

Eminent collector Giorgio Spanu may reside upstate, but there's one thing from the old country he can't let go of:

THE ART OF RED SAUCE.

Words Stephen Greco

Photography Martin Crook

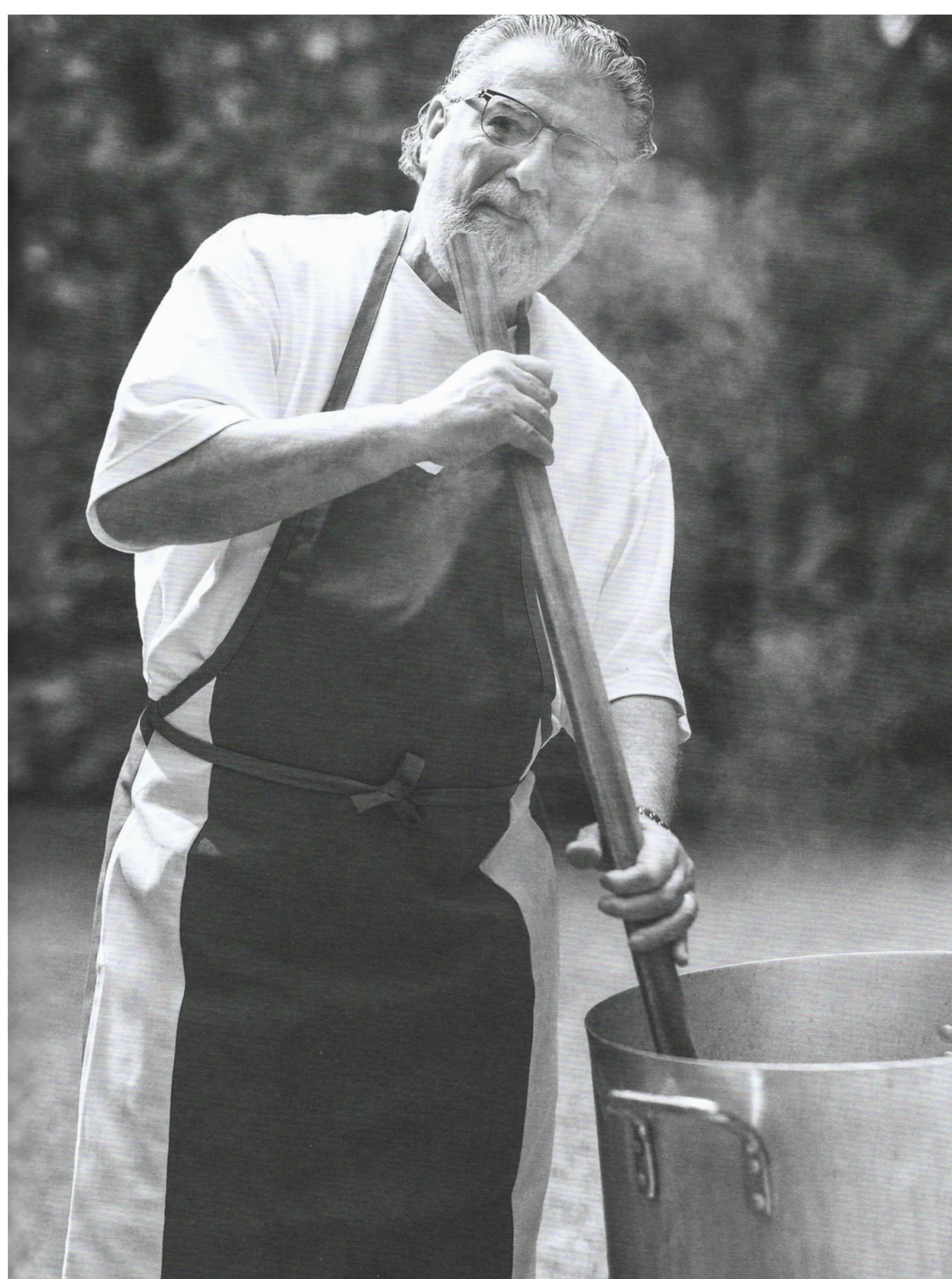
Wearing a big red apron, Giorgio Spanu is stirring an enormous pot of tomato sauce, part of an industrial-scale task he performs annually with the help of several assistants. They are surrounded by crates and baskets of tomatoes and other vegetables, all grown on Spanu's nearby farm, in the process of preparing a traditional Italian sauce that will be served in the café at Magazzino, the museum of contemporary Italian art that Spanu co-founded with his wife, Nancy Olnick, in Cold Spring, New York. Why does a noted art-world leader toil on the farm and in a kitchen, in addition to his office-bound responsibilities?

"I grew up in Sardinia," says Spanu, who was honored in fall, '24 with Italy's prestigious Premio Rinascimento+, which is given to eminent international art collectors and patrons. "My grandmother had a farm where she raised animals, in particular donkeys, which are everywhere on the island. For us, the donkeys were really our tractor, our working animal, our transportation. So, I decided not only to have the donkeys here, but a farm with chickens, guinea hens, ducks, pheasants, goats, and so on — everything that I knew growing up."

The rhythms and rewards of an agrarian life are in Spanu's blood. Arriving in the Hudson Valley around 1990, Spanu and Olnick started a garden almost immediately after renting a house there, because, he says, "there were not so many places up here where you could find decent produce." For decades now, after the two built a new home, raised a family, and acquired more land both to expand their plantings and to provide a home for their growing population of farm animals, the Spanu-Olnick Farm has been producing a dazzling array of fruits and vegetables, including several varieties of tomato.

And once a year, at the end of August or beginning of September, the sauce is made.

"The timing depends on the ripeness of the fruit.



We don't decide when. God decides," says Spanu, who was born on Sardinia and for decades has been collecting contemporary Italian art, particularly work from the Arte Povera movement, in partnership with Olnick. The only components of the sauce that don't come from their garden, he says, are the olive oil and the human labor. Spanu organizes a devoted team of co-workers, including local farmers originally from El Salvador and Guatemala, to cook and preserve hundreds upon hundreds of bottles of the sauce — some of which will be used in the café kitchen, some sold in Magazzino's shop, and some given with love to special friends of the museum.

Spanu has known some of the farmers who take part in the process for years. Some, he has helped gain green cards, seek U.S. citizenship, and enter the realm of higher education.

"I believe all these immigrants that come to America... the country is made of this. I came here as an immigrant, too, thirty-five years ago.

"CORN AND TOMATOES ORIGINATED IN THE OLD WORLD, TRAVELED TO THE NEW WORLD. THIS IS HOW THE PLANET IS, AND WE SHOULD ALL BE AWARE OF IT. IT IS NOT BY CLOSING BORDERS AND DIVIDING THINGS THAT WE WILL CHANGE."

I'm very fortunate that I didn't come with the suitcase tied with a rubber band; I had a college degree and was educated. But for all those that come without an education, they are also an asset to this country, and we should not forget that. Corn and tomatoes originated in the Old World, traveled to the New World, and now are everywhere. This is how the planet is, and we should all be aware of it. It is not by closing borders and dividing things

that we will change. The great point is that by opening borders we will probably make this world better and more beautiful."

Rich and ripe with savory depth, velvety smooth in texture, with a seductive earthy essence that's laced with hints of fresh garlic, basil, and onion, the Tuscan-style tomato sauce Spanu is making, a *passata di pomodoro*, arrives in Magazzino's Café Silvia on a simple plate of pasta from chef Luca Galli's kitchen, intended to delight all the senses — not only the ones involved in good eating, but those involved in good living, too. A well-made tomato sauce brings soulful abundance to the table — especially an Italian tomato sauce, as its varieties and uses have been perfected for centuries since some of the first tomatoes arrived in Europe from the New World, yellow in color and hailed as "golden apples." And a simple sauce like this can represent an abundance quite personal and spiritual, if it is made of ingredients largely grown in the host's own garden.

And the result of this farm-based culinary effort is meant to inspire others — the lovers of art and life who come to Magazzino seeking cultural intelligence.

"This is the thing that Magazzino wants to teach via the café," says Spanu. "I'm not interested in selling a sandwich. I'm not an agronomist, so I can't talk about the tomato *di per sé*. The café is a service that the museum gives to its visitors, but they must know more. How are we rich, making this tomato sauce? Magazzino doesn't just want to feed the stomach. It wants to feed the soul." ¹⁰

Stephen Greco's next book The Last American Heiresses: A Novel of Doris Duke and Barbara Hutton, *is launching in March 2025, from Kensington Books.*
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GIORGIO SPANU'S PASSATA DI POMODORO (TUSCAN STYLE TOMATO SAUCE)

- 5LB FRESH TOMATOES
(ROMA OR SAN MARZANO VARIETY —
OK TO SUBSTITUTE AN EQUAL
AMOUNT OF CANNED ROMA OR
SAN MARZANO TOMATOES)
-
- 3 CARROTS, MEDIUM SIZE
-
- 3 CELERY STALKS (NO LEAVES)
-
- 4 WHITE ONIONS
-
- 4 GARLIC CLOVES
-
- 125ML (4 FL. OZ)
EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL
-
- 1 TABLESPOON SALT
-
- 1/2 TABLESPOON SUGAR
-
- LEMON JUICE AND FRESH BASIL LEAVES
FOR CANNING

Wash and cut the fresh tomatoes into 8 pieces each. (Cut the canned tomatoes similarly, if whole.) Peel the carrots and cut into narrow slices. Chop the celery stalks, garlic, and onions.

Set aside the olive oil, salt, and sugar, and combine the rest of the ingredients in a large pot, and cook on a high flame for 15 minutes, stirring frequently.

Mix with an electric blender and add in the olive oil, salt, and sugar, and cook for another 20 minutes on a medium flame.

Using a Rigamonti Velox Tomato Press or similar machine, separate the skins and seeds out of the mixture, to obtain the smooth *passata di pomodoro*.

For canning, follow standard practices. Fill clean and dry Ball jars with the mixture, adding one small spoon of lemon juice and one basil leaf per jar. Seal the jars and boil for 20 minutes. When cool, store in a cool and dry area. The jarred sauce will last at least two years.

