



At his plot in the Robert M. Kubecka Memorial Organic Garden in Huntington, Nick Ranieri applies the techniques he learned while growing up on a farm in Italy.

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Growing a taste of home

BY JESSICA DAMIANO
Special to Newsday

In 2015, as Nick Ranieri tended his 100-by-100-foot garden in Mattituck, growing a veritable bounty that included artichokes, plum tomatoes, Swiss chard and fava beans, and grafting his own fruit trees — apple, peach, chestnut and others — the now-82-year-old Italian immigrant had no idea that a woman in Pittsburgh was on a

Nick Ranieri's Italian gardening heritage to be archived

mission to find and install him in the Smithsonian Institution. The retired electrician, one of 11 children raised on a farm in Mola di Bari along Italy's southeastern Adriatic coast, came to America with his wife, Rosa, in the 1960s and settled in Flushing, Queens, before moving to Mattituck and, more recently, Commack.

After moving into each home, Ranieri's first task was to turn the soil, construct beds and apply lifelong knowledge to farming his land, not as a hobby but to feed his family. "That's what I knew," he said. "In Italy, we grew everything we needed, and whatever we grew there, I wanted to grow here." But there were differ-

ences in climate and soil: "I started raising tomatoes the same way we did in Mola, but that was no good. The weather was dry there, so we grew tomatoes on the ground on a 3-foot-tall hill. That doesn't work here." So Ranieri installed trellises to hold the plants upright and began removing their suckers

and pruning side shoots. When other crops, like artichokes, which prefer mild winters, posed bigger challenges, he dug into his farming expertise. To protect artichokes from the cold, he built an intricate frame that also allowed him to grow herbs and greens under it almost all winter. He jury-rigged an irrigation system and developed ways to grow such nostalgic foods as bay leaf,

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Keeping a tradition alive

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lemons, figs and persimmons, the last from a tree that journeyed from Italy in his suitcase aboard a TWA flight. He even grafted a single tree to grow seven types of pears. Then he and Rosa dried beans, preserved vegetables and put up plum tomatoes for winter.

It's precisely these practices that interest the Smithsonian, which began documenting the history of gardens in America in 1987 in its Archives of American Gardens collection, according to museum specialist Kelly Crawford. The collection, "most well-known for its documentation of grand estate gardens of the 1920s and 1930s," is branching out, she said, and since the early 2000s has tried to be "more intentional about including gardens that illustrate the full spectrum of the American experience. This includes large estate gardens, everyday gardens, community gardens, and gardens that represent gardening traditions passed down from generation to generation."

The archives include photographic and written documentation on more than 10,000 historic and contemporary gardens, landscape architects, and garden designers and photographers, along with a handful of seed companies, Crawford said. The images and records are available to researchers, historians, designers, students, enthusiasts and others.

A START IN MATTITUCK

In Mattituck, where Ranieri moved in 2000, he constructed a 24-by-7½-foot greenhouse and fenced in a garden on his 1¼-acre property to grow fruit and vegetables year-round. Pretty soon, friends and neighbors caught on to what was going on behind his home in the cul-de-sac, word spreading as far as Brooklyn, where a friend from his hometown lived. "For four or five years," the friend brought a couple dozen members of the South Brooklyn Gustatorial Society to Ranieri's home to spend the day harvesting vegetables. "They would trample everything and do a number on my garden," Ranieri said with a chuckle. "Then the next day,



Nick Ranieri inspects the progress of the artichoke plants in his former Mattituck garden. He usually grows two varieties of the plant.

“In Italy, we grew everything we needed, and whatever we grew there, I wanted to grow here.”

— Nick Ranieri

we'd go to a friend's house on Shelter Island, and everybody worked together in the kitchen all day to prepare a phenomenal dinner for 26 people, all from the garden. It was amazing!”

It was through another Brooklyn organization, Molese Social Club in Carroll Gardens, that Mary Ann Pietanza, a contributor to the Red Hook Star Review newspaper, learned about Ranieri. “In 2014,

I had written an essay about the 1964 World's Fair and growing up in Red Hook,” Pietanza, 66, said, that caught the attention of the club, which was working to recruit younger and more diverse members. “They wanted to reach out to the community, hold fundraisers to give back and change the way they operated, so I started writing articles about them.”

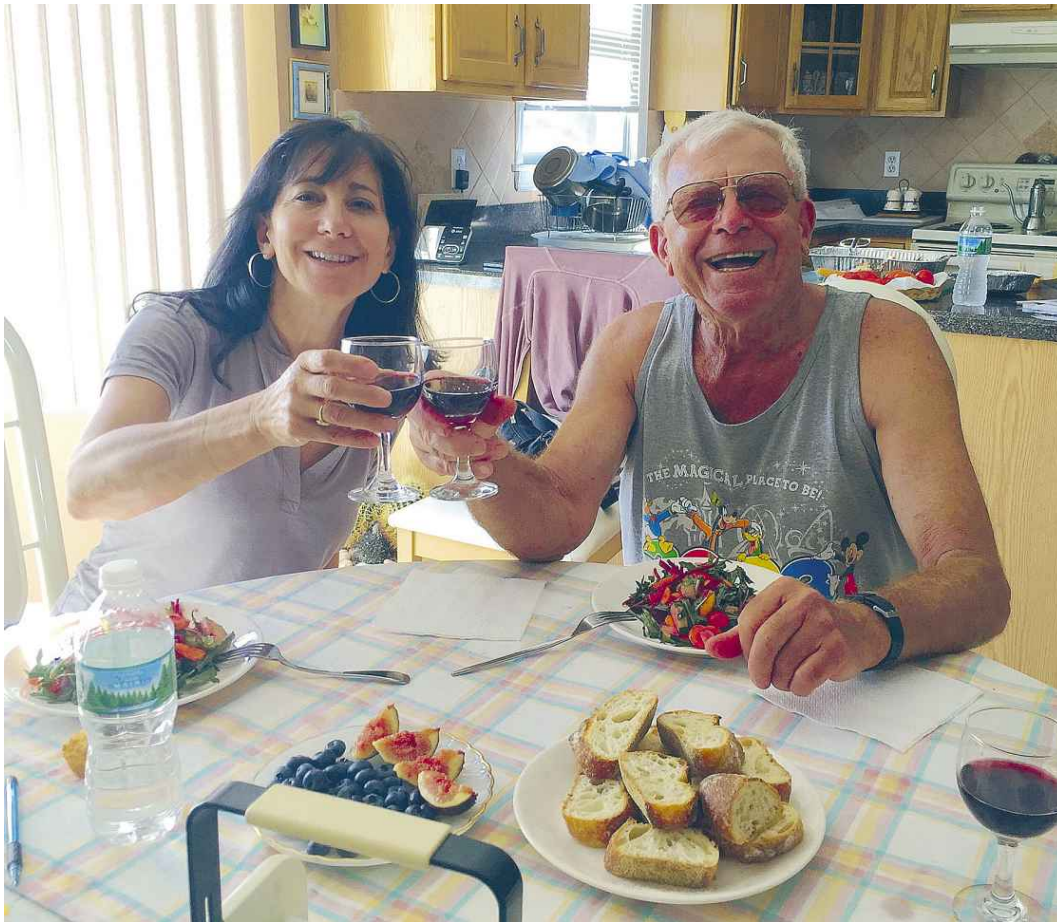
In 2015, Pietanza received a

call from Mary Menniti, a woman from Pittsburgh she had met a year earlier at a cooking demonstration at Eataly in Manhattan. “The class focused on the foods of Molise, Italy, and Mary presented a slideshow and explained that we were eating a meal based on the recipes of these Italian gardeners in Pittsburgh,” Pietanza said.

At Eataly, Menniti spoke about The Italian Garden

Project, which she started in 2011 to “document and share old, traditional gardening methods brought to America by immigrants and preserve the wisdom of the Italian American vegetable garden and its relevance to our food, our families and the earth.”

From speaking to attendees after her demonstrations and classes, Menniti gathered there was a “growing interest in seed saving, composting, capturing



Mary Menniti, founder of The Italian Garden Project, shares a homegrown lunch with Nick Ranieri in 2016. She is documenting his garden for inclusion in the Smithsonian Archives of American Gardens.



Pinto fagiolini are among the vegetables Nick Ranieri grows in his plot at the Robert M. Kubecka Memorial Organic Garden in Huntington.



Nick Ranieri shells fava beans, the first thing he plants in the springtime. He then dries and stores them for year-round use.

water using rain barrels." The Italian American gardeners "were so old school, they were becoming cutting edge [examples of] living more sustainably, more lightly on the earth," she said. "Sometimes Italian Americans take this for granted, but it is a unique culture that we are losing when we need it the most."

And her Eataly presentation resonated with Pietanza. "I was interested because my father

was a gardener, and he looked like the men in the slideshow pictures," she said. "So I told her I would like to be involved and gave her my number."

Since 2012, Menniti had been working with The Garden Club of America to document — in words, photos and videos — the unique gardening practices of Italian immigrants. The Pittsburgh chapter of the GCA learned of her work and invited her to partner with it to

contribute to the Smithsonian's Archives of American Gardens.

"Most of the entries in the archives are large, formal, ornamental estate gardens," Menniti said. "But now there was an interest in having more functioning, working vegetable gardens included," prompting her to find and profile an Italian American Pennsylvania gardener and work with GCA to include him in the collection.

Grow your knowledge

- See photos, videos and descriptions of gardeners in The Italian Garden Project at theitaliangardenproject.com.
- Learn more about the Smithsonian Archives of American Gardens, a collection of more than 6,500 notable gardens and landscapes dating to the 1800s, at si.edu/siasc/american_gardens.

— JESSICA DAMIANO

'A BORN EDUCATOR'

Knowing that the Smithsonian wanted more representative samples in the archives, Menniti began working to find others and asked Pietanza to be her scout in New York. Then the stars aligned: Pietanza had a new relationship with the Molesse Social Club, whose members connected her with several contenders, including Ranieri.

"When he brought me into his garden, I knew immediately this guy was for the Smithsonian," Pietanza said of her initial 2016 visit with Ranieri. "He was teaching me things that fascinated me, like how he can grow almonds and apricots on the same tree, and he had a story behind everything. He kept journals, tracked weather patterns. He documented where he got every seed and wrote down every idea. And everything seemed to thrive. He had a flourishing garden all the time."

In 2017, Pietanza began bringing a photographer on her visits. The more time she spent in Ranieri's garden, the more she learned. "He loves to teach you about what he's doing. He's so patient, he's a born educator," Pietanza said. "Nick has olive trees, blueberry bushes, strawberries, and persimmon trees from Italy and Japan, and he takes the shoots and develops and grows them. This just fascinated me," she said, adding that "he even grew a pumpkin patch where his grandchildren would come to pick pumpkins" in fall.

Personal matters and then the pandemic delayed the project and, in the interim, the Ranieris sold their Mattituck home in 2018 and moved to a ranch house on a 75-by-100-foot lot in Commack. "We're getting back into it now," Pietanza said, as she resumes writing, sorting through photos and providing her documentation to Menniti for the Smithsonian collection.

In the meantime, no grass is growing under Ranieri's feet. Although he says there isn't as much room at his new home, he grows "a little" — still more

than many backyard gardeners. "I have a couple tomato plants, string beans, cucumbers, a fig tree, persimmon trees, five fruit trees, a bay leaf tree and rosemary from Gorizia, Italy," he said. But he does the bulk of his gardening these days at the Robert M. Kubecka Memorial Organic Garden in Huntington.

At 9 o'clock nearly every morning in spring, summer and fall, Ranieri drives 10 minutes to his plot in the community garden to spend roughly 2½ hours tending his crops. "In springtime, the first thing I do is plant fava beans, peas and radishes. I plant broccoli rabe plants just for seed production," he said. In summer, plum tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, onions, garlic, peppers, eggplants and string beans replace them. "Then I succession plant for a fall harvest," adding puntanella chicory, broccoli, broccoli rabe, and two varieties of artichokes. And, of course, he teaches.

He has found a ready audience at the community garden, where he shows other gardeners how to separate seedlings, space plants and more. "I get very sad when I see people in the springtime and they don't know what to do with the plants," he said. "I want them to learn because I feel bad when I see people work hard and then have nothing to pick."

For her part, Menniti describes a similar sowing and reaping with The Italian Garden Project, an ongoing passion she feels pressure to keep growing. "I have to accomplish a lot of things within the next three to five years," she said, "because I really see these gardeners as the last of an important part of Italian American culture that isn't being paid enough attention to."

"They are the last recipients of an unbroken line of traditional knowledge passed from father to son, from mother to daughter. . . . The Italian Garden Project [is working to] capture as much of this wisdom as possible while we still have access to it."