Once Upon a Time in the Italian Wild West

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
CIAO, PARDNER Cesare Casella’s cowboy-inspired Tuscan spareribs are cooked in Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco and white wine.

By MATT LEE and TED LEE Published: March 10, 2004
ON a wintry Thursday, about a century after Buffalo Bill Cody passed through Rome and, so the story goes, challenged a posse of Italian cowboys to a rodeo competition, Cesare Casella commemorated the occasion by preparing pork ribs slow-cooked in tomatoes, hot pepper and garlic. He wore a Ferrari-red Western shirt, cowboy boots of pale blue python skin and a grin as wide as the Texas plains.

"I put this dish together in honor of the butteri," he said, referring to the cowboys of the Maremma region of Tuscany, who resoundingly trounced Buffalo Bill’s crew in Mr. Casella’s version of the tale. "Maremma was swampy. Malaria, many mosquitoes. The butteri ate lots of onions and garlic to keep the mosquitoes away."

Mr. Casella yanked back the plastic wrap covering a pan packed with uncooked pork spareribs, and the heady scent of raw garlic filled the kitchen above the dining room of Beppe, the Manhattan restaurant where Mr. Casella is the chef and an owner. The day before, Mr. Casella had massaged the ribs with generous quantities of minced garlic, sage, rosemary, salt, black pepper and crushed red pepper.

"Spareribs are not something you find in Maremma," he said. "But in the U.S., spareribs you associate with cowboys. The Americans lost to the butteri, so I give something for them, too."

That cowboys herd cows, and not pigs, had clearly been lost in translation.
Mr. Casella’s tribute to the cowboys is typical of his style: dipping into Tuscan history to find inspiration for completely original Italian-American comfort food.

"No oil in the pan," he said, shoving the ribs into the oven. "The fat from the ribs will melt and be the grease."

He set a large, empty saucepan over an unlighted burner and slicked the bottom of the pan with extra virgin olive oil. Turning to a cutting board, he gathered thin slices of garlic and dropped them into the oil. "I put the sliced garlic in cold oil because you get more flavor, more intensity, when you heat them up together," he said.

Mr. Casella lighted the burner, added pinches of crushed red pepper to the pan and watched the oil intently. When the garlic slices bubbled around the edges, he poured two 28-ounce cans of tomatoes with juice into the pan. "If I have good fresh tomatoes, I use them," he said. Alas, it was winter.

Mr. Casella turned up the heat under the pan and, when the bright red liquid bubbled vigorously, added a cup and a half of water, a shot glass of Tabasco and another of Worcestershire. "The Romans used garum," he said, referring to a first-century condiment made by fermenting fish with salt and herbs. "I use Worcestershire."

When the ribs had cooked half an hour, Mr. Casella removed the pan from the oven. Rosemary-scented steam rose from the ribs, which were lightly browned. The bottom of the pan was bone dry.

"Eh, they are not very fat," he said, agitating them with his tongs. "I like them with a lot of fat. When they are too skinny, you need to add oil." He drizzled olive oil into the pan, tilted it for even coating and put the pan in the oven, kicking the door shut with a python heel.

Mr. Casella donned a chef’s jacket with a tuft of fresh green herbs — sage, rosemary and thyme — peeping out of the breast pocket and raced off to the dining room to greet a table of Italian dignitaries. After 20 minutes, he dashed back up, stripped off the jacket and checked on the ribs.

They had turned a deeper brown and released more fat and water. Mr. Casella seemed pleased. He turned the ribs with tongs, and put them back in the oven.

The simmering tomato sauce was a deep, brick red, and he tasted it. He added pinches of coarse salt, ground pepper and a dash more of Worcestershire.
"This food is very simple and takes a long time to prepare because the mothers were overworked," he said. He elaborated: Women in rural Tuscany often prepared food that could sit for long periods, unmonitored and ready for the moment when workers returned from the fields.

When the ribs had cooked an hour more, he removed the pan from the oven, transferred the ribs to a deeper roasting pan and sloshed the tomato sauce over them. Then he poured white wine and water into the shallower pan, whisked the liquid around to pick up the crispy bits of pork left on the bottom and dumped it over the ribs. Mr. Casella covered the new pan tightly with foil and set it in the oven.

Forty minutes later — after he had exchanged ciaos with the Italian delegation — he removed the ribs and peeled back the foil. The murky tomato sauce was beginning to thicken nicely around the ribs.

He dipped a broad serving spoon into the sauce and spooned accumulated oil from the surface. "I take off some of the fat, not all," he said. He stirred the ribs and turned them with his tongs. He returned the pan to the oven uncovered and explained that Maremma was Italy's Wild West until the 1980's, when winemakers like the Antinoris had put it on the tourist map. "Now Maremma is very trendy," he said.

When the ribs were ready 20 minutes later, they barely made it to the plate. The pork fell from the bone: succulent, fiery hot, slightly smoky, with a concentrated garlic, herb and spice flavor that suggested black olives, although there were none in the dish. The sweetness of the tomatoes in the sauce offered solace from the heat and then more heat. Not a mosquito in sight.

The chef took a bite. "Bravo! This is Tuscan cowboy," he said, gesturing toward the platter of ribs, though he could have been referring to himself.