

NEXTGEN

ITALIAN CUISINE

BY DANIELLE DESIMONE

In a culture where history and tradition are valued above all else, two young Italian American women are making a name for themselves from opposite sides of the Atlantic—one from New Jersey, the other from Rome. Both are breaking the mold of the Italian culinary tradition...in the kitchen and online.

NONNAS' COOKING LEGACY IN AMERICA

For Rossella Rago, Italian cooking isn't something learned in culinary school. It's learned through the gentle kneading of pasta dough in your nonna's kitchen.

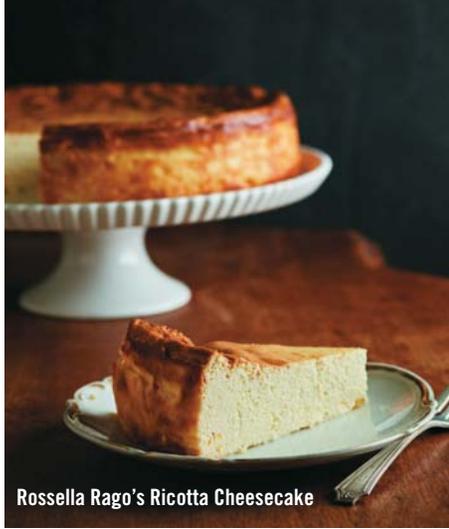
Born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., Rago is a first-generation Italian American who has made a career of her grandmother's recipes. As a young girl, she was surrounded by the tight-knit community of her family's hometown immigrants from Puglia, ▶



John Cristino

Rossella Rago

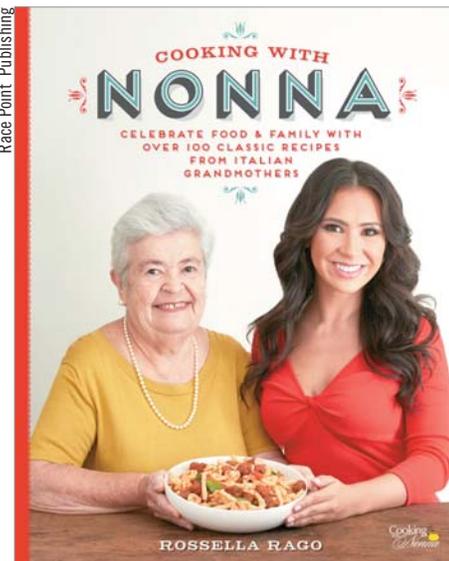
Deep-fried mozzarella and spicy sausage sandwich, *Nduja in Carrozza*, from Katie Parla's cookbook.
Photo by Kristina Gill



Rossella Rago's Ricotta Cheesecake



Rossella Rago's Seafood Beatrice



Rossella Rago's new cookbook.

which had a profound effect on her upbringing and love of Italian food. And, of course, there was always her nonna, who lived in her family's basement.

"Cooking has always been a big part of our lives," Rago says. "I was always surrounded by it and, because of that, I never thought that it was anything extraordinary."

Not until Rago went to college did she realize the rest of the world "doesn't cook like this." She experienced an "existential crisis," she says, that led her to recognize her true passion wasn't teaching, as she had originally planned, but rather cooking. All of those years of learning the ways of the Italian kitchen by her grandmother's side inspired Rago to start her own online cooking show. She named it "Cooking with Nonna."

The cooking show began as a family affair. Rago's father not only built her a website (cookingwithnonna.com), but also a professional, roll-away, stovetop island for filming. Rago's grandmother was one of the first guests on her show.

That was 2008, when the idea of YouTube stars was still a novelty, and Rago didn't really know what she was doing, she admits. But nearly 10 years later, she's getting the hang of it. "Cooking with Nonna" grew quickly and organically from an Italian American community desperate to reconnect with its heritage.

"This is the last generation of the nonna," Rago explains. "That whole generation of grandmothers who emigrated from Italy is sadly getting older, and you lose so much between the generations."

This is why Rago believes "Cooking with Nonna" is so successful. Later generations of Italian Americans, and even Italophiles, are craving having a nonna in their lives, she says, someone to rekindle those childhood memories of a grandmother bustling around a warm kitchen, making dinner from a recipe only she knows.

Rago brings that feeling back to life with her webisodes, in which she invites various nonnas to appear on her show and guide the viewers,

step-by-step, through the process of cooking one of their signature recipes.

Her favorite dish to make? "Eggplant parmigiana," Rossella says confidently. "But don't ask me if it's sauce or if it's gravy—I won't pick a side!"

This personal look into a nonna's kitchen has resonated with hundreds of thousands of people who now actively follow Rago across her social media platforms, many of them reaching out personally to ask Rago to "play detective" and find recipes their own grandmothers once made.

"Cooking with Nonna" has grown to include hundreds of recipes shared on Rago's website, as well as in her new cookbook (scheduled for publication on March 15) as a sort of catalog of long-lost traditions. "If we don't document certain recipes, and if we don't learn things from our nonnas while they are still here, we will lose all of those traditions that make Italian culture so unique," Rago says.

"Cooking with Nonna" has taken Rago from starring on (and winning) the Food Network's "24 Hour Restaurant Battle," to the shores of her family's hometown in Puglia where she leads guided culinary tours, to NIAF's 2017 New York Spring Gala where she will be honored this March for her contributions to the Italian American community.

Most importantly, it has introduced her to a cast of incredible women who inspired her to create her own "Cooking with Nonna" cookbook, which includes more than 100 recipes from 25 nonnas, reflecting the individual cooking styles of the women who provided the recipes, as well as their life stories.

"The nonna is the unsung hero of the Italian family," says Rago. "She is the cornerstone of the famiglia, and so it was nice to finally pay homage to these ladies through my book."

Our nonnas are, after all, far more than just the stereotypic elderly woman in the corner of the kitchen. They are defined, Rago says, "by the way that they love, and how they show that through cooking."

WHEN IN ROME

Katie Parla's love for Italy has been a lifelong affair. Although she credits her family's cooking for her passion for Italian food, she says her Latin and Roman civilization classes in high school are what made her realize, at age 16, that, "Someday, I was going to live there."

Today, Parla lives her ex-pat lifestyle full-tilt as a full-time resident of *la città eterna*, Rome, where she writes about Italian cuisine, travel and culture, and is taking the food-blogging scene by storm.

A native of New Jersey, Parla grew up in her father's restaurant where she developed a passion not just for Italian food, but the entire process of eating a meal. "For me, it's not just about producing a meal. I like the whole experience that goes into hospitality," Parla says.

Yale University art history degree in hand, Parla promptly moved to Rome to become an English teacher. Why Rome? "It was instantaneous," Parla says without hesitation. "From a very young age, I just always felt this urgency to spend the rest of my life there."

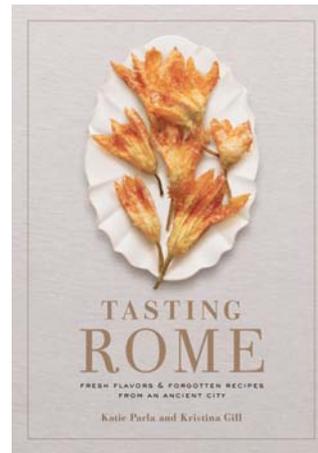
Parla soon realized that teaching was not her strong suit. Instead, she began writing guidebooks and travel articles for publications such as *The New York Times*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *National Geographic*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, and others, before earning a degree in Italian Gastronomic Culture from the University of Rome.

Through this degree and her own personal research, Parla has entrenched herself in the local Roman food and beverage scene. Not only was she exploring the century-old *pasticceria* making traditional pastries, she was also delving into the new restaurants making a riff on old-school *amatriciana* recipes.

She began writing on her personal blog (katieparla.com/blog) about Roman cuisine, and things took off in 2008. Soon, Parla was leading her own food and history tours around the city (with an archeological speleology certification from the city of Rome) and was increasingly sought

after to collaborate on much larger projects.

Last year, Parla published her first cookbook, "Tasting Rome: Fresh Flavors and Forgotten Recipes from an Ancient City." It is as much a history book as it is a kitchen guide, as Parla takes you through the streets of Rome that she knows so well, introducing the recipes



Kristina Gill



Katie Parla's 2016 Cookbook.

Katie Parla (above right) making *Cacio e Pepe*

of some of the city's most esteemed restaurants.

For Parla, writing the book was a way to connect Rome to the larger culinary world. "My favorite part of writing this book was being able to give a voice to the chefs, bakers and mixologists of Rome who aren't really able to communicate directly with the diners because of a language barrier," Parla says. "It takes time to build trust between the people making the food and the people eating it, so bridging that gap, and creating a main line into Rome's food culture, is the most rewarding part of publishing this book."

After a whirlwind book tour throughout the United States in 2016, Parla is back in Rome, researching and writing her second book on Italian southern cuisine.

Living in Italy for so long has given Parla the time, expertise and language skills to track down her family in Basilicata, as well as learn to define that difficult line between Italian and Italian American. She continues to tirelessly campaign for *pasta alla gricia*—carbonara's close cousin that calls for *guanciale* or *pancetta*, and pecorino romano, but no egg—to become a household name.

While the internet is oversaturated with food blogs of every size and shape, Parla's work stands out by spreading the gospel of authentic Roman cuisine and the culture that surrounds it. ▲

Danielle DeSimone is NIAF's Social Media Manager and Assistant Editor.



Katie Parla

Rick Poon



Pizza Romana from Katie Parla's "Tasting Rome" cookbook

Kristina Gill