



Gina DePalma

Profile: Gina DePalma

Fighting Ovarian Cancer, Italian American Cowgirl Style

By Michelle Fabio

What do Italian Americans and cowgirls have in common? “A whole lot,” says Gina DePalma, award-winning pastry chef at Mario Batali’s Babbo Ristorante and Enoteca in New York City.

And she can prove it. If you don’t see the parallels immediately, don’t worry. DePalma didn’t either while she was busy conquering the male-dominated world of chefs. It wasn’t until she faced ovarian cancer that she lassoed up her Italian American heritage, combined it with can-do cowgirl spirit, and founded the Cowgirl Cure Foundation for ovarian cancer awareness.

Over the span of two decades, DePalma worked her way up from a Gramercy Tavern underling to the top pastry position at Babbo by drawing on the drive, determination and food rules learned in her close-knit Italian American home. Her mother spent part of her childhood in Carolei, a village outside of Cosenza (Calabria), and her father’s family was from Campania. DePalma absorbed both culinary traditions.

“I knew from a very early age exactly who I was and where I came from,” writes DePalma in her cookbook, “Dolce Italiano: Desserts from the Babbo Kitchen.”

At Babbo, DePalma invents “straightforward and unfussy” desserts, unique among upscale Manhattan restaurants, but she isn’t recreating nostalgic childhood memories. Her mother still prefers a ripe, juicy fig to cake for dessert.

Instead, DePalma infuses the Italian love of fresh, locally available ingredients to make classic, simple desserts like Ricotta Pound Cake and Honey and Pine Nut Tart, which led to her being named Outstanding Pastry Chef by the James Beard Foundation in 2009 and 2008’s Best Pastry Chef by Bon Appétit Magazine.

Her career in full-force, DePalma was researching the follow-up to “Dolce Italiano” when she noticed “a presence” in her abdomen. It was diagnosed as stage-4 ovarian cancer in 2008. DePalma has since undergone multiple surgeries, a clinical trial at New York’s Mount Sinai Hospital, and 16 rounds of chemotherapy.

After three physically and emotionally grueling years, and one recurrence, DePalma was recently declared cancer-free, but the harsh realities of her disease don’t escape her.

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. For more information on Gina DePalma’s Cowgirl Cure Foundation, visit www.ginadepalma.net/The_Cowgirl_Cure_Foundation.html.

“Ovarian cancer is persistent, which is what makes it so formidable,” says DePalma.

As she continues to heal from the all-out assault on her body, she runs the Cowgirl Cure Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, asking others to “take a stand with me, spread the word, and mobilize for change.”

DePalma’s goal is wider attention and increased funding for research toward a reliable screening test and cure for ovarian cancer, called the “silent killer” because its vague symptoms of abdominal discomfort, changes in bladder and bowel habits, and feeling full quickly are often confused with basic stomach ailments.

Where does the cowgirl come from? Post-diagnosis, one of DePalma’s best friends gave her a cowgirl-inscribed ring as a reminder to channel fierce determination in her fight, and the symbolism resonated with DePalma.

“Cowgirls see what needs to be done, and go about doing it with can-do spirit and no fuss. Giddy-up, right?” says DePalma.

Giddy-up, indeed. In fact, even though DePalma was raised in the suburbs of Northern Virginia and rides the New York City subway, she’s been an Italian American “cowgirl” her whole life. Whether climbing up the restaurant ranks or battling ovarian cancer, she’s always drawn strength from both her ethnic heritage and her inner cowgirl, not only to fight, but win.

Michelle Fabio is an attorney-turned-writer who has lived in her ancestral village in Calabria, Italy, since 2003. She writes about savoring simplicity one sip at a time at Bleeding Espresso (<http://bleedingespresso.com>) and raising goats at Goat Berries (<http://goatberries.com>). You can also find her on the Eye on Italy podcast (at iTunes) and @michellefabio on Twitter. ▲



Courtesy of the Institute of Culinary Education

An Institute of Culinary Education alumnus, Gina DePalma gives an ICE demonstration on making her favorite Italian pastries