

A FAMILY AFFAIR

By Lisa J. Curtis

Posted on June 17, 2001

... [Comments](#)



The Brooklyn Papers / Greg Mango

When I tasted wines at the spectacularly restored Niebaum-Coppola vineyard and estate in Napa Valley, Calif., last summer, I never imagined that months later Francis Ford Coppola, godfather of "The Godfather," would be sitting at a red-and-white checked table on Eighth Street in Park Slope chatting over bowls of his pasta and sauce.

But that's exactly where this connoisseur of fine wines and creator of movie classics was on Monday – outside the Morisi-Coppola Pasta Factory between Third and Fourth avenues, hosting an Italian festa to celebrate both expansion plans for his Mammarella brand of dried pasta and his father's birthday.

Paramount Home Entertainment co-hosted the event with Coppola to announce the release this October of a DVD collection of the three "Godfather" films, which will include Coppola's behind-the-scenes anecdotes.

For fans of his wines, which range from an inexpensive "Coppola" to an exclusively priced "Rubicon," it comes as no surprise that the filmmaker would come up with his own brand of pasta. And just as he went to California to make fine wines, he came to Brooklyn to make "authentic Italian" pasta.

The filmmaker partnered in 1998 with Park Sloper Peter Morisi, owner of Morisi Macaroni, to form the Morisi-Coppola Pasta Factory. Coppola had already been selling the pastas in his winery's gift shop, but it was not until Morisi hit hard times that the two joined forces. The wholesale factory makes the pastas sold under Coppola's Mammarella label.

Both Morisi and Coppola have a passion for high quality. Coppola seems to feel his drive for perfection stems from his ethnicity. "Italians are good at anything they do – even being gangsters," he said with a smile, when asked by a reporter at Monday's press conference cum block party whether he wasn't stereotyping Italians in the "Godfather" films.

Morisi and Coppola's determination to preserve centuries-old traditions is why the company makes these handcrafted pastas in the pasta rustica style found in southern Italy.

The four Mammarella cuts – gemelli, farfallone, quadrefiore and rosette (12 ounces sell for \$3.99) – are made using antique bronze molds and dried on wooden racks as they were more than 100 years ago.

On Monday, Morisi demonstrated the 1913 pasta press, or extruder, he uses to make the quadrefiore, or "square flowers," pasta. Next to him, in a beige linen suit, Coppola demonstrated to the audience of press and paparazzi the heavy bronze molds Morisi was using to form the thick pasta shapes.

"He loves the place. I remind him of his Uncle Ziggy," Morisi told GO Brooklyn. "He's a gourmand and a raconteur. It fits."

The old machine gives the pasta a substantially more chewy quality.

The dough, made of durum wheat flour, is pushed through the press, fitted with the brass plates.

"The pasta has a rough texture, which absorbs the sauce better," said Morisi. The quadrefiore falls out from the press onto simple, wood-framed screens and goes into a drying room where it will dry "naturally with low temperature drying" for four to five days, according to Morisi.

Coppola's pastas feature a picture of his mother, Italia, at age 17, on the Mammarella label. Mammarella, which means "dear little mama," is the family's affectionate term for their grandmother. His mother is now 89.

Coppola also offers three organic sauces from family recipes that reflect his Neapolitan heritage: arrabbiata, pomodoro basilico and puttanesca.

To create a true homemade taste, organic chopped tomatoes are used versus conventional tomato paste and no sugar or additional salt is added to the Mammarella line.

Arrabbiata means "angry" in Italian and is appropriate for this spicy sauce with slivers of fresh garlic, chopped parsley, red pepper and a hint of red wine – which simply had too much zest for my delicate palate. The pomodoro basilico (tomato basil) has "a lot of chopped onion, but no garlic" according to Coppola – and was a sweeter success. The puttanesca is a true representation of this hearty Italian favorite with chunks of garlic, whole capers and olives. (The sauces sell for about \$6 for 26 ounces.)

Eighth Street residents Monday sampled free bowls of the pastas and peppers, rustic breads and glasses of Coppola wines – his Chardonnay being a much touted favorite on the hot and humid day.

The June 11 event was also a celebration of Coppola's father's birthday, or Carmine Coppola Day as proclaimed by a banner inside the main tent. Carmine Coppola, who died in 1991 was a composer

who scored parts of the "The Godfather" as well as "Apocalypse Now."

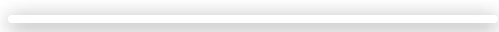
"My dad was very clever," said Coppola, who grew up in Great Neck, NY. "Every year on June 11 he took us to Coney Island, to the Steeplechase. So each year we were as excited about June 11 as we were about Christmas."

Coppola added a bit of life to the event with a brass band that performed music by Carmine Coppola and fellow "Godfather" composer Nino Rota. Coppola also had Eighth Street transformed with green and red tinsel spanning the street and Italian flags fluttering along the iron railings of the front stoops, by long-time collaborator and Oscar-winning production designer, Dean Tavoularis.

Coppola joked that while making a movie may take a year and a half to develop, then a year to get the green light to make it and a year to film and edit it, "with food, you take 20 to 30 minutes and you're done and they love it. They say, 'that was great.'"

Though it's unlikely he'll set up another Tuscan fantasyland like his Niebaum-Coppola vineyard in Brooklyn, perhaps Coppola will consider establishing another Cafe Niebaum-Coppola on Brooklyn's Fifth or Seventh avenues. (There's one in San Francisco's Italian enclave, North Beach, after all.)

Until then, we can enjoy the substantial Mammarella pastas and, as Morisi says, share his enthusiasm to "keep the tradition alive" in one Park Slope pasta factory.



Mammarella pastas and other shapes and flavors are sold in the Morisi-Coppola Pasta Factory store [186

Eighth St., (718) 788-2299] on Fridays and Saturdays from 9 am to 3 pm.