



n

The

FAMILY

issue

DIY THEME PARKS

PETS MAKE YOU HAPPY

NEW FAMILY HOLIDAYS


IT'S BEACH TIME!

SPIES! SPIES! SPIES!

THE MAKING OF PIPPI LONGSTOCKING

GRANNIES' BEST RECIPES

HOW GERMANY RESURRECTED THE BOARD GAME



Just like Nonna ~~used to~~ make

Words/Toby Skinner • Photography/Myles Pritchard



Jody Scaravella already has an idea of what the first scene in the movie of his life would be. He sees himself as a child, strolling the Italian food markets of south Brooklyn, holding hands with his nonna, played by Sophia Loren.

The fact that Jody, or Joe as he's known, has actually sold the rights to his childhood story (to *Loving* producer Jack Turner) is largely down to his Staten Island restaurant, Enoteca Maria, where real-deal Italian nonnas share cooking duties with a daily-changing roster of grandmothers from around the world, all cooking dishes inspired by their native cuisine.

Built around the simple idea that grandma's recipe is the best, the restaurant opened 11 years ago, and has become a curious kind of sensation, spawning cookbooks, e-books and a soon-to-be brand of nonna-approved food products.

On my visit to the small restaurant on a Thursday morning, there's more hugging, selfie-ing and rounds of applause between the nonnas and their benefactor than in your typical neighbourhood restaurant. "It's like having a whole new family," says Greek nonna Ploumitsa Zimnis – a sentiment that's echoed by the others.

This big happy family is all thanks to Joe, a 62-year-old with darting eyes, a handlebar moustache and a dream of recreating his own childhood. Growing up in Brooklyn, his earliest memories are of Sunday lunch at his nonna's house. "I can still smell her cooking," he says. "This place is built on that idea: of being safe and sound, of being home."

It's also built on loss. Not long before opening Enoteca Maria in 2007, Joe lost his grandmother,

sister and mother in relatively quick succession. So, when he saw this vacant storefront on Staten Island, looking out over the water, it was "a chance to replace in some way what I had lost," he says.

He believed that Italian nonnas from different regions cooking old family recipes would be a hit. Never mind that he was still working as a materials forecaster for New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and had never even worked in a restaurant before.

Today, as he unpacks wine boxes and arranges superhero figurines on an old set of brass scales ahead of the restaurant's lunchtime opening, he's frequently interrupted by calls for bookings. The evident success he's made of Enoteca Maria is a serious achievement, given two significant challenges: none of his chefs are professionals, and they all have big personalities. "These women were used to being at the top of the pyramid in their families," he says. "There were a lot of competing voices at first."

Things settled, though, with the nonnas adapting to their new family, taking turns to cook their best dishes. For guests, the only issue is trying to choose between delicious dishes like Nonna Alexandra's Bulgarian banitsa, made with filo pastry, or Nonna Adelina's otherworldly lasagne. I roll out of Enoteca Maria with that warm fuzzy feeling you get from a day at grandma's house.

For Joe, the experience has given him more than a possible movie deal. "It's been an honour to get to know these wonderful ladies," he says. "They'll never replace the family I've lost, but they've helped me in ways they'll never know." enotecamaria.com
Turn the page to meet the nonnas with their dishes »

**"This place is
built on the idea
of being safe,
of being home"**



“My way is
to fold the
pastry like a
concertina,
and put the
ingredients
between the
grooves”



◀ **Nonna Alexandra** **BULGARIA**

Alexandra Mladenova isn't quite your stereotypical grandma. She breezes into Enoteca Maria wearing all red, with red hair and lipstick. "It's my favourite colour, not just because of how it looks, but how it sounds," she says. "Rrrrrrr-ed. Sexy, no?"

Alexandra, 60, came from Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2006, seeking adventure. "I go where I feel good," she says. "And people appreciate me here – the way I don't walk, but glide, except when I go upstairs – then, I run."

Alexandra, who also works as a tax accountant, started cooking in Enoteca Maria's open kitchen two years ago, and says it's "like being onstage at the theatre, performing". Like most of the nonnas, she'll cook here once a month, with a focus on native dishes such as tarator, a cold cucumber soup with walnuts, garlic and dill, or kavarma stew with pork and vegetables.

There's also a secret ingredient. "Love," she says. "If I cook in a state of love, that energy goes into the food, and it will make you feel good."

▶ **Nonna Adelina** **ITALY**

Adelina Orazzo is in some ways the quintessential Italian matriarch: no-nonsense, straight-talking, even in her halting English, and the creator of a ricotta lasagne that is a dish of richly textured magnificence.

Growing up in a little village near Naples, she learnt to cook from her mother and grandmother. Her family were poor but proud – her uncle would paint the floors to make them look tiled – so the first things she learned to cook were peasant dishes like pasta e fagioli (pasta and beans). "My food comes from here," says Adelina, pointing to her heart.

She moved to Brooklyn in 1990, when her husband and his brother took jobs as waiters. She'd been cooking at home for her husband, six children and four grandchildren in 2006, when she saw an advert in the local newspaper seeking Italian nonnas, and became one of the first people in Joe's kitchen. Now, she says, "I have a whole new family."



"The ragu is the most important ingredient in lasagne. I can spend up to four hours on it"

“Cooking here is like coming out of the kitchen at home and seeing my own family”





◀ **Nonna Ploumitsa** **GREECE**

Enoteca Maria has been a form of therapy for Greek nonna Ploumitsa Zimnis, who came to work here in September 2016, after her husband died that summer. "It was my husband who taught me to cook," she says, in halting English. "This place has helped me come to terms with losing him."

Ploumitsa comes from Chios, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, but she didn't learn to cook until after she arrived in America, aged 24. "It was a way of reconnecting with home," she says. "My husband would teach me, but my mother would send letters with recipes for dishes like Chios seafood stew, stuffed squash or mamoulia [traditional Christmas] cookies."

Ploumitsa is joined at the restaurant today, as she is during all her shifts, by her

daughter Maria, who remembers seeing the Enoteca Maria advert that September. "My mum had always been so full of energy and joy, but after our father died I was scared that she wouldn't bounce back," says Maria. "But then I saw that advert, and saw that the restaurant is in a neighbourhood called St George, which is the same name as my parents' village in Chios. It felt like fate."

That first shift together, Ploumitsa was nervous. "I'd never cooked for so many people before," she says. "But I remember meeting Nonna Adelina, and it was like we'd known each other for years. And I remember coming out of the kitchen, and seeing the diners so happy. It was like coming out of the kitchen at home, and seeing my own family."

mamaploumitsa.com

◀ **Nonna Mona** **EGYPT**

"My family have always loved my cooking, but they have to like it, don't they?" says Mona Elhadidy, who comes from Cairo, and has four children and eight grandchildren. "I was amazed when the diners at Enoteca Maria liked it, too."

Mona came to New York in 1976, following her husband, who wanted to complete his medical studies. Both of them later worked for an airline, before Mona retired in 2005, when she could devote more time to feeding her family dishes from home, like Egyptian moussaka and lamb fattah. "It's important to me that they eat the dishes I grew up eating," she says. "I like drawing, too, and cooking is an extension of that. I see it as art."

When she first started working at Enoteca Maria this April, even her family were surprised at the quality of her dishes. "She really lifted her game," says Jasmine, Mona's daughter. "We were all like, woah. She just took control and totally bossed the kitchen."

"I shape my lamb-and-rice fattah like a heart, because of what this dish means to me"



“The secret to good kofte is pounding it all together before shaping. I serve mine on a long plate, with rice and salad”

▲ **Nonna Fatima** **TURKEY**

The ever-smiling Fatima Polad, who radiates a kind of Zen tranquillity, is technically a nonna-in-training – in other words, at 44, she is the baby of the Enoteca Maria sorority, with two children but as yet no grandkids.

Originally from Ankara, Turkey, Fatima moved to New York City in 1995, and has since worked as a nurse and in the clothing department of an army base. Her menus of comforting Turkish classics include imam

bayildi – stuffed eggplant – and sigara böreği, filo pastries stuffed with feta and parsley, as well as her famous beef kofte.

She started working at Enoteca Maria in 2016. “That first time cooking, I left the kitchen and there were guests wanting to hug me and take selfies with me. I was like, who? Me? But it felt like having a whole new family to cook for. I’d come back to work here even if they didn’t pay me. Being here makes me feel warm inside.”



“There are no big fancy chefs here, just people with big hearts”

◀ **Nonna Carmen**
ARGENTINA

Nonna Carmen Bernardo, from Buenos Aires, is a force of nature. She doesn't speak much English, but she wields a rolling pin with ferocious intent, and can't stop herself from picking up every ingredient on the table in front of her. "Carmen's eternally ready for her close-up," notes Joe, as he wanders past.

Carmen came to America via Venezuela, and now lives in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, just across the river from Staten Island, with her son, his wife and granddaughter Elaine.

"There are no big fancy chefs here, just people with big hearts, like Joe, who has never forgotten the women in his family," she says. "Everyone here always wants to hug and take selfies, and it's amazing to see that people love these old Argentinian dishes from my childhood. It makes me feel young again."

Norwegian flies to New York from 15 destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at [Norwegian.com](https://www.norwegian.com)