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CESARE CASELLA: A BRIDGE BETWEEN TUSCANY AND NEW YORK

by Lucy Gordan

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Tuscan Chef Cesare Casella is a Renaissance man of Italian gastronomy. The author of three books: *Diary of a Tuscan Chef*, *Italian Cooking for Dummies*, and *True Tuscan*, the most important breeder in the United States of *chianine* and a new hybrid pig called "Stonewall," the owner of Mountain Sweet Berry Farm where he produces beans, vegetables and grain, the owner of Maremma restaurant in Manhattan, and professor at ALMA, Casella is also the Dean of the newly opened Italian Culinary Academy in lower Manhattan. Lucy Gordan recently interviewed him on site exclusively for *Epicurean Traveler*.



Gordan: Our tastes in food are intimately connected to our childhood, can you describe your first memories of food?

Casella: The smell of dough and bread baking in a wood-burning oven probably, because my family made bread every week. With the leftover dough we made pizza which I love.

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Maremma's Mezzanine



Maremma's Dining Room

Gordan: Your mother and father owned the trattoria *Vipore*; where was it and what does *Vipore* mean?

Casella: In my local dialect — I'm from the hills just 5 kilometers outside Lucca in Tuscany — *Vipore* means viper. According to a local legend, *Vipore* was the nickname of the owner of my family's trattoria in the 18th century. It's also the name of the place where the trattoria is located. It was on a back road, used by bandits to avoid tolls, which connected Florence — a day's ride on horseback — to the sea. The owner supposedly behaved like a viper. He never attacked unless attacked first.

Gordan: Were your parents happy that you chose to follow in their footsteps?

Casella: These days many parents encourage their children to become chefs because now it's considered a prestigious profession with the possibility of becoming world-famous like a movie star or a champion athlete. Instead, 30 years ago being a chef was a disgrace, a misfortune. My parents did everything in their power to discourage me. They'd say to me: "We've already suffered enough; we speak from experience, so choose any other profession you want: architect, doctor, teacher, anything, but not chef..."

Gordan: So why didn't you listen to them?

Casella: Cooking is part of my DNA. I've always lived in the kitchen, in a restaurant. When I decided to attend hotel school, to discourage me my parents cut off my allowance. It had no effect. Cooking and food are my passion, my life, still in crescendo today.



Gordan: How did they divide up their different responsibilities at *Vipore*?

Casella: My mother ruled the kitchen. My father and his mother made homemade pasta and my father grilled the meat. Otherwise he was in charge of provisions. He was fanatic about finding the best of every product we had on the menu. It was no problem for him to travel 100 kilometers to seek out the best porcini or pecorino. We had to serve the best. I've inherited this mania from him. My mother refused to teach me to cook. She used to kick me out of the kitchen when she was teaching our summer interns.

Gordan: *Vipore's* specialties?

Casella: Tortelli, pasta with porcini sauce, grilled meats. Country cooking with fresh ingredients. As a child, I learned more about food than about grammar and history.

Gordan: What steps did you take to transform *Vipore* from a country trattoria into a restaurant with a Michelin star and world-famous clients like Tom Cruise and Henry Kissinger?

Casella: When I returned home after hotel school and my military service, I gradually added new more refined and modern dishes to *Vipore*'s menu still using only fresh and local ingredients.

Gordan: So the transformation was gradual, but inevitable?

Casella: Yes. My passion for cooking and food has always overwhelmed me. It's beyond my control. For example, the first day I had my driver's license I drove to *San Domenico* in Imola to eat. From then on almost every Monday and Tuesday, when *Vipore* was closed, I'd drive somewhere to a famous restaurant to see what was on the menu and to eat. I've eaten at *Enoteca Pinchiorri* and *Bocuse's* between 20-25 times, for example.

Gordan: Do you consider yourself first Tuscan and then Italian?

Casella: Since I started teaching Italian cuisine at the French Culinary Institute, thanks to the research I've done on the cuisine of all Italy's 20 regions, I've begun to think of myself as Italian, but not as a European. Before that, I was Tuscan, and more Tuscan, and then more Tuscan you cannot get.

Gordan: Who was your mentor?

Casella: My mother for her natural cooking talent and my father for his indefatigable search for the best available products.

Gordan: What did you learn from them?

Casella: That the fresh ingredient in itself is as important as knowing how to cook it. For example, I am the most important breeder of *chianine* (a breed of Tuscan cows) in the United States. I own 53 on my farm "Mountain Sweet Berry Farm" in Monticello, New York, an hour and a half north of the city. Many of my farmhands are autistic.

I wanted to import *cinta senese* or the Sienese girdled pig, too, best translated as the Sienese Saddleback, but they refused me permission. The US Department of Agriculture said yes; the Italian Ministry of Agriculture said no; not what you would expect. So I bred a hybrid which will be registered as "Stonewal.I" I've gone to all this trouble because, like my father, I'm fanatic about the quality of the products I serve at *Maremma*. In New York you can find just about everything, but it's not always the same quality level as in Italy. In his new book, *Il Codice Marchesi* (The Marchesi Code or Codex), Gualtiero Marchesi says, "As for Italian cuisine abroad, even if made with Italian products and cooked by Italian chefs, it will always be different from Italian regional cuisine, cooked in Italy by Italian chefs."

Gordan: How did you happen to jump across the Atlantic?

Casella: As I've already told you, many American VIPs came to *Vipore* during the summer. For starters, I came to New York to see these clients/friends. Then I started cooking benefit dinners for the charities they were interested in. Before long, I received a job offer from Pino Luongo, the owner of *Cocco Pazzo*, in those days the most hip restaurant in New York. When I turned him down, he offered me a one-week a month consultancy. To that I couldn't say "no." One thing leads to another, one week turns into two and so here I am.



Gordan: Why did you decide to stay in New York?

Casella: I married an American journalist, Eileen Daspin. She'd come to interview me at *Vipore* for *W*. She was a correspondent in Milan. My only regret is that Italy is so far away. Each time I go, I lose

two days in travel time. I know that if I didn't have the chance to go back to Italy every two or three months, I'd have serious survival problems. I like it here in New York, but I feel Italian, not Italian-American. When I'm here, I don't feel like an immigrant. I feel at home, but without a doubt, I'm Italian, even if I'd also find it hard to readapt my ways to living there fulltime.

Gordan: You are from Lucca. Why did you name your restaurant *Maremma* after another region of Tuscany?

Casella: For two reasons. One, there's already a restaurant named *Lucca* in Manhattan, and two, because the Maremma is a region of Tuscany still undiscovered by Americans. I like the rugged "Wild West" spirit of the Maremma. I like *butteri* — the cowboys of Italy. I wanted to combine the culture and cuisine of this southwestern part of Tuscany with those of the American southwest. When this idea didn't take off, my menu became Tuscan and a big success. From this experience I learned that, even though New Yorkers can be very international and open-minded, they are not at all adventurous gastronomically-speaking. They want to know what they are eating. Italian has to be 100% Italian.

Gordan: *Maremma's* specialties?

Casella: Tuscan with Casella flair.

Gordan: Besides being a chef and the owner of *Maremma*, you are a professor at ALMA, the author of several books about cooking and Tuscany and now the Dean of ICA. What aspect of your work do you enjoy the most?

Casella: For most of my life I've been lucky to be able to do what I love doing. Besides Pino Luongo's full-time job, I've turned down other very lucrative offers, one very recent one was to open and run a chain of "Mediterranean" restaurants. I considered the possibility — there were too many zeroes involved to turn it down flatly, but I wouldn't have been able to choose the menu. Freedom of choice and of creativity are fundamental to my well-being. Here at ICA, for example, I have *carte blanche* to create from scratch an Academy of Italian Cuisine. It's bliss to share with others what you love and know about.

Gordan: So you like all aspects of your work?

Casella: Yes, especially "The Bean Republic," a charitable organization like Mountain Sweet Berry Farm, where I produce and sell beans, vegetables, grain and Italian spices — all organically grown. I have a great time selling my products to the best chefs — Italian and not Italian — who work in the States.

Gordan: Are you writing another book?

Casella: Yes, I'm working on four different projects — three books and a television show. One book talks about the culinary rapport between my mother and me. We began working on it together two years ago when she gave me her hand-written notebooks of her recipes. Then I started to search my memory for others of her recipes that she had not written down and to try to reconstruct them in the kitchen. The second book is about Italian cuisine for professional chefs. It's going to be the text book for ICA's course and will be published in a couple of years after we've perfected the recipes here at ICA. The third book will also be a cookbook of Italian cuisine by my friends and chefs that I admire. Each region of Italy will be represented. From this book I want the American public to learn that Italian cuisine is not a national cuisine, but a regional one.

Gordan: ICA is housed in a new wing of The French Culinary Institute and before becoming the Dean of ICA, you taught a course in Italian cuisine at the Institute. What is the difference between Italian and French cuisine?

Casella: Italian cuisine is about women. In many of the best restaurants in Italy and Italian restaurants abroad the chefs are women. This fact is not taken into consideration enough. Personally I can't think of any restaurants with two or three Michelin stars in France where the chef is a woman, while in Italy there are several.

Gordan: You've collaborated a long time now with Gualtiero Marchesi; how did you meet?

Casella: Too many years ago I attended the cooking lessons called *Palato Assoluto* that he gave at his first, then newly-opened restaurant in Via Bonvesin de la Riva in Milan. I came all the way from Lucca to study and eat at his restaurant whenever I could. Without a doubt Marchesi is the best Italian chef. I admire him for his talent and his knowledge of food.

Gordan: In a nutshell how would you describe Marchesi?

Casella: Divine.

Gordan: Other chefs you admire?

Casella: I owe a lot to Angelo Paracucchi, Franco Colombani, and Annie Pinchiorri. She is in a class all her own. She's been at the top of the top since the 1980s. There was a time when I ate at *Enoteca Pinchiorri* every two weeks, so I've put her through the ringer all right.

A young chef I admire a great deal is my friend Massimiliano Alajamo at the restaurant *Le Calandre* in Sameola di Rubano near Padua.

Gordan: Name three characteristics essential for becoming a top chef?

Casella: 1) To have your own talk show; 2) to be an expert at choosing your ingredients; and 3) to respect your client. My father told me over and over again that it is the client that gives us our livelihood, that the client can choose to go to whatever restaurant he or she wants, yet he or she has chosen you. You must treat the client as you would a guest in your own home, with deep respect. My clients are sacred for me.

Gordan: Like Midas and Marchesi you are very successful at everything you do; why?

Casella: Thank you. To be compared to Marchesi is the greatest compliment I could receive. Marchesi has class, style and a strong personality. He's his own person, an artist. I think the secret of our successes is that we have both always done what we love doing and are always one step ahead of the game. Marchesi put Italian cuisine on the world map. He brought Italian home-cooking into the restaurant.

Gordan: ICA is just opening now; what do you think it will be like ten years from now?

Casella: ICA will be the spokesman for authentic Italian cuisine. Like Marchesi, our graduates will be ambassadors of Italian cuisine which will grow more and more popular.

Gordan: Up to now you've told me about Cesare Casella the professional; I'd also like to know your personal preferences. For example, your favorite foods?

Casella: At the moment sushi, a recent discovery for me.

Gordan: Wines?

Casella: It depends on the season of the year, what I'm about to eat, and my mood. I don't have a problem drinking champagne with a steak or red wine with fish. I'm not a conformist. I drink what I feel like drinking at that moment. Generally-speaking, I prefer white wines or important red wines as long as they are Italian.

Gordan: Flowers?

Casella: Jasmine.

Gordan: Color?

Casella: Green.

Gordan: Are you a gourmand?

Casella: Yes, but of salami and cheese, not sweets. I produce salami at my farm because it's against the law to import homemade salami from Italy. In New York you can find good brands of salami, but they're not the same quality as homemade. Whenever I go to Italy, I feast on salami.

Gordan: A dish you don't like?

Casella: Anything badly prepared or seasoned with truffle-flavored olive oil.

Gordan: How do you spend your free time? Your hobbies?

Casella: I must have a psychological problem here because all my hobbies are connected to food. I

love the countryside, raising cows and pigs, gardening, going to farmers' markets, and eating. Whenever I try to interest myself in a non-food-related hobby, I drop it quickly. It doesn't keep my interest.

Gordan: Where do you go on vacation?

Casella: Italy of course and the American West. There is so much I still haven't seen here or in Italy. I love the coast of Oregon and northern California.

Gordan: Chefs are well-known for having collections of motorcycles, fast and fancy cars, and watches; what do you collect?

Casella: Cows, my 53 *chianine*.

Gordan: Would you still choose to be a chef?

Casella: Here at ICA 60% of our students have enrolled with the intent of changing careers. I don't have that problem. I always wanted to be a chef. I don't know how to do anything else. I am really lucky. My passions, my work and my hobbies are all related to food!

Gordan: Any new projects for the near future?

Casella: Yes, a top-quality gourmet shop with a restaurant attached. It will be named for an Italian city and will serve only local products that the clients can also buy after their meal.

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