

TEXT CAROLINE BECK | PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

In the grounds of her Sicilian farmhouse, the cookery school director Fabrizia Lanza tends a garden in two parts, which is both productive and peaceful – filled with wildflowers, fragrant herbs and citrus trees





THIS PAGE Wildflowers that flourish beside the surrounding vineyards have migrated to the edges of the garden, creating more fluid boundaries. OPPOSITE Pale flowers of *Osteospermum ecklonis*, orange *Aloe maculata* and yellow *Sedum dendroideum* bring colour to the area under an old stone pine

Arriving at the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School is like the homecoming you always wished for. Sicilian switchback roads with lumbering tractors lead you to the pantiled farmhouse folded into the vineyards, where small dogs bark a greeting. You flop down under jasmine and scented roses, someone puts a drink in your hand and you are encouraged to relax. As if you could do anything else.

The calm is seductive, as behind the scenes of this well-oiled farm and cookery school is the tireless Fabrizia Lanza. She has been the director since its founder, her mother Anna, died in 2010. The garden is its secret heart. 'It is always my dream to have an excuse to be there,' she says, but the school calls her away. Her days are spent overseeing cookery courses, taking pupils into the hills to milk sheep for ricotta, teaching the island's European- and North African-influenced food history and enjoying the twin pleasures of the table – talking and eating.

Fabrizia is as likely to want to share her mischievous views on the Netflix drama *The Crown* as she is to talk about cooking with foraged greens. The school is a hub for like-minded chefs, academics and food lovers from across the world, with value placed on practical skills. During the ambitious two-month Cook the Farm programme, students cook, eat and think about food, gathering ingredients from the kitchen garden or hunting out wild food. The most frequent word shouted out gleefully around the table each night is 'Mangial!', meaning 'Eat!'

The garden is in two parts. A productive garden, surrounded by citrus trees and filled with vegetables, herbs and fruit, is kept as a permanent larder for guests. Then there is the ornamental garden, terraced and tranquil, where you can hear shepherds calling their flock from the surrounding hills each evening. Anna laid out this area in 1987 but, as Fabrizia explains, 'She hated the fierce heat of Sicily, so she spent a lot of time creating shade in

this garden, which I am slowly replacing.' It has a much wilder feel than in Anna's day: the wildflowers that ribbon the vineyards have migrated to the garden's edges, making the boundaries fluid. In the bright light of the southern Mediterranean light, orange California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*), deep purple salvias and blue echiums lose their brashness, and at sunset they glow. Between cracks in the paving, camomile and thyme release their scent as the heat fades. Wild pelargoniums scramble over the stone terrace lined with rosemary, and arching over everything are orange, lemon and fig trees.

While Anna was pioneering Sicilian cuisine and becoming something of a food celebrity in the United States, Fabrizia was running an art gallery in northern Italy. She returned to Case Vecchie in 2006 in her mid forties, feeling conflicted about living with her mother again, but she soon reconnected with Sicilian cuisine in a way that astonished her. Fabrizia tells the story of her complicated road back to the south in her book *Coming Home to Sicily**, which weaves together her memories of food, people and the farm. Over time, she has developed a deep connection to the garden: its style owes much to her training as an art historian, and she scrutinises it daily, considering the way the plants work together and how it fits within the landscape, looking for ways to improve it. She has her mother's dynamism mixed with a curator's skill of making connections – with ideas, plants and people. Supper with her guests is often enjoyed outside in the rose-filled courtyard, with conversations in several languages.

The genius of the place is that, although the work done here is serious, Fabrizia has created a place that feeds all the senses. In less skilled hands it could feel like a worthy crusade, but instead it leaves you wanting to taste more □

Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School, Valledlunga Pratameno, Sicily: annatascalanza.com

THIS PAGE Roses, including pink 'Madame Isaac Péreire', *Matthiola incana*, *Ballota pseudodictamnus* and *Salvia argentea* are interspersed with orange *Eschscholzia californica*. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Ruscus hypoglossum* and *Oenothera speciosa* flank a path. The view through the cookery school's doorway. Red *Hedysarum coronarium* and yellow daisies grow wild in the fields. *Rosa banksiae* 'Lutea' and *Wisteria sinensis* cover the pavilion



