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Cook's tour

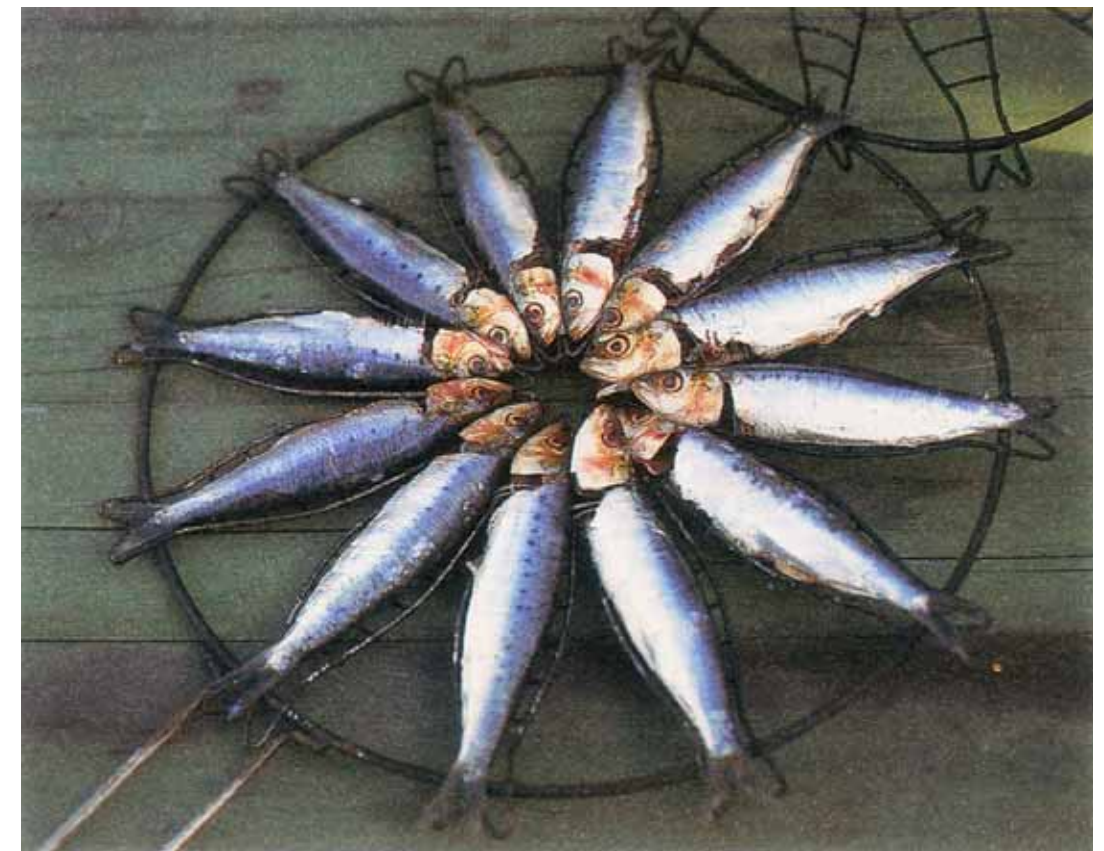
AN ITALIAN GARDEN FEAST TAKES SHAPE ON A NORTH END ROOF • *by Carol Stocker*

Michele Topor is of Polish ancestry, but she became an ardent Italophile when she moved to Boston's North End 25 years ago. "I didn't know anything about Italy or anything Italian when I first moved in here," she says. "But I found that because of the warmth of the people here I have an extended family. Learning about the foods made me want to learn more, so I started traveling to Italy."



Topor's roof-top feast includes grilled polenta with gorgonzola and grilled red peppers and, below, grilled sardines.

OPPOSITE: Fresh produce awaits preparation on Topor's kitchen table.



Michele Topor, center, chats with guests while grilling vegetables.

RIGHT: Hibiscus, geraniums and an array of herbs create a lush corner perch. Just over the railing, tomato and pepper plants soak up sun.



Topor made herself an authority on Italian cooking and today teaches classes and leads market tours in the North End under the name L'Arte di Cucinare.

A dozen years ago her passion sparked the need to create a rooftop garden for growing the tomato, pepper and herb seeds she continues to bring back from



Dessert, fresh figs and plums wrapped with a lump of brown sugar and a drizzle of Prunella or kirsh, is prepared for the grill.



An arbor draped with leaf plants makes a cozy dining canopy.



Michele Topor's living room is an eclectic, inviting mix of furniture and accessories.

the annual culinary tours she leads to Tuscany and Sicily.

She has since accomplished one of the more challenging feats in gardening: transforming a hot, windy rooftop in the city into a thriving Eden. Without a designer (but with a little help from her friends), she has managed to create a penthouse garden on pennies.

Topor has turned negatives like the heat of her North End rooftop in summer into pluses. She grows tropical and semi-tropical plants such as fig trees, jasmines and seedless table grapes. Topor wants nothing less than to recreate Sicily on her roof, so there's even an olive tree.

Because it's so labor intensive to keep a roof garden going, Topor demands more than beauty from her plants. Flowers must be fragrant "If it grows, I like to either eat it or smell it," she says. Most fragrant of all is her night-blooming jasmine, which has so much perfume passersby can smell it on the street five stories below.

Her loves include herbs (tarragon, rosemary, lots of mints, and thymes) and vines. She grows varieties seldom seen in New England such as bizarre passion flowers (which are now in style) and bougainvillea. By late summer, kookie loofa sponges dangle from her trellis.

The interior of her four-room condo is just as gaily gardenesque as the sunny Mediterranean roof, with plaster walls saturated in sunflower yellow accented with yellow and red pottery purchased in Italy.

"It was very hard to find a place where I could have a private roof garden," says Topor. She looked for two years before finding this historic but modest five-story brick building in which she was able to buy the top floor condo without sharing roof access.

Establishing the garden took "a tremendous effort," she says, but adds it's easier now that the potting soil and pots are in place. "I use a combination of really good potting soil, compost, vermiculite, peat moss, and polymer pellets that help retain water," she says.

Topor makes her living from food, but then gardening is

harder than cooking. "You're at the mercy of the weather and the elements," she says. "It takes determination. It's a lot of work."

But now that she's had her rooftop garden for more than 10 years, she has no doubt it's been worth the effort. It's an oasis in the middle of the city," she says

Whether as a setting for teaching a class on grilling or for entertaining friends al fresco, Topor's festive, leafy rooftop with its exotic plants and to-die-for view of the city skyline, leaves visitors swooning.

"People have started asking me to consult on how to plant their own balconies and decks" she says. Her approach is earthly low-tech. "I tell them to make sure they have a water source. I just got a hook-up this year. I used to thread a hose down to my kitchen sink."

Watering continues to be the biggest challenge. All Topor's plants are grown in containers, which makes them more vulnerable than in-ground plants to reflected city heat and drying rooftop winds. In summer, daily watering is critical and can take an hour a day. Plant sitting at Topor's home is not for the lazy.

Also, because most of her plants are not cold-hardy, each fall she must "pile them into my car and farm them out to relatives and friends who have more window space than I do."

Moving her plants in and out of their winter quarters and up and down five flights of stairs is a major feat that requires even more helping hands.

But Topor has plenty of friends who pitch in, knowing they will be rewarded with a gourmet rooftop luncheon made with the best ingredients from local shops — and rooftops.

It's savvy for someone who entertains in a garden far from the kitchen, or as in this case up a steep ladder-like flight of stairs, to find dishes that can be cooked close to the table.

Topor's repertoire is clever and extensive enough that she can produce a five-course meal on the outdoor grill. She teaches students exactly how to do this in her cooking class on grilling, which she conducts on the rooftop.

For this meal, the abundant antipasti includes a starburst of *sarde alla brace*, sardines grilled in a marvelous fish-shaped wire holder that Topor bought in Provence. *Calamari ripieni*, or stuffed squid, is a first course classic, followed by grilled rabbit and *polenta*, grilled until just crisp on the outside and topped with nuggets of gorgonzola and strips of grilled red pepper.

After a vegetable course of grilled tomatoes and peppers from her garden, the meal is finished with a dessert of plums and figs stuffed with rum-drizzled sugar cubes, wrapped in grape leaves and cooked on the grill.

As for wine, Topor selected Prosecco, a sparkling white wine from the Veneto region of North Italy as both *aperitivo* and dinner wine. After dinner, she served Peach Grappa, also from Veneto, as *digestivo*. Even the wasps who try to join the picnic get fed. "Wasps love mortadella," says Topor, who puts a plate of it by the railing far from the human feasting to draw them away.

It works. ▲