

PBS chef, gardener hubby wow 'em at the Majestic

By MARGARET MCKENZIE
THE CONWAY DAILY SUN

CONWAY — An unusual sight greeted traffic passing through Conway Village shortly before 10 a.m. on Monday: a line of people snaking down the sidewalk in front of the Majestic Theatre.

What (or rather who) they were waiting for was Mary Ann Esposito, host of “Ciao Italia!,” NH PBS’ longest-running cooking show, who has been making the rounds this spring, promoting her book “Ciao Italia: Plant, Harvest, Cook!”

Her program Monday, which combined both cooking and gardening advice, was presented by the Mountain Garden Club.

The delay in opening the doors wasn’t due to Esposito being late, but rather that delivery of copies of her book was behind schedule. Just in the nick of time, however, the truck pulled up, and the lobby was filled with energetic Mountain Garden Club members shuttling them in on dollies and arranging them on tables.

The books (which came with a \$35 ticket to the show) were before the event, so we were able to page through them after taking our seats.

The hardcover, 272-page book is an imprint of Peter E. Randall Publisher of Portsmouth. Subtitled “Simple Planting Advice and 100+ Easy Italian-Inspired Recipes,” it retails for \$39.95.

As garden historian John Forti says in the foreword, “All our ancestors ate from the land ... Mary Ann Esposito reminds us that when our tables are linked (through a garden) to our own backyard, freshness surpasses any other extravagance.”

Meeting Esposito backstage, you form some immediate impressions.

She seems warmer, softer, prettier than the “Ciao Italia!” studio lights make her look.

It’s also surprising to find out that despite her long roots in Durham — where she and husband, Gaetano (Guy), live — Esposito hails from Buffalo, N.Y. It’s where she became curious enough about her Italian roots that she went straight to the source: traveling to Italy, learning to speak Italian and learning all the different ways to cook, say, rigatoni.

While vegetarian dishes are now all the rage, Esposito said she isn’t buying plant-based cooking as a fad. Not if you’re Italian, at any rate.

“Italians follow the Mediterranean diet, and the largest part of the food pyramid for them is ... what? Vegetables and fruits!” she pointed out, adding, “It just goes to show that everything old is new again, just rearranged.”

It was getting close to show time, and interview over, you return to the theater to take your seat. Master of ceremonies George Cleveland introduced her and gave a nod to the garden club. A sure sign of spring, he said, is when they are bending over plantings in the traffic islands “inches away from tractor-trailer trucks.”



Mary Ann Esposito, host of “Ciao Italia!” on NHPBS, also is an author. Her latest book doubles as both a cookbook and a gardening guide. (MARGARET MCKENZIE PHOTO)

He then thanked sponsors: Dave and Sue Clark, Dean and Sascha Davis, Debony Salon, Dutch Bloemen Winkel, Grant’s Shop ‘n’ Save, Hannafords of North Conway, Minuteman Press, North Country Fair Jewellers, Walmart of North Conway, Wildcat Tavern in Jackson and Neysa and Kimball Packard of The Farmstand in Chocorua.

Mary Ann took the stage to a big round of applause. After settling into her seat, she set the humorous tone by noting, “We’re just waiting for Guy, but that’s nothing new.”

When Guy came out, Mary Ann explained that the book came about during the pandemic. “We were not allowed to film anything. We were stuck at home. So I started thinking, we need to teach people where food comes from. My idea was to get down and dirty, from dirt to dinner. I would say to Guy, here’s what I need you to plant for me this year. And we thought, why not turn it into a book?”

She added: “Everything I know about a garden comes from Guy. And everything else comes from —”

“You,” her husband deadpanned.

They made quite the team. Guy gave the gardening advice (start planning in January, use straw between the beds to keep the weeds down, grow your cucumbers on a trellis) and Mary Ann kept things moving along with asides like: There is no such thing as Italian cuisine. “It’s regional,” she will tell you. Depending on whether you are in Sicily or Tuscany, a dish like eggplant parmigiana can be an entirely different thing. Some Italians bread the sliced eggplant, while

others use only cheese. Some even add hard-cooked eggs.

The Espositos’ garden in Durham is 30 by 60 feet, she said, about a third of an acre. Guy said, “Right now in our basement are 144 lettuce seedlings, enough for the two of us and all of our neighbors and people we don’t even know.”

Mary Ann added: “The joy of gardening is you give a lot of it away,” which got plenty of nods from the garden club members in the audience.

The first slide showed Guy growing some luscious-looking basil plants.

Mary Ann said: “We all know Italians can’t cook without basil. And let me tell you, dried herbs are useless. Save your money. When you rub basil leaves between your fingers you get the peppery perfume of basil. Do that with dried basil, you get nothing.”

Then she added: “Guy has a good trick for keeping (picked) basil fresh. Gently crush the stem, put it in a jar, put a clean plastic bag over it, it allows the basil to jump back up. It will keep for 2-3 days. Basil doesn’t like cold and it doesn’t like water on its leaves.”

Guy said he uses Reemay gardening cloth stretched over metal hoops to shield the growing basil. “It keeps the wind off the basil, which dries the leaves, which makes them tough. It also keeps the bugs off. Japanese beetles love basil.”

All that and more can be found in the pages of “Plant, Harvest, Cook!”

Sections include preparing to plant, and what to plant. There is the Early Spring Garden, with lettuce, beets, cucumber, cauliflower, leeks, peas, etc. A few pages are devoted to growing and storing them, then a series of recipes follow (In “The Mighty Onion,” we are instructed to plant onions in March or April, after the ground has warmed up. Space the sets 5 inches apart. When they mature, gently pull them out and let them dry in the sun up to a week. Then store in mesh bags in a cool, dry place. Following this practical advice, Esposito offers such recipes as Batter Fried Onion Fritters, Creamy Onion Tart and Onion, Potato

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Mary Ann Esposito and her husband, Gaetano Esposito, regaled the audience Monday at the Majestic Theatre in Conway Village with 90 minutes of advice on gardening in New England and cooking hearty Italian fare. (JOHN BRUNI PHOTO)

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and Pumpkin Seed Focaccia, accompanied by huge color photographs.

The book is great, but to get the true essence of Esposito’s earnest approach to cooking Italian

food, you really have to watch her in action on her show. It airs on New Hampshire PBS daily at 1 p.m., Monday-Friday.

Her show at the Majestic ran 90 minutes, and you left wishing it was longer.

The pleasure of learning from

Esposito is not just the depth of her knowledge and charm of her personality but her fidelity to New Hampshire and to public television. Why is she just a regional celebrity? All you can say is, Food Network’s loss is our gain.

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