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CAFE STYLE:
Contessa Raimonda Gaetani
entertains.

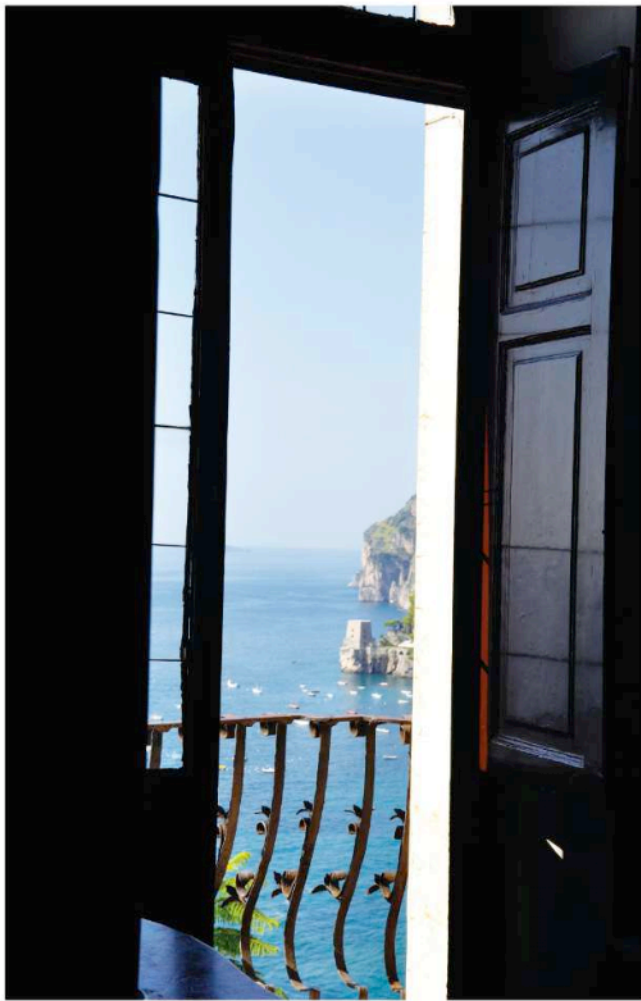


COOKING WITH A CONTESSA

Her noble ancestors entertained lavishly, and this contessa continues the family tradition.

I love pasta! I love pasta e cocozza, pasta and pumpkin, pasta e piselli, pasta and peas, and pasta e cavolfiore, pasta and cauliflower, simple pasta dishes, using the vegetables in season,” says Raimonda. This is Raimonda, she is a contessa. Her green - gray eyes catch the light as she tells about her love for Italian pasta. Raimonda Gaetani dell Aquila d’Aragona is her full name and she reigns from a noble family dating back to the year 1,000, maybe earlier. She is half English, half Italian and 100 percent Neapolitan. She is an internationally known costume and set designer, who is smart, creative, artistic, successful and loves to cook. Her Italian palazzo is home to a perfectly appointed white sitting room set on a Baroque Neapolitano Stingo ceramic floor. Her sunflower yellow terrace houses a mosaic masterpiece titled, From Earth A Flower Is Born, created by Pierpaolo Pinicciusto in the ’40s. Her home, which dates to the early 1800s, resembles a museum. Impeccably organized with every antique and heirloom in place, it is an absolute room with a view. The smell of fragrant café

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI**



GRACIOUS LIVING:
Contessa Raimonda Gaetani entertains
guests and hosts cooking classes at her
elegant family home, Casa Gaetani.

permeates the air and in moment a handsome butler serves rich black espresso in pearly white demitasse cups. Her two loyal dogs, Totò and Olga, sit by her side.

"We all cook in our family at the Casa Gaetani," she says. Her favorites are the simple Neapolitan foods, the old-fashioned foods, salame, sweet provolone and capocollo. "I am not a big antipasto person," she says, "although I love fiori di zucca with provola, panzerotti, salty little pockets filled with cheese that are flash fried, alici burro e toast, anchovy on buttered toasted bread, and of course, uova e alici-boiled eggs filled with bechamel, gelatin, Marsala, and cream and then garnished with anchovies," she adds. Another favorite is acqua pazza, fish in crazy water, and pomodori gratinati, sweet cherry tomatoes filled with Parmigiano-Reggiano, virgin olive oil, herbs and bread, stuffed and baked.

Born in Naples, Raimonda studied architecture at the University of Naples School of Architecture, and spent a sojourn in Paris where she exhibited her paintings at the Salone de la Jeune.

As she opens her two favorite cookbooks, *Mrs. Beeton's All About Cookery*, which was her grandmother's copy, and a *Cucina Napoletana* by Jeanne Carola Francesconi, she narrates stories about her family recipes. "We still follow Mrs. Beeton's cookbook, as my mother was Scottish," the contessa says. "We once put an Italian twist on Mrs. Beeton's Pot Pie classic and made a fish pie with leftover fish, and it turned out to be delicious, she explains.

Her most famous family recipe is for Sette Odori. A seven herb pasta recipe, including garlic, onion, celery, oregano, parsley, basil and tomato, blended together in a food processor and left to set for about a half hour. You then toss al dente spaghetti or maccheroni into the sauce and pan with a little Pecorino Romano (not Parmigiano), grated on top, she says.

Raimonda's grandfather was Scottish, an engineer who started shipbuild-



ing in Naples and who built the first railway in 1840 during the Fascist period, she says. He built Napoli Portici. "My Neapolitan father was Conto Roberto Gaetani dell'Aquila d'Aragona. He came from an old Neapolitan family that dates back to around the year 1000—we have even had a couple of popes in our family along the way," she says.

Her family includes a long line of English and Scottish blue-bloods. Her father's family included vice kings of Sicily and reigned during 1600 to 1650 when the Kingdom of Naples was under Spanish rule. At that time it was called the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and it was the largest and wealthiest of Italian states. It existed to the 1800s until Italy became unified in 1861.

She points to two masterpieces on the wall of her sitting room and explains, "The paintings are of a husband and wife, two vice kings who were from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and date to the 1600s. I cannot recollect if she was Sveva San Severino, a famous beauty of her time, or an Austrian aristocrat, anyway, anyone will tell you that it's wrong," she laughs.

When she is not in the kitchen, she is at work as an internationally known costume and set designer in theater, opera and ballet. She has created costumes and sets for some of the world greats including Franco Zeffirelli's theater production of "Saturday, Sunday,

Monday" by Eduardo de Filippo that starred Sir Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright at the National Theatre; "Filumena," at the Lyric Stage London, Royal Theatre Copenhagen and National Theatre Oslo; "Inner Voices," at the National Theatre London; "Ghosts," at the Rogaland Theatre in Norway; "Grande Magia," at the National Theatre Bergen and Pirandello's "Absolutely Perhaps."

Her opera costumes and sets include "Cavalleria Rusticana, a Pagliacci," directed by Franco Zeffirelli, which starred Plácido Domingo and played at Opera North, Rome Opera, the Kennedy Center Washington, and in Los Angeles. Also on her roster is "Traviata," which played at the Teatro della Maestranza in Seville, Spain, and *Il Travatore*, produced by Franco Zeffirelli, starring Plácido Domingo and played at the Metropolitan in New York. She also designed costumes (2005) for *Pagliacci*, which starred opera superstar Angela Gheorghiu and Plácido Domingo and played at Covent Garden.

Her talents continue in ballet where she designed Esoterik Sat by Lorca Massine for Teatro alla Scala in Milan; *Pulcinella*, for the Teatro la Fenice in Venice; *Gaiete Parisienne*, for the Garnier Theatre in Monte Carlo, and Grand Theatre in Geneva; and Jarm Hampton's production of *Peer Gynt*.

She has an A List of producers and directors in her repertoire including Eduardo de Filippo, Luca de Filippo, Armand Pugliese, Carlo Checchi, Enfrico Maria Salerno, Pirandello, Scarpetta, Mario Monicello, and Carla Fracci and Franco Zeffirelli. She singles out Franco Zeffirelli as her friend, co-worker, artist, and a great man and mastermind. "It has been many years of a very good relationship," she adds.

"The most interesting and memorable guests I have had here were Franco Zeffirelli, Leonard Bernstein, Aleksandr Baryshnikov, Gregory Peck, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton," Raimondo says. "Once Picasso came to Naples and Pompei with Massine, while they were doing 'Parade,' and had lunch at the old trattoria La Stella. Lots of people used to come here," she says.

Once she took Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton shopping for T-shirts at La Tartana. "They bought all the blue and white mariner ones in Positano. They lunched at Tre Sorelle on the Spiaggia Grande, ordered lots of aperitivi, and many hours later they returned by boat to Zeffirelli's villa. They were really crazy in love, passionate about each other, an adorable, charming, beautiful couple," she recalls.

When asked about her love for cooking, she says, "Cooking has come into my work many times, at the National Theater in London (then called the Old Vic) we made ragu for the theater performance, 'Saturday, Sunday, Monday,' by Franco Zeffirelli. The whole play is about cooking, and we cooked real onions on the set so the whole theater smelled of onions. Everyone left the theater to find an Italian restaurant. There was a trattoria piccolino nearby that instantly became quite popular, as people left the play hungry!"

Once when she was at the National Theater in Bergen, Norway, she found "the most beautiful fish market. We were again working on 'Saturday, Sunday, Monday' and the set called for a kitchen, and so I asked for a real working kitchen to be built. I went to the local fish market and bought the most beautiful mussels, clams, shrimp and a package of spaghetti, and then cooked on the set. The most expensive part was the wine, and I fed the whole crew," she says. "The Norwegians never had seafood with spaghetti - they make their seafood baked and stuffed, never with spaghetti. The whole cast and crew ate huge dishes of spaghetti. They never ate so well in their lives, it was one big Neapolitan dinner," she explains.

Raimonda has homes in Rome, Tuscany,

and "a little house in London near King's Road in Cheney Place. England is a place where I worked a lot. I have lots of friends there, and I don't want to lose the English part of my upbringing. But Positano is forever," she says.

Raimonda Gaetani's villa, hosts The Villa Azzura Cooking Program with Cooking Vacations; her family recipes are included.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. Cook with Maria at Cooking Vacations Italy. See www.cooking-vacations.com or phone (617) 247-4112 for more information.

Spaghetti with Cauliflower

- 4** **tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 1¾** **ounces pancetta or prosciutto**
- 2** **cloves garlic, whole**
- 1¾** **pounds cauliflower, cleaned and chopped**
- 1** **teaspoon tomato concentrate**
- Salt, to taste**
- Pepper, if desired**
- 1** **pound dry spaghetti, broken**
- Chopped fresh parsley, to taste**

In a large sauté pan, heat the olive oil and sauté garlic and pancetta until the garlic is lightly colored or "blond." Remove garlic and discard. Add cauliflower and tomato concentrate. Cover and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the cauliflower is tender. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Meanwhile, cook the spaghetti in boiling salted water until half cooked. Drain and save the pasta water. Add the spaghetti in with the cauliflower and add several ladles of pasta water, as needed to create a creamy, but not too watery sauce. Add chopped fresh parsley to taste and serve with a pinch of chopped fresh parsley on top.

Makes 6 servings.

Pasta with Squash

- 2** **pounds squash, spaghetti, acorn or butternut**
- 2** **whole cloves of garlic**
- ½** **cup extra virgin olive oil**
- 1** **whole chili pepper**
- Salt, to taste**
- 1** **pound tubetti (ziti-style) pasta**

Chopped fresh parsley, to taste

Prepare squash by removing seeds, skin and chopping into small cubes. In a large pan, sauté garlic with olive oil until light in color or "blond." Remove garlic and add the chopped squash, chili pepper and a pinch of salt, to taste. Cover and cook on low heat, adding a bit of water, if necessary. The squash should break down and become creamy.

In the meantime, cook pasta in boiling salted water until very al dente. Drain and add to the squash with a little bit of pasta water. Allow the pasta to finish cooking in the squash sauce. Five minutes before removing from heat, add chopped parsley, to taste. Serve with a pinch of chopped fresh parsley on top.

Makes 6 servings.

Dark Cherry & Cream Pie

For the short-crust pastry:

- 2** **cups flour**
- ½** **cup butter, at room temperature**
- 1¼** **cups sugar**
- 3** **egg yolks**
- Zest of 1/2 lemon**

For the pastry cream:

- 3** **egg yolks**
- ⅔** **cup sugar**
- ⅓** **cup cornstarch**
- 12** **ounces whole milk**
- 1** **teaspoon vanilla**
- 1** **strip lemon peel**
- 7** **ounces candied dark cherries or cherry marmalade**
- 1** **egg yolk**
- Powdered sugar, as needed**

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

For the dough:

Mix all ingredients together, working the dough until just combined. Be careful not to overwork. Form into a ball and chill in the refrigerator for a half hour to an hour.

For the pastry cream:

In a medium saucepan, mix the egg yolks with the sugar using a wooden spoon. Mix vigorously always in the same direction until the mixture becomes light colored. In a small bowl, mix cornstarch with a little milk. Pour



SEVEN FLAVOR PASTA

cornstarch mixture into the eggs and mixing continuously, add the rest of the milk little by little and the vanilla. Add the lemon peel and place on medium heat to thicken the cream. Stir continuously, always in the same direction until thickened. Remove lemon peel and allow mixture to cool for a half hour.

To assemble:

Prepare the pie by rolling out a bit more than half of the pastry dough until large enough to cover an 8-inch pie pan. Place the dough in the pan. Spoon about half the pastry cream into the pan, then add the cherries or cherry marmalade, and then top with the rest of the cream.

Roll out the other part of the pastry dough and cover the pie. Brush the top with egg yolk and bake in a preheated oven at 350°F for 30 to 45 minutes until the crust is golden. Remove and allow to cool. Serve with powdered sugar dusted on top.

Makes 8 servings.

Seven Flavor Pasta

This is a recipe passed down in Contessa Raimonda Gaetani dell'Aquila d'Aragona's family.

- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 pinch oregano
- ½ small bunch parsley
- 1 bunch basil
- 4 medium tomatoes, chopped
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Pinch of sugar
- 14 ounces spaghetti or rigatoni
- Pecorino Romano, grated
- Basil leaves for garnish

Mix all of the ingredients except pasta, cheese and basil in a food processor.

Meanwhile, cook the spaghetti or rigatoni in boiling salted water until al dente. Drain, but reserve some pasta water. Mix the pasta

with the sauce, adding a few spoonfuls of the pasta water. Serve with a few fresh leaves of basil and grated Pecorino Romano on top.

Makes 6 servings.

Note: If you wish to avoid raw onions or garlic, gently sauté the sauce for 5 minutes so before serving.

Pasta with Cannellini Beans

- 1 large onion
- 1 carrot
- 1 celery stalk
- 3 to 4 garlic cloves
- ¼ cup parsley
- ¼ cup basil leaves
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 can of Pastene crushed tomatoes (or other type of Italian crushed tomatoes)
- 1 teaspoon of black pepper
- 1 teaspoon of sea salt, plus extra to taste
- 6 to 8 cups water
- 2 (16-oz.) cans of drained cannellini beans
- 1 pound tubetti (ziti-style) pasta
- 1 teaspoon of crushed red pepper
- Pecorino or Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, grated for garnish

In a food processor: add onion, carrot, celery, garlic, parsley and basil. Blend until chopped fine.

In a large sauce pan warm olive oil and add the chopped vegetables from the food processor; sauté for 5 to 7 minutes. Add crushed tomatoes, black pepper and sea salt and sauté another 5 to 7 minutes.

Add water and cook on low heat for about 20 to 25 minutes. Add cannellini beans and simmer slowly for 20 additional minutes.

In a large pasta pan bring water to boil and add salt to taste. Cook the pasta al dente. Drain. Add the cooked pasta to sauce and mix. Add additional salt, black pepper, crushed red pepper to taste, and garnish with Pecorino or Parmigiano-Reggiano grated cheese. Drizzle with extra virgin first cold pressed olive oil.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

-Recipe courtesy of La Cucina Napoletana by Jeanne Carola Francesconi.