

Interview initiated by
Village Market Square

Sicilian Cowboy sauces a long time coming

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“If you have basil, onions and garlic sauteeing, and people smell it, you can get them to come to the table.”

That may have been the theory of La Quinta resident John Maniaci's nonna. But Maniaci, 64, has made that process easier by creating a line of marinara, spaghetti and barbecue sauces that bear his name.

The “Sicilian Cowboy” saw his sauces displayed on the shelves at Jensen's Finest Food grocery stores for the first time about a month and half ago.

“We love to support local vendors and give them a chance,” Jensen's gourmet food buyer Kim Grotewold said. “For us, it's a nice relationship when we can introduce small companies to the whole community.”

And Maniaci is betting his nonna would be proud.

“I learned how to cook the same way my mother learned, by watching her and Nonna in the kitchen,” Maniaci said.

The sauces — including Uncle Frank Amico's spicy barbecue sauce and a fragrant garlic/oregano basting sauce — are a tribute to his family.

Maniaci uses fresh ingredients to start each sauce — pasta sauces have big chunks of plum tomatoes.



John Maniaci prepares an Italian dish using one of his sauces, which he has marketed and sells at local markets. (Omar Ornelas La Quinta Sun)

Sicilian Cowboy sauces

Where to find it: Jensen's Finest Foods, 73-601 Highway 111, Palm Desert, (760) 346-9393 (760) 346-9393 ; 2465 E. Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs, (760) 325-8282 (760) 325-8282

“For the mushroom sauce, we start with whole mushrooms, not mushroom pieces,” he says. “It takes more time but tastes better.”

The spicy barbecue sauce is a family recipe that goes back “at least 70 years,” Maniaci said.

Aside from the kitchen lessons learned at home, Maniaci has spent a lot of time in the restaurant business. He started his career at his Uncle Frank Amico's restaurant, and his cousin is former Palm Springs restaurateur Paul d'Amico. When he moved to the Coachella Valley in the 1980s, he got a job as a manager at Sonny Bono's restaurant.

“He was tough, but he knew his stuff, and I learned a lot from him,” Maniaci said. Maniaci opened Sicilian Cowboy in Murrieta in the early 1990s and decided to keep the name going with a line of sauces in the late '90s. But he had no idea that developing products for mass production, finding a bottler, getting FDA approval and “all the business side of it” would take to so long.

“It took me 10 years to get the sauces into stores,” he says. “If I had known what it took when I started, I might not have.”