

# GRAND DISHES

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Iska Lupton

Recipes and stories from grandmothers of the world





**NICOLETTA**



As we learned to prepare Nicoletta's favourite Sicilian dessert, she was also intermittently checking on her husband setting the table ('He always does this - he didn't wait for the dishwasher to finish before taking out the cutlery'), making dinner for the evening and texting the boiler man to come and fix a problem with the heating.

It would have been the ultimate scene of everyday domesticity, were it not played out for us in a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Sicilian palace by the Italian Duchess of Palma. 'Unfortunately, modern duchesses don't have time to polish their nails,' she shrugged while shoving a tray of rosemary-seasoned potatoes in the oven, brewing us a tea and ordering her husband to, 'just please wait for the dishwasher to finish its cycle.'

This cooking duchess invited us into her palace for a special culinary masterclass spiced with Sicilian history, calling each of us 'piccolina' and driving home just how important it is to cook when you're a 'mamma'. Her spirit is every bit that of a true matriarch and her fierce energy is enough to dispel any image of a puffed-up aristocrat lethargically lounging on a chaise longue. In short, we absolutely love her.

**Born:** Venice, Italy, 1952

**Mother tongue:** Italian

**Grandchildren:** Isabella, Gioacchino

**They call her:** Nonna Nico

Both my grandmothers were excellent cooks. One was better at French-style cooking and the other was from Tuscany. My maternal grandmother passed away when I was nine, but I picked up the Tuscan recipes as they were passed down in the family. I do always regret not asking for the recipes of my paternal grandmother because she had such a refined way of preparing food. My own step-grandchildren love my *gelo di mellone*, which is a Sicilian dessert. I'm Venetian, but since I've been living here in Sicily for so many years, I've learned to cook local dishes. It's a delicious watermelon pudding infused with jasmine.

Sometimes people are surprised to hear that I'm a duchess, but I tell them that modern duchesses don't have time to sit around painting their nails. My husband Duke Gioacchino Tomasi di Lampedusa

has inherited the 18<sup>th</sup>-century palazzo of his adopted father and Italy's most famed writer, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa - author of *Il Gattopardo (The Leopard)*. We must do all we can to maintain it and to keep his memory alive. The cooking workshops I run here are a part of that.

I've always loved food as a very important cultural aspect of a country. Through food and the cuisine of a country you understand its history and its culture. It's exactly what I want to do in my cooking classes. My lessons are focusing on Sicilian culture and history through food. We make traditional dishes, like Palermitan street-food favourite *panelle*, or a selection of pastas inspired by different regions of Sicily. I also really believe in cooking local and using ingredients that make sense to the season.



I myself have a huge collection of cookbooks. I love them as books. I like the ones that also tell stories and ones that reflect my way of understanding a cuisine. I enjoy learning about the history of a dish. For example, this *gelo di mellone* I am cooking for you today would not exist were it not for the Arabs that came to Sicily over 1,000 years ago. Sicilian cuisine has been heavily influenced by the Arabs, who brought practically half of the ingredients that are now staples of the Sicilian kitchen. Jasmine, which features heavily in this dish, was introduced by the Arabs. Other staples like almonds and pistachios also came here with the Arabs.

It has been said by my son that I'm the only mamma that's ready to cook at any time of the night or morning. I love to host very much. I always love to cook and love when my son brings his friends. I've cooked a whole meal for him and his friends at three in the morning. He was one of the most popular kids in the American school because he would trade my beautiful food for all this horrible junk food, like peanut butter-jelly

sandwiches. At a certain point, one of the other mothers stopped me and asked me for my meatball recipes. I said, 'How do you know about my meatballs?' to which she responded that all the children were eating my food. Of course he'd give the blonde girls with blue eyes two meatballs. Food is love, after all.

Feeding is an expression of love. It's an Italian thing. Here, it's important to feed. Did you know, for example, that one of the first symptoms of mental disorder is a bad relationship with food? How you approach food in life can say a lot about your mental state and your personality. Then of course, there is the inescapable fact that we can't live without food.

—

*Nonna Nico*









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## NONNA NICO'S SICILIAN JASMINE-INFUSED WATERMELON JELLY (*Gelo di mellone*)

### INGREDIENTS

(Feeds 6)

- 1 2½–3kg (5½–6½lb) watermelon, flesh deseeded and roughly chopped
- 1 handful jasmine flowers, plus some for decoration (optional)
- 150–200g (¾–1 cup) granulated sugar, depending on the sweetness of the watermelon
- 75g (heaped ½ cup) cornflour
- 100g (3½oz) dark chocolate chips, or shards of finely chopped dark chocolate

### METHOD

1. Push your chopped watermelon flesh through a fine-mesh sieve or whizz in a blender until smooth and measure out 1l (4 cups) of juice. If you have extra, save it, chill it and serve with mint for a refreshing drink.
2. Put the juice in a large bowl with the jasmine flowers and let steep for a few hours, then remove and discard the flowers.
3. Pour the juice into a saucepan, add the sugar to taste and whisk in the cornflour. Cook over a low heat, stirring constantly until it comes to a boil and thickens. Time 1 minute and remove from the heat.
4. Pour into a large glass bowl or individual ramekins (or champagne saucers for glamorous presentation!) and let cool. Refrigerate until set and cold.
5. Before serving, garnish with chocolate chips (to imitate the watermelon seeds) and jasmine flowers.