

The good food father

It was Francis Ford Coppola's devotion to Italian family tradition that propelled him into the Hollywood firmament. Now that same passion is expressed through his love for food and drink - which is why most of his productions these days come from his Californian vineyard and his pasta factory in Brooklyn

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Francis Ford Coppola settled his bulky frame into one of the tight wooden booths at Rao's, New York's most exclusive restaurant. This conservator of old-fashioned Italian-American tradition had never been to the 35-seat family-owned spot that opened on East 114th Street in 1896, at a time when East Harlem was a thriving Italian community. Rao's caters to a mix of regular customers, some high-profile, some not, but all to the exclusion of most others. It took four days to secure a reservation. For Francis Ford Coppola.

Then he planted two bottles of his own red wine on the table. 'I had trouble getting past the door,' he said. 'All these people stopped me and wanted to talk to me about my films. I was glad I had a couple of bottles of my wine so I could show them I do other things.'

As much as Coppola's fame depends on films like *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the newly re-edited and recently released *Apocalypse Now Redux*, he's easily as proud of his wines as his Oscars. And one of the two bottles he brought to the restaurant was an inspired choice.

Like Rao's, Coppola's 1998 *Edizione Pennino*, a hard-to-get \$35 zinfandel grape, pays homage to Italian immigrant history. It celebrates his own eponymous maternal grandfather, a songwriter who came to New York from Naples in 1905. The label, copied from the one used by his grandfather's music company, shows Mount Vesuvius and the Statue of Liberty. The corks are stamped with names of his grandfather's songs.

'My mother kept complaining that I was naming everything Coppola this and Coppola that,' he added. 'What about the Penninos, she kept saying, they're family too.' The zinfandel grape is supposed to be related to the primitivo grape of southern Italy. 'You can see how strong the connection is,' he said.

Family. Tradition. History. These elements drive the engine of Coppola's unique creative, frequently grandiose vision, often in movies and certainly when it comes to food and wine. Before he started filming *The Godfather*, he assembled the cast at a big table, with Marlon Brando at the head of it and the other stars, including Robert Duvall, James Caan and Al Pacino, around it. It was a lavish meal. He had his sister, Talia Shire, who is also in the film, do the serving. 'They were going to be a family in the movie so they had to learn to behave like a family, and have the kind of memories of special occasions, the eating and drinking and interacting, that members of a family would retain,' Coppola explained. Were he to repeat that rehearsal exercise now, the meal would surely feature the wines, pasta, olive oil and pasta sauces he and his wife Eleanor, a documentary film maker, manufacture under their Mammarella brand name at their estate in California.

'For me food is the best way for people to connect,' he said. 'They can relate on a sensual level. And a good meal is instant gratification, unlike a movie

which takes years. When I'm not making a film - and these days I'm making them less and less because so much of it is about business and not art - I want to do something with food and wine. My wife believes that my restless creativity is what has me looking for some new little hotel or a new wine, the things that please me.' With *Apocalypse Now Redux* out of the way, he has started casting *Megalopolis*, a sweeping, futuristic retelling of Roman history set in New York that he has spent 10 years developing.

Coppola was born in Detroit in 1939, grew up in New York City and then in a suburb on Long Island. His father, Carmine, was a composer and musician. Coppola remembers wine as a part of his life since childhood, when he drank it diluted. His uncles made their own wine in the basement of their homes, even during Prohibition. Francis always wanted a little vineyard of his own, so he could do the same.

In 1974, with one Oscar on the mantelpiece and flush with the success and profits from *The Godfather*, he and Eleanor were looking for a modest weekend retreat for themselves and their children (including actress/director daughter Sofia Coppola, now married to fellow film director Spike Jonze) in the wine country, north of San Francisco, where they were living, and where Coppola's company, American Zoetrope, was based.

While showing them what seemed to be suitable houses, the estate agent decided to take a detour to a gem of a property that was about to be auctioned, the historic Gustave Niebaum estate at Rutherford in the Napa Valley. 'It's not for you but I wanted you to see it anyway,' the estate agent said.

But he was wrong. The Coppolas were tempted by the sprawling old Victorian sea captain's house on 1,560 acres. Their bid was not successful but a year later the estate came on the market again, and the Coppolas snapped it up for \$2 million. The frame house, set back from Highway 29 which slices from south to north right down through the Napa Valley, needed some work. The lawns and vineyards stretch from the road back to the western hills, the Mayacamas Mountains, and the 700 metre peak of Mount St John. The land, in the central viticultural area of the valley, is celebrated for its soil, called 'Rutherford dust', and is especially suited to cabernet sauvignon.

Coppola had his vineyard. He could make a little wine on the side just like Uncle Mikey, or so he thought, and sell the rest of the grapes. He had already acquired a taste for good wine, thanks in part to having shared a bottle of RomanÉE-Conti with the actor Bill Cosby and having been introduced to Bordeaux first growths, including Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, by Gore Vidal when the two collaborated on a film.

Furthermore, he was now the proud owner of an important piece of California wine history. Gustav Nybom was a Finnish sea captain who made his fortune in furs, first in Alaska before it was purchased from Russia and became part of the United States, and then in California. In 1880, having changed his name to Gustave Niebaum, he bought the Inglenook estate and the adjacent property, and by 1887, he finished the imposing stone winery chateau. Within a few years, Inglenook wines, which were the first to be estate-bottled in California, were winning prizes.

After Niebaum's death, control of the estate passed to other family members until finally, in 1936, most of the responsibility fell to John Daniel Jr, his great-nephew. He continued to run the estate and make exceptional wines until 1964 when, desperately in need of funding to modernise the operation, Daniel sold the Inglenook name, the chateau, and 94 acres of the land to Allied Grape Growers, a cooperative owned by United Vintners, which in turn sold it to Heublein. The Coppolas acquired only part of this legacy, Gustave Niebaum's house and most of the land, including 125 acres of vineyards. But not the Inglenook chateau and winery. The local Napa community did not necessarily welcome the famous Hollywood director but the general

sentiment was that the Coppolas were a better alternative to the huge, impersonal corporations that were starting to buy wineries.

'I still thought I'd sell most of the grapes and use a little to make some wine for myself, like my family used to do,' Coppola said. Then he described an evening when Robert Mondavi, the owner of the Robert Mondavi Winery in nearby Oakville, one of America's leading winemakers, came to his home. 'I opened a bottle of 1890 Inglenook I had found in the cellar. It was spectacular. Then and there Bob insisted that I think about making a great wine. Imagine if we had inherited a thoroughbred horse. It would be crazy not to race it. Now, almost by accident, we came to own this great estate. We had to make a fine wine. I believe in authenticity, and in preserving it.'

His passion and attention to detail took over. He hired as his winemaking consultant the legendary Andre Tchelistcheff, a Russian emigre whose expertise was responsible for the exceptional Georges de Latour private reserve cabernet sauvignons of the adjacent Beaulieu Vineyards.

Tchelistcheff delivered. The result was Rubicon, something of a revolutionary wine for California in those days because it was a Bordeaux-style blend, not a varietal cabernet sauvignon typical of most of California's prestige labels. It was made in 1978 and not released for sale until 1985, and, in keeping with its Roman connection, on the Ides of March.

The 1978 Rubicon, which is now scarce and fetches \$100 a bottle is a big, complex wine. It's dark, rich and possessing the typical black cherry and cedary flavours of cabernet sauvignon, with its tannins softened by a touch of merlot's sweetness and cabernet franc's elegance. In the best years it's capable of long-ageing. Rubicon is the premier wine of the estate that Coppola named Niebaum-Coppola, joining his family name to a century-old tradition. The engraving on the label shows the house. 'The estate has been owned by only two families, the Niebaums and us.' He likes to compare himself to Niebaum: both young, successful and coming to Napa from San Francisco to make their mark.

But he did come close to losing it. Having mortgaged everything he owned to finance *Apocalypse Now*, at one point he had to declare bankruptcy. It was touch and go for at least a year, then his finances improved, partly thanks to the film's eventual profit of \$100 million. The money enabled the winemaker, Scott McLeod, a young graduate of the University of California, to start upgrading the winemaking equipment. 'I don't care what it would have taken,' Coppola said. 'But I think the last thing I'd ever let go was the estate. It was not just a winery, it had become my home, a rare, historic home at that.'

Edizione Pennino, the wine he brought to Rao's, is ripe and earthy. It was added to the portfolio in 1992. By 1994 he was making a series of Francis Coppola Family wines, also estate-bottled but less expensive and more widely sold than Rubicon or Edizione Pennino. These are well-made varietal wines, cabernet franc, merlot and chardonnay, selling for around \$25 a bottle.

But the Coppolas were not finished. 'Ever since I bought my property, it galled me that Heublein never respected the heritage of Inglenook,' he said. In 1995 the Coppolas used \$9.2 million of the profits from the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* to buy the 39,000 square foot Inglenook chateau and the remaining 110 acres of vineyards next door, reuniting the original property. The family has vowed never to allow it to be broken up again. The Coppolas now grown-up children, Sofia and Roman, the latter of whom makes films and music videos, are as devoted to the estate as their parents. Another son, Gio, died in a boating accident in 1986. Now that the estate was complete, an epic vision began to take shape. With Dean Tavoularis, the set designer for all Coppola's films and many other projects, Coppola set about restoring the chateau, adding a grand, hand-crafted \$1 million staircase, gardens with pools and fountains based on Paris's Luxembourg Gardens, tasting rooms,

museums of wine and film memorabilia, and a gift shop where not only his wines, but also the olive oil he had been making from the trees on the estate, were sold. And he began to look around for other food products to sell to complement the wines.

Coppola still delights in sitting outside the ch teau under the oaks in summer with Eleanor and entertaining guests for lunch at a picnic table covered with a red-checked cloth. Platters of prosciutto and sliced homemade dried salami, hunks of cheese, peppers from his garden that he roasted, and ripe, scarlet tomatoes drizzled with the fruity olive oil from his trees are inevitably accompanied by a veritable wine tasting as corks were pulled on half a dozen bottles of his red wines. Copious plates of pasta, fresh green salad and ripe peaches would follow. There is passion in the way he digs into his food and refills his plate, urging his guests to do the same. And, as a result, sometimes his favourite Hawaiian or fine pink linen shirt will be the worse for wear.

A while back a friend brought him a couple of boxes of an unusual, artisanal pasta made by Morisi in Brooklyn, New York. 'I had tasted some of that real rustic pasta in Italy, but it was hard to get it here,' Coppola said. 'So I made an arrangement to carry it at the winery, in part to assure my own personal supply.'

Then, about three years ago, he heard that John Morisi, who was running the company his parents had founded in 1940, was having financial problems. Coppola did not want the company to fail and became a major partner. The company, now called Morisi-Coppola, is a modest, old-fashioned factory on a quiet side street not far from the Brooklyn waterfront. It uses antique brass dies instead of Teflon-coated ones to cut the pasta shapes, giving the pasta a rougher surface and a thicker, meatier, more mouth-filling texture. It's the only pasta still made in America on this kind of equipment, some of which is nearly 90 years old. The often hand-cranked machinery can turn out only about 100 kg of pasta a day, compared with 10,000 kg in a big commercial plant.

Morisi scoops handfuls of fettucine noodles as they tumble from the extruder and hangs them over a dowel. He uses a machete to slice the bottom edges evenly. Morisi-Coppola pasta is also dried very slowly, on well-ventilated wooden racks behind a row of doors along one wall of the factory. Slow-drying, up to four days, improves the flavour. The pasta is bagged and labelled by hand. Several kinds of Morisi macaroni, including gemelli, farfallone and rosette are now being distributed nationwide, in select stores and on the Internet (www.Niebaum-Coppola.com). Whenever Coppola is in New York he tries to stop by the factory. 'John reminds me of one of my cousins,' he said.

For his part, Morisi doesn't complain that Coppola tends to take over when he's in the factory, grabbing a cookie or two from a display in the shop, and putting a pot of water on the stove for lunch, just the way he did the first time he visited the factory. 'I like to cook,' says Coppola. 'I believe I have a talent for it. I started cooking when I was in school. I didn't have much money and the only way I could eat what I liked was to make it myself. I also learnt to cook by feel. I don't measure the ingredients and I never give recipes with exact ingredients. And I'm also very organised. I'm instinctively good at timing. That's the hardest part for some people, getting everything to be done on time.' He doesn't rush his cooking, waiting until the water is at a rolling boil before adding the pasta and testing the strands several times to decide when it's ready to be drained.

When he's at Morisi-Coppola he usually opens a jar or two of his tomato sauce, from a line of products bearing the Francis Coppola Presents Mammarella label showing a picture of his mother, Italia Pennino Coppola, when she was 17. She is now 89. Her family nickname is Mammarella. Most

of his products, and many of his wines are labelled, in true showman style, Francis Coppola Presents.

In June, with Dean Tavoularis collaborating on the design, he threw an old-fashioned Italian block party for several hundred friends, family members and local residents on the street in front of the **pasta factory** to kick off the national distribution of the pasta and sauces. It also celebrated the birthdate of his father, Carmine, a composer and musician with whom he worked on a number of projects, and who died in 1991. Many of his aunts, uncles and cousins were at the party.

They drank his wine and ate plates of his pasta mixed with his sauces. It was the closest thing to having Coppola do all the cooking himself. The sauces are not your garden-variety celebrity item but are made according to his recipes. And as with everything else, he is obsessed with the details.

The recipe for his pomodoro-basilico, for example, calls for onions but no garlic because he does not think garlic belongs in plain tomato sauce. He insists that the basil be torn by hand, not cut, to preserve its flavour, even in the sauce factory.

He's pleased enough with the way the sauces are made to use them himself, at home. The rest of his family uses them too. But he's keeping close watch and says that if expanding the distribution of them, like the pasta, compromises their quality, he'll cut back the production.

All the ingredients in the sauces are organic. The tomatoes are from Muir Glen, the country's largest packer of organic tomatoes. The extra-virgin olive oil, which is also bottled separately, is made by an organic California olive oil producer. (Another extra-virgin olive oil, from the trees on his property, is sold only at the winery, as are a number of limited-production condiments, some cheeses and salamis made to his specifications.)

'Alice is a friend of Eleanor's,' he explained, referring to Alice Waters, the famous California chef-restaurateur and long-time promoter of organic farming. Waters convinced Eleanor Coppola, a quiet, supportive but also visionary woman, of the value of organic food and she had no trouble winning over her husband. Their winery is certified organic.

'If we can put in an organic garden in Belize to grow vegetables, fruits and herbs, we can certainly do it in California,' he said.

Like the winery and the pasta company, the hotel in Belize was an accidental opportunity that acquired a life of its own, adding another dimension to Coppola's already overflowing C.V.

Back in 1981 he had the idea that Belize, the newly independent former British Honduras, could become an international telecommunications hub if its government would apply for a satellite licence, with Coppola's help. He got nowhere with that project but did happen to see an abandoned, run-down lodge, Blancaneaux, in the Pine Ridge Forest Preserve near Caracol, a major Mayan site. He bought Blancaneaux, planning to refurbish it to use as a personal retreat for himself, his family and friends.

But like everything else that tempts him to provide his own personal satisfaction, it evolved into something much bigger. (Coppola also publishes a literary quarterly, *Zoetrope: All Stories*, which features fiction by young writers. True to form, it began modestly but is now a prizewinner.) The whole thing became a typical Coppola production, down to the Frette linens, the imported wood-burning pizza oven, the espresso makers, the cellar stocked with Napa Valley wines, including his own, and, most importantly in a country where electricity is frequently unreliable, the on-premises hydro-electric power plant which operates around the clock. Eleanor Coppola, who also studies ethnic fabrics, was deeply involved in selecting furnishings from Central American craftsmen.

And once the logistics of bringing friends down to Belize became too complicated he decided to open its comfortable villas and cabanas to the public. In 1993, after a party to celebrate his fifty-fourth birthday, Blancaneaux was opened. Coppola has now acquired a second hotel in Belize, the Blancaneaux Turtle Inn, on the coast in Placencia, a beach town.

The gardens at Blancaneaux are planted with beans, marrows, beets, carrots, cucumbers, aubergines, tomatoes, lettuces, capsicums, onions, mangoes, papayas, pineapples, oranges, grenadines, and even lambascioni, a wild onion-like hyacinth, the seeds for which he brought from Italy. On the menu, in addition to pizza and pasta, are dishes like lemon chicken made according to a recipe from the mother of Coppola's friend and colleague, Martin Scorsese.

His newest wine is called Blancaneaux. It's an estate white blended from chardonnay and Rhône Valley varietals, marsanne, roussanne and viognier and intended to complement Rubicon. Only five acres of the Niebaum-Coppola estate, in a cooler corner not suited to cabernet sauvignon, are planted with white grapes. The result, which the winemaker, Scott McLeod, had been developing since 1990 - the first vintage, 1999, was released in March - is a harmonious wine, at once fruity with citrus flavour, yet conveying hints of spice and honeysuckle with great finesse.

Niebaum-Coppola, which now produces more than 100,000 cases of wine annually and has around 80 employees, also makes a Diamond Series of less-expensive wines and a pair of bottom-of-the-line everyday quaffs called simply Francis Coppola Presents Rosso and Bianco. 'It always bothered me that some of my friends and family could not afford Rubicon so I wanted to make something that was more reasonably-priced,' he said.

The other wine he brought to dinner at Rao's was also a new project, called Cask series cabernet sauvignon, made in the venerable Inglenook tradition and bottled with a wood veneer label sporting a logo inspired by the Inglenook original. 'I wanted you to try it even though it's probably not the best choice with this food,' he said.

He had ordered lemon chicken, a dish with a definite pucker. 'My lemon chicken is based on Marty Scorsese's mother's recipe,' he noted. 'But if lemon chicken is Rao's signature dish, let's have it.' And he was intrigued with Rao's penne with cabbage and sausage. 'I never had pasta with cabbage,' he said. 'We have pasta with sausage and broccoli rabe, not cabbage, in my restaurants.'

Coppola was a partner, with Robert De Niro, Robin Williams and Drew Nieporent in Rubicon, a smart San Francisco restaurant. He sold his shares to the director, George Lucas, so he could open a moderately-priced Cafe Niebaum-Coppola in San Francisco's Italian North Beach section (a local law required it). A second Cafe Niebaum-Coppola just opened in Palo Alto in the Silicon Valley.

And then, as he was polishing of the last of the lemon chicken, the lush veal chop, and the escarole, a couple of women at the next table at Rao's wanted their pictures taken with Coppola. He got up graciously. And he smiled as he lifted his glass of Edizione Pennino for the camera.

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