

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

A passion for Sardinia

Houston restaurateur's new cookbook introduces the heritage and cuisine of his beloved native land

By **PEGGY GRODINSKY**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Ef시오 Farris has an abiding passion for the stories, scents, people, landscape, traditions and tastes of his native Sardinia.

The proprietor of Arcodoro restaurant in Houston and Arcodoro & Pomodoro in Dallas, he documents them with tenderness and expertise in *Sweet Myrtle & Bitter Honey: The Mediterranean Flavors of Sardinia* (Rizzoli, \$40), his first cookbook and probably the first Sardinian cookbook published in English. The New York Times praised its thoughtfulness, "love and intelligence," and listed it among "25 noteworthy cookbooks published in 2007."

Farris, with writer Jim Eber, relates food traditions that date back thousands of years and embody the island's gutsy, make-do peasant cooking. Sardinians use few ingredients and they use what is at hand. They gather honey, saffron, wild nettles and asparagus. They cultivate grapes and rice. They catch shellfish from the sea, hunt boar, press olives into oil and milk into curds. Theirs is waste-not-want-

not cooking, using not merely the flesh, but also the intestines, blood, bones and brains of the animals they eat. The island's straightforward cooking reveals traces of Roman, Arabian, Moorish and Catalan tables, the result of centuries of invasions.

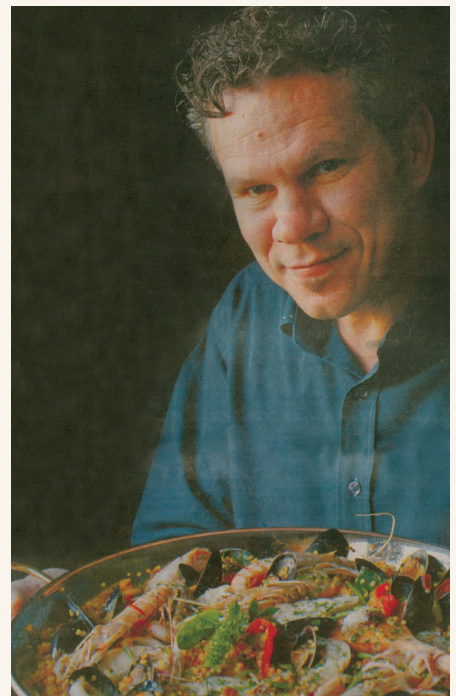
To recreate it in American kitchens, however, it's necessary to shop for a few exotic and expensive imported Sardinian ingredients (Farris's GourmetSardinia product line is at hand to help). It's paradoxical food for thought as you cook your way through these elemental, appealing dishes.

Farris embodies some of the same contradictions. He is a savvy, stylishly dressed businessman with an American knack for marketing. His wife and partner, Lori, also deserves credit. They know a niche when they see one. He has the charm and poetic turns of phrase of an Italian, and the can-do, entrepreneurial, get-up-and-go attitude of a Texan. On Sundays, he cooks leisurely meals for his family, Sardinian lunches that slide into Sardinian dinners. But he loves to make sushi, too, and has deep admiration for Japanese cuisine. He seems at once Texan, American, Sardinian and Italian - but, he says without hesitation and with "all due respect," he is Sardinian at heart.

The evocatively named *Sweet Myrtle & Bitter Honey* is a love letter to his homeland, "my inheritance and my legacy," as he writes in the book's afterword.

Actually, Farris says, Texas reminds him of Sardinia. Both peoples are stubborn, independent and have a strong sense of history. Texas, like Sardinia, is practically its own country.

Farris was born in 1960 and named for Sardinia's patron saint. He came to America at age 25. He spoke no English; he'd never before set foot out of Italy. On Sardinia, everybody knows everybody -



FAMILY COOK: Ef시오 Farris, owner of Arcodoro restaurant in Houston and Arcodoro & Pomodoro in Dallas, enjoys cooking leisurely meals for his family on Sundays, such as Sardinian Paella with Fregula.



HEARTY POLENTA: Topped with sausage and tomato sauce, this polenta recipe makes a cozy casserole.



LET'S HEAR IT FOR LENTILS: Pork ribs are sweetened with saba.

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AS FEATURED

DECEMBER 26, 2007

or, if not, their first cousin or best friend. But however much Farris loved the land, the opportunities for a curious, ambitious young man were limited. By contrast, his early days in Manhattan were thrilling, “columns of people, rivers of people. I never wanted to go to sleep.” In America, the opportunities were “immense.”

Soon he was managing an Italian restaurant, and before you could say uno, due, tre, he’d met Lori. “From a tourist, I became a little visiting.”

He stayed?

“Not really,” Farris says. “I went back home and got a bigger suitcase.”

The couple married; they now have two children, ages 10 and 13. In 1988, they moved to Dallas to open a restaurant. At the time, Americans’ impression of Italian food was evolving from spaghetti with meatballs to a mosaic of distinct regional cuisines.

“That’s when we jumped in. Before, it was impossible for us. That’s when we screamed, ‘Here we are: Sardinia!’”

In the beginning, Farris says, Americans would tell him that, of course, they knew about Sardinia - then proceed to locate the island somewhere off Cuba. In the beginning, he repeats, customers came to Arcodoro & Pomodoro in Dallas (formerly two restaurants, now consolidated) demanding iceberg lettuce. The Dallas restaurants introduced that city’s diners to radicchio, pasta as its own course and olive oil on the table, in place of butter. Farris’ brother is executive chef there. The Houston restaurant opened in 1996.

Sweet Myrtle & Bitter Honey, a heartfelt, attractive cookbook-cum-travel-guide, is an extension of the couple’s two-decades-long effort to introduce Americans to Sardinian cooking and, by extension, Sardinia.

“Everybody knows where curry comes from,” Farris says, “but nobody knows where fregula comes from.”

Given the thousands of cookbooks published each year, and our keen interest in Italian food, that’s almost shocking.

“The only other cookbook I can think of that even gives Sardinia the time of day is a big, beautiful book that Giuliano Bugialli published a few years ago, *Foods of Sicily & Sardinia and the Smaller Islands*, a big, splashy coffee-table book,” says Nach Waxman, owner of Kitchen

Arts & Letters, a cookbook store in New York City.

“Before that came out, you really had to scratch to even find a few recipes. This was really pleasing to have a whole book devoted to Sardinia. We have something like five shelves of Italian books here and, other than the Bugialli, nothing else on the subject.”

Sweet Myrtle & Bitter Honey makes few concessions to American tastes. The photograph of dozens of curled-up eels may put you off. The description of sambeneddu, “a treat made from pig’s blood that has been cooked and sweetened . . . mixed with vinu cotto (reduced grape juice), sugar, cloves and other aromatic herbs and spices (and) stuffed into the pig’s intestines” may prompt you to put down your fork and knife. Chances are the tattaliu (braided goat intestine and organs) won’t be your cup of tea, either. Farris says he fought for their inclusion, as well as that of tough-to-find-in-America ingredients, such as wild nettles and myrtle.

“Substitute? No substitute,” he insisted. “There is going to be no substitute. Either you make my recipe or you are making something else.” Of 125 recipes, he adds, no more than 20 will provoke squeamishness.

The book opens with a recipe for pane carasau, the island’s traditional flat bread. Farris lavishes it with photographs and reminiscences - and in this case, gives American cooks a break.

“Personally, I don’t recommend (making it),” he said. Even his restaurants are supplied by a baker in Sardinia. “We are in the 20th century, so we need to take advantage of what we have. We cannot go back in the cave completely.”

Farris would like to open more restaurants in America and expand his import line. He is building a restaurant-inn-cooking school in Sardinia scheduled to open next summer. One day, he’d like to split his time between Texas and Sardinia; the family already summers there. It’s not that he misses the place, not exactly.

“I try not to look at it that way. When I am here, I enjoy here, and when I am there I enjoy the best of what is there - enjoy my family, enjoy the food, enjoy the beauty. Friends. Simple things.”

He says this over a long, slow lunch

on the patio at Arcodoro. Italian arias tinkle faintly. Farris knows the charms of the Sardinian wine in our glasses as intimately as he would those of an old sweetheart. We are eating arancini (irresistible fried rice balls), a seafood soup that sings of the sea, pork and pancetta with malloreddus (a Sardinian pasta I fall for instantly), scallops with fregula perched on a seashell and fried, sweet ravioli with bitter honey.

He drizzles his own brand of olive oil over almost every plate: “They call me the Drizzler.”

Disregard the Galleria-area parking lot and shopping mall, imagine a sandy beach and jagged coastline, and you just might think you’re on an island in the Mediterranean.

People always ask him when he left Sardinia, Farris says between bites.

“I never left.”

SARDINIAN PANTRY

Houstonians Efsio and Lori Farris run GourmetSardinia, importer of food products that may be unfamiliar to Americans. Find some of these online at www.gourmetsardinia.com.

- **Abbamele:** tawny, semi-sweet reduction of honey and bee pollen, good in salads or with ice cream, cheese and fruit
- **Bottarga:** salty, flavorful fish roe, usually gray mullet, also known as Sardinian caviar
- **Cannonau:** dry, robust red wine that pairs well with pasta, roasted and grilled meats and cheese
- toasted semolina pasta
- **Miele amaro:** bitter honey traditionally used in desserts
- **Mirto:** the island’s ubiquitous wild myrtle flavors liqueur, preserves and roast meat
- **Pane carasau:** crackerlike bread
- **Casu marzu:** an illegal, rotten sheep’s milk cheese, the sort of shock food prized by bad-boy TV chef Anthony Bourdain. Sardinians cherish the decomposing mass swarming with larvae as “a rich, very soft, creamy delicacy that is both subtle and pungent,” Farris writes.
- **Saba:** sweetener of unfermented grape juice reduced to a syrup
- **Vermentino di Sardegna:** white wine often paired with seafood