Meet the **farmer**

Alessandra Rellini from Agricola Farm in Panton

BY **ELSIE LYNN PARINI**

Alessandra Rellini always wanted to raise her own animals. So when this Italian native was recruited by the University of Vermont to teach in the Psychology Department, she saw an opportunity to pursue her farming dream in the Green Mountain State.

"The opportunity allowed me to cultivate the idea of raising my own animals and doing my own butchering," she said in an interview at the end of March. "But then things spiraled out of control."

She started with three little pigs... Now, 11 years later, Rellini has 90 pigs, a flock of chickens and upwards of 27 Icelandic sheep. With the help of Stefano Pinna, Andrew Sheets, Tirragen Vixie, Drew Anderson, Rellini and her daughter Eva, Agricola Farm offers meat and homemade pasta CSAs; a farm store with meats, pastas, and other local products; monthly authentic Italian lunches and dinners; and local butchering. If that's not enough to keep someone busy, Rellini has maintained her full-time job at UVM since moving to Vermont in 2006.

Why go to all the trouble of farming? Well, Rellini was missing the flavors of home. "It was hard to find the cuts of meat that I wanted and the taste was just not the same," she explained.

So, what else was there to do? With a few trips home to Italy to learn about the way pigs were raised and how to develop good flavor, Rellini has crafted her own technique and lifestyle to create a superior taste and farm-way-of-life.

"Everything we do on this farm is for the fat," she said. "Because the fat is the most important part for the flavor... The lard has to be either snow white or have just a hint of pink — absolutely no yellow."

Pinna, an Italian agronomist, came to the farm two years ago and is in charge of the crop rotation for grazing. He plants the food the animals eat, and since you are what you eat, some might say Pinna is the flavor-master. Rellini said her pigs eat about 30 percent of their diet in the fields.

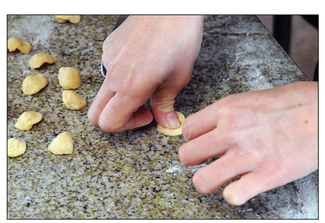
"It's taken us 10 years to figure it out," Rellini said of the pigs' diet. "The Italian diet didn't work for our pigs... we did a lot of exploration."

From about May to December the pigs are out on pasture, eating a mixture of field greens, sorghum, rye, barley, oats, wheat, leftover fruits and veggies from Tomgirl Juice of Burlington, spent grains from distillers and brewers, and Myer's Bagels from Burlington. Every three to four days, the pigs are rotated to different fields.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

did you know?

EVERY PIG HAS A "SWEET-SPOT" — A TICKLISH PLACE THEY LOVE TO HAVE RUBBED. IF YOU FIND IT, THE PIG WILL FLOP OVER ON IT'S BACK. THEY CALL IT **"FLIPPING THE PIG"** ON AGRICOLA FARM.



Alessandra Rellini is the owner of Agricola Farm in Panton, where she and her farmhands raise pigs, chickens and sheep. The farm also offers a pasta and bread CSA, and monthly meals.

INDEPENDENT PHOTOS /TRENT CAMPBELL

MEAT SPAGHETTI SAUCE

Recipe from Alessandra Rellini

INGREDIENTS:

1 lb Agricola sausages
2 garlic cloves
1 yellow onion
10 or 12 small basil leaves
8 medium-sized fresh tomatoes, or 1 can of crushed tomatoes
3 Portobello mushroom hats
2 spoons extra virgin olive oil
4 oz of good chianti

DIRECTIONS:

If you're using fresh tomatoes, blanche, peel them and cut them in quarters Peel and cut the onions in 1 inch strips about 1/3 inch wide. Peel the garlic and smash it using the flat part of the knife. Remove the sausage from the refrigerator and let it sit at room temperature for 30 minutes. Remove casing.

Sauté the onions and garlic in a medium size sauce pot at medium/low temperature. Once the onions are transparent remove the large chunks of garlic and put the sausages in the pot and break them with a wooden spoon. Cook on low heat and allow the fat to melt in the pot.

Clean the hat of the mushrooms with a damp paper towel and cut into ¾ inch squares.

Once the meat is cooked (no longer pink), add the wine and turn the heat up to high. Mix occasionaly. Allow all the alcohol to evaporate.

Add the mushrooms. Turn down the heat to medium and cook until most of the water has evaporated.

Add the tomatoes. If you are using fresh tomatoes add the chunks of tomatoes, a pinch of sugar and 4 ounces of water. If you are using the canned tomatoes just poor the can in. Add a little salt. Let simmer at low heat for 40 to 50 minutes. During the last 5 minutes cut the 12 basil leaves with your fingers and mix into the sauce. Salt and pepper to taste. Place sauce on top of the spaghetti and garnish with remaining basil.

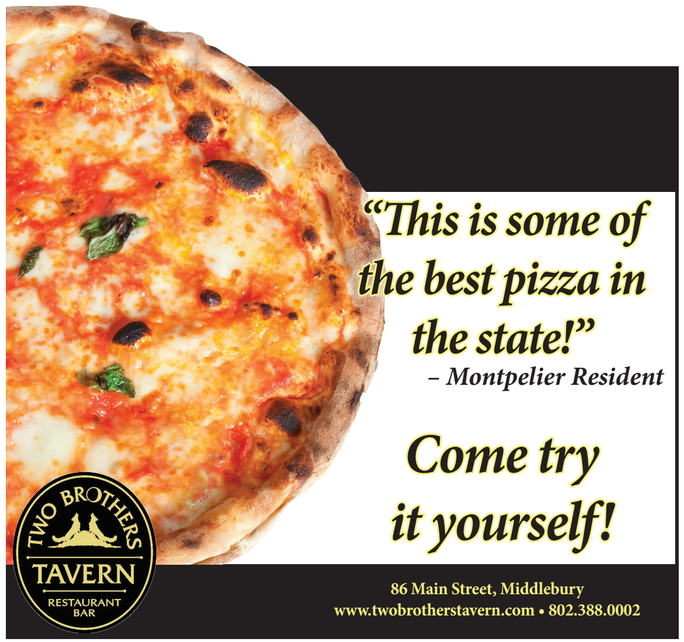
FARMER

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Because of this unique diet, Rellini's pigs grow slower than conventional pigs fattened on corn and soy. This means they take longer (more than 14 months) to grow to full weight. "It's a more mature meat and flavor," she said. "It's not as sweet and is very complex."

When the pigs are ready to be butchered, Rellini takes them to the Mad River Food Hub — a USDA facility in Waitsfield — where she rents space to butcher her own product. The cuts are sold to individuals directly, to local chefs and in the Panton farm store.

Though the land at 2674 Jersey St. has been in farming since the 1800s, Rellini and Agricola Farm have only been in the Panton community for two years. Prior to that, they were located in Williston, Monkton and Hinesburg.

"There's great support from the town and community here. People call us the farm with the pigs outside," Rellini laughed. Sometimes her pigs — or sheep, or chickens — take a little extra freedom and mosey out of their area. But Rellini has it under control with the help of her farm assistants and neighbors.

To learn more about Agricola Farm's products, CSA or upcoming events, visit www.agricolavermont.com.