

For the Love of Pasta, a Director Moves Into Macaroni

By Florence Fabricant

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FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA -- filmmaker, winemaker, restaurateur and food buff -- had barely arrived at the Morisi-Coppola Pasta factory in Brooklyn last Friday when he asked John Morisi, whose parents started the company in 1940, if he could put a pot of water on to boil for ravioli.

It was lunchtime. And Mr. Coppola, feeling right at home, was taking charge.

He treats Mr. Morisi like family. For years, Mr. Coppola had sold the company's artisanal dried pasta in the gift shop at his Niebaum-Coppola winery in the Napa Valley of California. "Keeping it in stock was one way to assure my own access to it," he said. "Maybe it's the old Italian attitude, but I like getting it free whenever I want."

When he heard Morisi was having financial problems about two years ago, he became a partner in the small, old-fashioned factory at 186 Eighth Street (Fourth Avenue), near Park Slope.

"I knew it would be a pity to lose this resource," he said. "I believe in authenticity, in doing what it takes to respect and to retain the culture."

What makes Morisi-Coppola Pasta distinctive is that the factory uses vintage pasta machines (circa 1913) that are more hands-on than modern equipment. The extra work is worth it, Mr. Morisi said. It gives the pasta a substantial, satisfyingly chewy quality like that of traditional rustic pastas produced in small factories in Italy and of some brands readily available here, like Latini, Martelli and La Nonna di Monello.

After the dough, made of durum wheat flour (the best for pasta) and water, is mixed, it is forced through an extruder -- the factory has only one -- fitted with brass plates that give the pasta its various shapes. The brass creates more friction than modern Teflon devices, so the pasta has a rough texture, the better to grab the sauce. Then it goes into rooms with fans, where it is dried for up to four days, instead of just a few hours like most commercial macaroni.

Mr. Morisi said that in a good day he can make 200 pounds of pasta in an hour; a giant factory can turn out about 20,000 pounds an hour. Of the dozens of kinds of pasta made by Morisi-Coppola, Mr. Coppola selected four styles to bear his Mammarella label: gemelli, farfallone, quadrefiori and rosette, which are sold in stores, including Whole Foods supermarkets, for about \$3.99 for 12 ounces. They are also available from www.niebaum-coppola.com. These and other shapes are sold in the factory's small store for \$1.89 to \$2.29 a pound on Fridays and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Mr. Coppola picked up a handful of short, twisted gemelli and then the farfallone, which comes in thick, randomly curled ribbons. "Ah, 'and those who husbanded the Golden Grain,' " he quoted from "The Rubáiyát" of Omar Khayyám.

He has long been drawn to the heft of the company's pasta. "It's almost meaty," he said. "And it takes much, much longer to cook, 12 or 15 minutes, and for some shapes even 20."

That brought to mind the ravioli. Mr. Coppola checked the water (he had already salted it). Not boiling yet.

"I'm instinctively good at timing, at organizing a meal," he said. "It's the hardest problem for many people, being able to have all the components ready when you want to serve them. Then I can sit down and eat with everybody. Food and wine allow me to relate to people on a sensual level. I like that. It's instant gratification, unlike a movie which takes two years to come about." He has been working on a futuristic epic called "Megalopolis" for longer than that.

Mr. Coppola, 62, has been making movies since he was 27, but has been cooking since he was a teenager. And with food as with film, he obsesses over every detail.

He had come to Brooklyn to organize a block party, held on Monday night in front of the factory, to kick off the national distribution of his Mammarella line, which includes pasta sauces and olive oil and until recently was not sold on the East Coast. It also marked the birthday of his father, Carmine, a composer who died in 1991. Mammarella is the nickname of his mother, Italia, who is 89 and is pictured on the label at 17. Mr. Coppola's parents came from southern Italy. He was born in Detroit and grew up in Great Neck, N.Y.

He remembered the ravioli. He opened two jars of his pomodoro basilico -- tomato basil -- sauce and poured them into a pot. "I insist that the basil in my sauces be torn, not chopped," he said.

The Mammarella line also includes a puttanesca and an arrabbiata sauce (about \$5.99 for 26 ounces). The sauces are made according to his recipes by Muir Glen, a big organic tomato company in California.

"Of course, they don't cook it the way I do," he said. "I use imported San Marzano plum tomatoes. I drain off the liquid -- but save it -- and break the tomatoes up in the can. I start with olive oil and chopped onions. I chop them by hand, not in a food processor. My family thinks I'm crazy, but I think it's better. The basil goes in and then the tomatoes. It's very concentrated. As the tomatoes start to break down, I add back the liquid."

Mr. Coppola said his wife, Eleanor, a documentary filmmaker, had insisted that all the ingredients be organic. "She's a friend of Alice Waters and she's a big believer," he said. "Now I'm one, too. We went to great expense to grow everything organically for the little hotels I own in Belize, and if it can be done in Belize, it probably can be done anywhere."

He and his wife started their winery, which today includes the former Gustave Niebaum and Inglenook estates, in 1975. They released their first vintage in 1978 and now produce a range of wines, all organic.

He also has two restaurants, both called Cafe Niebaum-Coppola, one in the North Beach district of San Francisco, the other in Palo Alto. He said that all his enterprises are profitable, but added that in filmmaking, the concern with the bottom line has taken away some of the fun: nothing, though, takes the fun out of cooking.

The water was boiling. He dropped in two boxes of plump cheese ravioli, stirred gently with a long wooden spoon, and covered the pot so the water would return quickly to a boil. Finally the ravioli was done, drained, mixed with sauce and ladled into bowls.

"It needs some salt," Mr. Coppola declared. He added a good pinch to his plate and dug in. "There goes the shirt," he said.