

We learn how one woman's enterprise lifted her Sicilian village from obscurity

HERE IS A BIG DIFFERENCE between the concepts of fame and human greatness. Fame can be achieved by performing acts which are of benefit to society or through the important results of one's own efforts. In many cases, however, a person is remembered for greatness of a simple type. This is a rarer and more difficult achievement.

In Maria d'Arrigo, an 84-year-old lady from Savoca, a tiny settlement perched 400 metres up a mountain between Messina and Taormina, these two qualities are perfectly blended.

One day, a businessman suggested that Maria should open a bar in Savoca, at a time when there was no such establishment in the village. Having thought it over, she was convinced this was a good idea and set to with enthusiasm but faced the problem of where to locate the bar. A local judge presented her with a two-storey house and it is here, on the ground floor, that you will find the bar today. This was in 1964.

From that moment, she has been the owner of the 'Vitelli' bar, one of the most famous and most visited in the world. Until 1971, it had no name but was known simply as 'the bar' but this was a life-changing year.

A HAPPY COINCIDENCE

The young Italian-American film director Francis Ford Coppola was in Sicily to film some important scenes for *Il Padrino* (The Godfather). Originally, the scenes were to be shot in Corleone but the Mafia demanded a payout from Paramount, so a change of plan was decided upon.

Saro Urzi, who played the part of Vitelli, father of Apollonia, suggested to Coppola that he should take a look Savoca, since it was a very similar village to Corleone. So it was that one day, to the amazement of the inhabitants, Francis Ford Coppola arrived with bigwigs from Paramount to investigate the site. They were immediately impressed, both by



WORDS and IMAGES : FABRIZIO FIORENTINO

the village itself and also the surrounding scenery, which lent itself to the mood of the film.

Maria was there, standing behind the bar in the centre of the main square, little realising that her fate was soon to change dramatically. Paramount decided that the bar should be called 'Vitelli' and from that day it has borne that name on a sign seen in the film and brought fame to the village. The sign has never been removed.

MEMORIES OF TIMES PAST

The bar is like a small museum, a joyful repository of period pieces and props featured in the film. Maria is a proud and jealous guardian of this small, but great, heritage. In the centre of the little front room are the chairs upon which Al Pacino and his two bodyguards sat; the walls are covered with stills from the film and newspaper articles. With muted pride, she showed me the evidence of those years. An internal staircase is completely full of objects such as amphorae, agricultural tools, religious pictures, and so on.

The thing that strikes you about Maria D'Arrigo is her reserve and the openness of her gaze. While speaking, she looks you in the eye and you feel that your very soul is under scrutiny. We sit in her bar and, having offered me a wonderful lemon *granita*, she starts to talk.

She tells how on several occasions she was asked to play the part of Signora Vitelli, Apollonia's mother, but she felt unable to accept the proposal because, her own mother having died recently, it didn't seem right to take on the role. She preferred to stay inside the bar while the scenes were being shot outside.

COME BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Maria has clear memories of those exciting times. The place was full of people, many of them chosen from Savoca, along with trucks and film cameras which shattered the peace of the village.

She remembers with great affection the shyness of the young Al Pacino who often came into the bar to beg for one of her lemon *granite*, for which he had acquired a passion. She tells me of her personal friendship with Francis Ford Coppola, who still sends his greetings to her. She has also received a gift

Maria d'Arrigo:



queen of Savoca



MOTHER OF THE WORLD

She is kind to the needy but has shown herself to be generous towards the famous, too. And her goodness is continually repaid. For these grand examples of humanity she has been nicknamed 'la mamma del mondo'.

When, at the end of the shooting, Coppola offered her a blank cheque on which to write the fee for all the disturbance, instead of a sum of money she wrote just 'grazie'. Few others would have done this. For her, it had been an honour and a pleasure to have met him and she was not interested in a financial reward. Still today, money is of little importance to her.

With an expression somewhere between pride and shyness, she recalls having met, and treated as her children, Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and many others. This year, the American director will be returning to

from Al Pacino: a lovely pen with red and black hearts, a sign of the affection which, after all these years, the actor still has for her.

Because of her bar, every day many tourists come to see for themselves this typical Sicilian village. Recently, the *Comune* organised a thanksgiving festival, simple and understated, because Maria is a lady who has no time for



The seats in the foreground were used outside the bar by 'Michael Corleone' and his bodyguards

... at the end of the shooting, Coppola offered her a blank cheque...

who can't walk, presenting them with one of her lemon granite, whose fame has spread all over Sicily. She tells me with a smile that she never has to buy the lemons because people bring them to her from all over the Sicilian countryside.

Sicily, to Caltagirone to be precise. The *Comune* of Savoca has issued an invitation to Coppola to pay a visit to the village and he may accept. Then Maria looks at me and says, 'I will get to know when Coppola is in Caltagirone because I have a lot of friends there who will tell me.'

There is no doubt that when her friend Francis Ford Coppola returns, he will do so with a desire to renew his acquaintance with this marvellous Sicilian lady who, 35 years ago, gave her hospitality to make the cult movie *Il Padrino* so famous and to bring to the attention of the public this little village of Savoca, which is today so deeply indebted to her.

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This mural, with Maria and Al Pacino, in character, appears on a wall near to the bar and entrance to the town

grand speeches, a lot of attention and, particularly, being photographed. She prefers to be recognised for her goodwill and her constant desire to do her best for her customers. She is at pains to look after, free of charge, the old folk who come to draw their pensions, or those



Sitting in Michael Corleone's chair outside the bar...