

FOOD NETWORK

## REALE SIMPLE

With the first and only three-star restaurant in Abruzzo, Italian chef Niko Romito has elevated the region's cuisine. Now he's expanding his epicurean empire.

BY JAY CHESHES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIANNA GLAVIANO

**T**HE 12-COURSE tasting menu at Italian chef Niko Romito's fine-dining restaurant, Reale, in the rugged mountains of Abruzzo two hours north of Naples, features ingredients so simply presented they appear barely touched. At the restaurant in early autumn, dinner moves from a cubist watermelon pedestal topped with matching tomatoes to an inch-thick sheaf of cabbage served with a steak knife. Later in the meal, thimbles of pasta bob in sweet onion broth.

The spare presentations hide hours of work and layers of complexity behind their "apparently simple" facades (*Apparently Simple* is the title of the chef's autobiography, published in 2015). Romito, 43, spends weeks, sometimes months, perfecting a dish, shearing off salt, sugar and fat, among other distracting components. "Ours is a very naked, bare cuisine," he says. "The littlest mistake is immediately visible."

His watermelon is compressed sous vide, dipped in lemon syrup and showered in steamed tomatoes that have been steeped for 24 hours in garlic and herbs. His cabbage takes more than a month to make its way to the plate, after being seared in embers, aged 35 days in a vinegar-wine marinade, steam-cooked, sliced thick, roasted and presented with cabbage cream and drops of star anise distillate. "Without these invisible ingredients, the dish would not be the same," he says.

Romito's precise cooking has gained a cult following in recent years. In 2013, it earned the soft-spoken chef a third Michelin star. Since entering that elite club—his is the first and only three-star restaurant in Abruzzo—he's been racking up accolades in Italy.

Last fall the Gambero Rosso guide named Reale the country's best restaurant. "His food is complex but not complicated," says California chef David Kinch, who in November invited Romito to cook a collaborative meal at his restaurant Manresa, south of San Francisco. "He deserves to be known."

Lately this largely self-taught chef has been quietly preparing to conquer the world. From Casadonna, his compound in a former 16th-century monastery on a hillside in the town of Castel di Sangro, he has cultivated a small army of acolytes—32 aspiring young chefs pass annually through Niko Romito Formazione, the professional cooking school he launched next door to Reale in 2011 (a partnership with the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Piedmont). Recently he's begun expanding his empire—launching new offshoots from Reale,

where students and alumni of his school often work—and turning his methodical approach to less rarefied segments of the food world.

This winter, in Rome, he launches a third branch of his creative trattoria Spazio (the others are in Milan and in the Abruzzo village of Rivisondoli, where he grew up)—staffed by students finishing up degrees at Romito's school. Other outposts are planned for seven other cities, including New York and London. There's also a sweet and savory doughnut chain, Bomba, in the works with a major Italian conglomerate—debuting in Milan this spring—and an expansion underway of his Nutritional Intelligence project, which is changing hospital cooking by keeping food costs low while improving nutrition and flavor, starting with two hospitals in Rome. And he's building a bread factory on the main highway out >



**FRESH OUTLOOK**  
"Ours is a very naked, bare cuisine," says chef Niko Romito, in the breakfast room at Reale, his flagship restaurant in Abruzzo, Italy.

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of Castel di Sangro, which will soon dispatch his extra-crispy sourdough loaves across Italy—with a retail outlet planned across the street. A related bread-themed restaurant concept is in the early planning stages, with a debut envisioned in central Milan. And he’s just getting started.

In late September, he unveiled his idea of a new canon of classic Italian cooking, launching, in Beijing, the first in a series of restaurants with Bulgari Hotels and Resorts, offering updates on many of his country’s most iconic dishes. Romito spent a few months last summer preparing the concept, reconstructing more than 100 traditional recipes—from a spaghetti pomodoro with no oil or garlic to a veal Milanese that features no flour or egg. “The most difficult thing is to reinvent something everyone knows,” he says. “I wanted to strengthen and enhance these dishes, make them lighter with new techniques.”

To the naked eye, the hard work isn’t always evident. “There’s a huge research process behind it, but at the end of the day this is food that’s easy to understand,” he says. “For us, simplicity is our luxury.”

As the new culinary ambassador for Bulgari, Romito will be rolling his concept out widely. A second Il Ristorante Niko Romito opened at the new Bulgari Hotel in Dubai in December. A third follows in Shanghai this spring, with more restaurants in the pipeline in Milan and Moscow. “Food can go in any direction; it can be a victim of trends, of fashion,” says Silvio Ursini, the executive vice president at Bulgari Group, who brought Romito on board. “Niko’s approach to research, to ingredients, to delivering an at once simple yet complex experience, is something we really liked.”

Romito stumbled into a career in food. “When I started I knew nothing about running a restaurant,” he says during lunch on a rare day off at Reale, surrounded by family—his mother, Giovanna, a retired English teacher in her mid-70s who lives nearby, along with his older twin sisters, Cristiana and Sabrina, who work in his rapidly expanding business.

His father, Antonio, a designer, worked on houses and hotels in the area and had an entrepreneurial streak. In 1972, he bought a storefront on impulse in nearby Rivisondoli. On a dare, he decided to open a bakery there. “He said, ‘Do you bet if I open it, it will become the most popular place in town?’” recalls Giovanna. And soon it was, with vacationers lining up for its *bomba*, plump doughnuts filled with custard and jam that would, many years later, inspire his son’s doughnut chain.

As a young man, Romito shared his father’s interest in food and took a few cooking classes after school while studying finance at the University of Rome Tor

Vergata. By then his father had transformed the bakery into a rustic tavern called Reale, serving traditional dishes prepared initially by a local cook and, eventually, by his father.

Romito was a few exams shy of graduation when his father died in 1999. Rather than sell the restaurant, as his mother suggested, Romito decided to try running it himself. His sister Cristiana joined him to help with front-of-the-house operations.

Romito began experimenting in the kitchen, inspired by cutting-edge cooking he’d read about in books and magazines. Though business was often slow in a town with just 500 full-time residents, he was determined to make the restaurant a success.

He eventually began to develop his own minimalist style. Six years after he took over Reale, the restaurant earned its first Michelin star. The second followed a year later, bringing in epicurean pilgrims from across Italy. For the first time, the restaurant was regularly busy. The tasting menu then was just 70 euros (about \$94). “We were the smallest town in Italy, per capita, to have two Michelin stars,” he says. After the announcement, Romito got a call from Bulgari Hotels. The company had a job offer: head chef at its hotel restaurant in Tokyo. Romito considered it but turned the opportunity down because he had plans of his own.

He had found a beautiful new home for Reale—the crumbling remains of Casadonna in Castel di Sangro. After a massive construction job, he installed a new kitchen, hotel rooms and a cooking school, financing it with a personal bank loan. Not long after he moved the Reale team over from its original location in Rivisondoli, the restaurant earned its third star. “Until we moved to Casadonna, we never made a profit,” he says.

In the summer of 2016, Romito was approached by Bulgari again, nine years after he had passed on the job in Japan. He was offered a new deal, not as an employee but as a partner with his name on the door—eventually at all the company’s restaurants. “In hindsight, he did the right thing turning us down,” says Ursini. “He would never be where he is today.” ●



**FLIP SIDE**  
Left: Casadonna, a former monastery that’s now home to Romito’s hotel, restaurant and cooking school. Below: Panettones from his baking laboratory.



**FIRESIDE CHAT**  
Left: A place for Casadonna guests to relax and unwind. Below: Roasted cardoncello mushroom, parsley and pepper from Reale.

