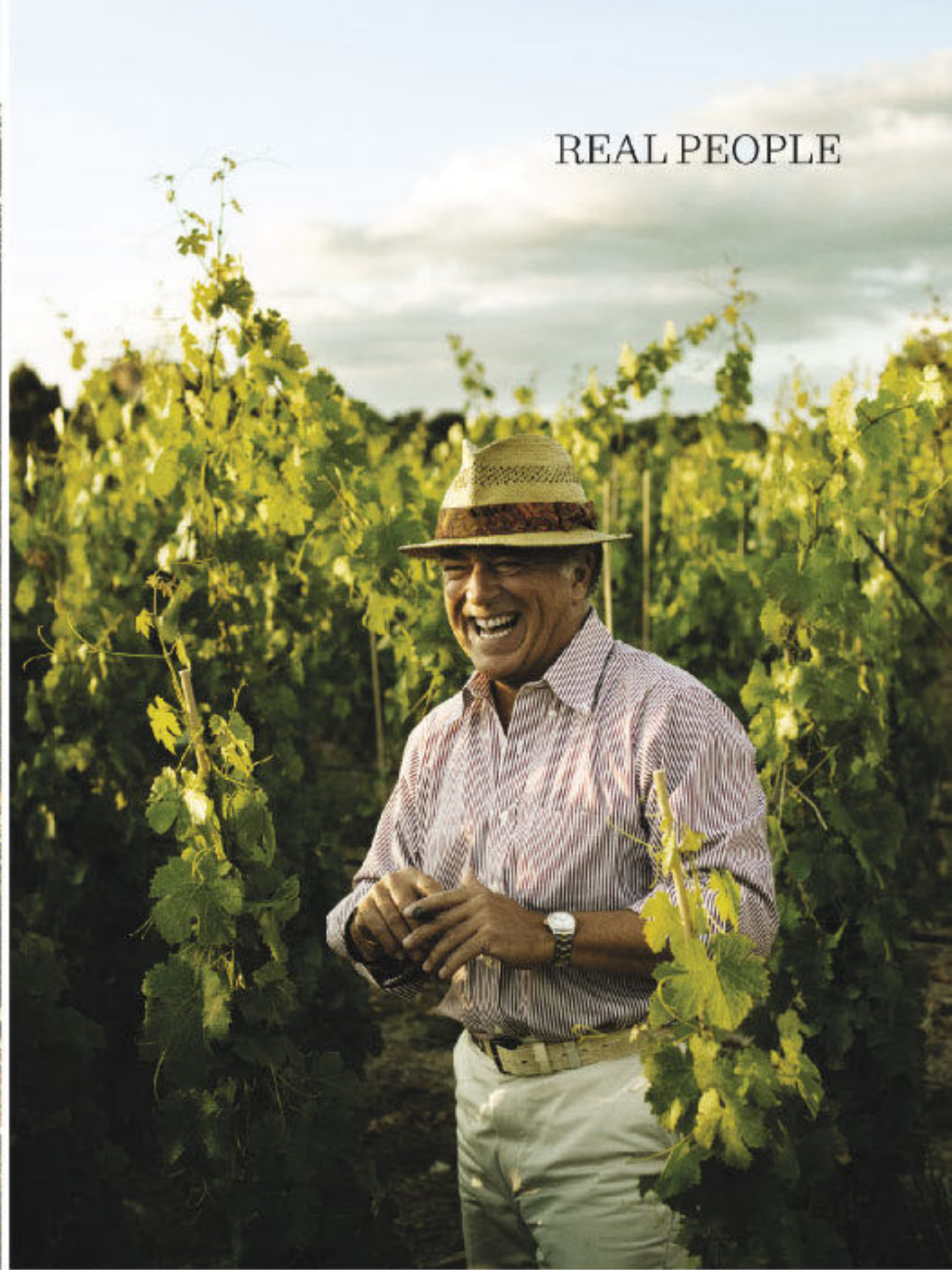
'Nonna's an extraordinary cook. She was also born in the castle grounds, had nine children... and everyone loves her'



Carlo Baccheschi Berti, *above right*, looks after the vineyards, while his wife, Aurora, *below*, is in charge of the castle's kitchens – from which Nonna, *above*, can't keep away



REAL PEOPLE



Tuscan bread salad

Serves 8

Prepare 20 minutes, plus chilling

- 1 red onion, thinly sliced
- 1 cucumber, peeled and thinly sliced
- 5 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 round lettuce, chopped
- 25g pack basil, leaves picked
- 5 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 5 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 400g 3-day-old country-style bread

1 Soak the onion in water for 1 hour, then combine with the cucumber, tomatoes, lettuce, basil, oil and vinegar.

2 Break up the bread and dunk very briefly in cold water. Squeeze the bread dry, then add to the other ingredients; season.

3 Cover the salad; chill for 1 hour before serving.

Per serving 202kcal/5.2g protein/26.4g carbs/4.5g sugars/8.1g fat/1.3g saturated fat/2.5g fibre/0.68g salt



Vicarelo produces two organic red wines, *right*, as well as many of the vegetables served at the castle's communal table, *above*

To fund the constant refurbishment, the castle is also now a hotel. Guests dine with other guests and any family and if Nonna's come to cook, so much the better. And as Nonna is here today, Aurora's job is simply to set a table for lunch under a pergola bursting with fragolino grapes.

Dishes begin to appear, and the conversation rarely strays from the subject of food. "Nonna taught us to forage for asparagus and wild strawberries," says Aurora. "We make almost everything," adds Carlo, "Sheep's milk cheese, focaccia, wild boar sausage... We even have our own cows and porks. I mean pigs." Anything they cannot grow or rear, they obtain from small local producers.

As Nonna brings to the table a tart topped with cherry tomatoes, onions, capers and oregano, she reminds the couple of how she taught them to forage from the garden. "There are wild herbs that grow here," she says. "And the olive oil is from the groves over there. The wine is good too!" And while Carlo himself would like to think he's a photographer's agent turned winemaker, Nonna is quick to put him in his place. "His job is to look after the chickens!" she says, to much laughter.

If Aurora has mastered just a fraction of Nonna's culinary repertoire, guests at the castle are in for a delicious and unforgettable treat.

For information about Castello di Vicarelo, visit vicarelo.it





Onion and cherry tomato tart

Serves 6

Prepare 1 hour, plus chilling

Cook 30 minutes

- 2 tbsp capers, rinsed and chopped
- 1 tsp dried oregano

- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 5 red onions, thinly sliced
- 10 cherry tomatoes

PASTRY

- 200g plain flour
- 50g semolina
- 2 tbsp olive oil

1 Warm the oil in a pan over a medium-low heat. Add the onions and a pinch of salt and cook for 40 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add a drop or two of water if the onions start to catch. Meanwhile, halve the tomatoes, scoop out the seeds and stuff with the capers and oregano.

2 For the pastry, blitz the flour, semolina and a pinch of salt in a food processor. Slowly add the oil, then about 80ml water, until a ball of dough forms. Wrap in clingfilm and chill in the fridge for 30 minutes.

3 Preheat the oven to 200°C, gas mark 6. Roll the pastry to the thickness of a £1 coin and trim to a circle about 30cm in diameter. Leaving a 3cm border around the edge, spoon the onions and tomatoes onto the pastry. Fold in the border all around the edge. Re-roll the pastry trimmings and cut 4 x 2cm-wide strips. Place these in a criss-cross pattern on top of the tart.

4 Bake for 30 minutes until golden. Cool a little before serving.

Per serving 210kcal/5.3g protein/36.9g carbs/5.4g sugars/4.5g fat/0.6g saturated fat/3.5g fibre/0.39g salt



Pepper and anchovy aubergine slices

Makes 8

Prepare 10 minutes

Cook 15 minutes

- 5 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 1 red pepper, sliced

- 1 yellow pepper, sliced
- 1 tsp hot chilli flakes
- 2 tbsp capers, rinsed
- 1 thyme sprig, leaves stripped
- 1 aubergine, cut into 1.5cm slices
- 8 large anchovy fillets

1 Warm 3 tbsp oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat. Add the garlic, peppers and chilli flakes and sauté for about 10 minutes, stirring regularly. Add the capers and thyme; season, then remove from the heat.

2 Heat a griddle pan over a high heat. Brush the aubergine slices with the remaining oil and griddle for 2-3 minutes on each side. Top the aubergines with the peppers, laying the anchovy fillets over the top. You can also serve the pepper mixture on toast.

Per serving 85kcal/1.5g protein/3g carbs/2.8g sugars/7.5g fat/1.1g saturated fat/1.7g fibre/0.6g salt